

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL EXILE and RETURN GOD THE PROVIDER *Rebuilding the Wall*

Last week, we studied how Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the King of Persia, came under conviction that the walls of his homeland in Jerusalem needed to be rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity and prayerfully learned that God had called him to lead the project. Even though you may know that you have been called by the Lord to a certain ministry or project, that knowledge does not make problems that arise in that work disappear. In fact, being called to do the “Lord’s work” is almost a guarantee that problems will come!

When Sir James Thornhill was painting the inside of the cupola of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, at one point he finished an area and stepped back to view it. Had he gone back one more step, he would have fallen from the scaffolding and perhaps killed himself. Seeing the situation, a friend seized one of the brushes and rubbed paint over a part of the picture. The artist rushed forward to protect his work, and at the same time, his life was saved. When the picture of our life or ministry is not all we think it ought to be, perhaps the Master Artist is rescuing us from something far worse and preparing us for something far better.

It would have been about a two-month journey from Susa to Jerusalem. Nehemiah was well-accompanied by a military escort and was arriving in the city as its governor. His arrival naturally attracted attention and the enemies of the Jews arose quickly. **2 Chronicles 20:17 (ESV)** ¹⁷ *You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf....*”

Since Nehemiah did not want his enemies to know what he was doing, he went alone at night to look over the city walls. The walls were broken down and the gates were burned. In Nehemiah we see the qualities of a good leader. He did not live in a dream world; he faced the facts of the problem – while seeing the potential while surveying the problems.

Nehemiah spoke to the people in **Nehemiah 2:18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ *And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So they strengthened their hands for the good work.* However, there was a negative response from outsiders. **Nehemiah 2:19 (ESV)** ¹⁹ *But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”* Yes, there will always be those who want ‘tear us down’ and take away our joy. Throughout the Bible, we always find opposition to God’s people. We should realize that it will not be any different today. The likes of Sanballat and Tobiah are all around us -- and Satan will use them to provoke us and discourage us. When Nehemiah became aware of this growing opposition, he prayed. This is what we need to do - when we face fear; when we become aware of opposition: PRAY!

The rebuilding did get off to a good start despite the naysayers. In *Nehemiah 3*, we see there was a place of ministry for everyone willing to work – priests, rulers, craftsmen, and women helped. When the enemies of God’s people realized that verbal intimidation was not going to work, they decided to ‘step up their game.’ And we see God’s people acting wisely in the face of conflict.

Read Nehemiah 4:7-9 (ESV) ⁷ *But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry..* ⁸ *And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.* ⁹ *And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.*

One of the most dangerous stages in doing a God-given job is in the middle. The excitement of the beginning is forgotten. The enormity of the work hits us in the face and opposition grows. For Nehemiah’s opposition, a common cause brought four different groups together. The city was now completely surrounded by enemies! God’s people sometimes have difficulty working together, but the people of the world have no problem uniting in opposition to the work of the Lord. Immediately after the arrest of Jesus we read in *Luke 23:12 (ESV)* ¹² *And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.*

Nehemiah did two significant things: he prayed and watched! *Matthew 26:41 (ESV)* ⁴¹ *Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*”The watching came in the form of setting a guard. But, that guard did not end all the problems.

Read Nehemiah 4:10-14 (ESV) ¹⁰ *In Judah it was said, “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”* ¹¹ *And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.”* ¹² *At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.”* ¹³ *So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.* ¹⁴ *And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”*

The whining had begun. It was same type of whining that kept the Israelites from entering the Promised Land after the ten spies said it could NOT be done. The Jews who lived outside Jerusalem kept bringing reports that the enemy was planning another surprise attack. We don’t know if the outsider Jews were just spreading rumors or promoting a conspiracy. Long before Nehemiah ever started his building project, he had prayed to the great and awesome God of heaven. In the midst of rebuilding, Nehemiah still maintained his strong faith. He did not bow down to Satan’s tool of discouragement. Instead he reminded his people: *Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight.*

Sometimes the enemy attacks us from without like Sanballat and the others. Sometimes the enemy attacks us from within. There is a need for God's people to address social injustice.

