

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 4, Chapter 2 conclusion

Last week we established a key point of reference for the history of Nehemiah: he was essentially a politician and government leader. And while he was indeed a Godly man, a Jew educated by Ezra to some degree on the Torah, nonetheless his role in the ongoing matter of re-establishing the Jewish people in Judah and rebuilding the city of Jerusalem was quite different than Ezra's. While Ezra was the pious religious reformer who came from Babylon with Artaxerxes' blessing to re-establish the preeminence of the Law of Moses over the Jews, to insist upon proper worship and ritual among the priests, and to revive Torah-based morality in the everyday lives of the common Judeans, Nehemiah came from the Persian capital as a government official to revive Judah's economy and to re-establish Jerusalem as a fortress city and thus as a place of security and safety for the local residents. And the first step in this economic reboot was to rebuild the once nearly impregnable defensive walls that surrounded the holy city. Those walls had lain in ruin for almost 175 years since Nebuchadnezzar had toppled them. A few individuals had tried to rebuild them during that time but regional and local political opposition always managed to thwart the effort.

So the Lord raised up Nehemiah who was of just the right temperament, training, mindset, and ability to get the job done. And we discussed how this is so very often the Lord's way of doing things. There is not a hint that up until Nehemiah's brother Hanani (who lived in Judah) came to visit Nehemiah at the Persian capital with news of the decrepit state of the holy city that Judah and Jerusalem were anywhere on Nehemiah's radar. He seems to have been a satisfied, content man, highly placed in the Persian administration and having almost daily personal contact with King Artaxerxes as his cupbearer. Yet when apprised of the news about Jerusalem, Nehemiah became nearly obsessed with a desire to do something about it. He was so overwhelmed with sadness (and probably a bit of anger mixed in), that it showed on his countenance and thus when he was serving the king and queen their wine at one of their many yearly banquets, the king couldn't help but notice.

When Artaxerxes confronted Nehemiah about his downcast appearance, a fearful Nehemiah explained that he indeed was depressed because the place where his ancestors were buried lay in a condition of desecration. The king fully understanding that this brought shame upon Nehemiah and his family offered to help. Nehemiah used this opening to ask the king for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild it, accompanied with letters of authorization signed by the king that made Nehemiah the governor of the district of Judah, and that demanded

that Nehemiah be allowed to safely travel through whatever territories he had to in order to get to Judah. In fact, the king sent a detail of soldiers with him to assure his security along the way. And the king authorized valuable timber to be taken from the royal forests to be used in the various elements of reconstruction.

This is where we left off last time, so let's re-read from this point forward in Nehemiah chapter 2.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 2:9 – end

Before we begin with verse 9, I want to point out something we touched on in the last lesson. It is that Nehemiah had no idea (until the day his brother showed up with bad news from Jerusalem) that the Lord had spent years preparing him for a task that others had failed at. Nehemiah, while having received some training in the Torah from Ezra, used it the way most of us do our Biblical training: personally. It is the rare