Read Nehemiah 5:1-5 (ESV) ¹ *Now there arose a great outcry of the people ... against their Jewish brothers.* ² *For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive."* ³ *There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine."* ⁴ *And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards."* ⁵ *Now ... we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, ... but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."*

In the midst of a 'great work' a 'great cry' was heard among the Jews. The Hebrew words used in verse 1 are the same used to describe the cry of the Israelites in **Exodus 3** when they were enslaved in Egypt. They were now crying out against their own people! Jew was exploiting Jew. There were also external factors which included a famine in the land, the Persian king levying extremely high taxes and Nehemiah requiring workers to stay in Jerusalem to work on the wall at the expense of their own harvests. Nehemiah was a leader who listened and then did something about the problem.

Read Nehemiah 5:6-8 (ESV) ⁶ *I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.* ⁷ *I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother."* ⁸ *And I held a great assembly against them* ⁸ *and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say.*

From Nehemiah's reaction, we find a biblical example of how we should respond to wrongdoing. Nehemiah got angry! But then, he tells us: *I took counsel with myself*. In spite of his intense anger, he did not 'fly off the handle' and take immediate action that might have proved hurtful. A 'rush to judgment' often leads to mistakes. Instead, he backed off, got 'a hold of himself', and did some serious thinking. After he 'cooled down', he was able to look at the overall problem before taking a course of action.

What was happening in Israel was well-known. Therefore, Nehemiah had to deal with it publicly. Nehemiah called a meeting and presented the problem to the people by reminding them of what the LORD had said. Although not quoted in this passage, here is the LORD's opinion regarding charging interest to brothers. **Exodus 22:25 (ESV)** ²⁵ *"If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him.* Nehemiah then reminded the people how they had been slaves to other nations and now they were making slaves of their own people. That went to the heart of the matter.

Read Nehemiah 5:9-11 (ESV) ⁹ *So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?"* ¹⁰ *Moreover, I and my brothers and my*

servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. ¹¹ Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.”

Leaders in a God-given task need to take seriously valid complaints that create internal problems. Complaints can drive a wedge even into the strongest foundation. Nehemiah wasted no time in confronting the situation. As a spiritual leader in Israel, he had no choice if he wanted to be in the will of God himself. God had called him not only to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but to make sure the people obeyed God’s laws. Oh, you might be thinking, ‘I am not a leader so this doesn’t apply to me.’ But, the truth is, each of us is called to be a leader in ‘reflecting Christ’ no matter what our position. If we find ourselves in a position where we need to confront someone or if we find ourselves in need of being confronted, we can learn from the actions of Nehemiah as leader and the people who responded to his leadership.

Read Nehemiah 5:12-13 (ESV) ¹² *Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.*

Nehemiah was practical. Basically, he told the people to ‘put their money where their mouth was’. He required them to swear by oath that they would do as they had promised. Nehemiah shook out the folds of his robe to symbolize what God would do with the money lenders if they did not keep their promise. Shaking your robe or the dust off your feet was a typically Jewish act of condemnation. We read of Paul in **Acts 18:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”* This was not the final opposition to the wall but we will now move straight to the time when God’s people give glory to God for success.

Read Nehemiah 6:15-16 (ESV) ¹⁵ *So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶ And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.*

After studying all the opposition, we know it could only be a miracle when the wall and gates were restored in 52 DAYS! However, the completion of the project itself did not end problems. We think, ‘I’ll do this or that and my problems will be over’. The truth is at different phases in our lives, we encounter the same ole devil. He’ll just be masquerading with another face. Nevertheless, we can be just as confident and courageous as Nehemiah because we serve the same great and awesome God! Hallelujah to His name.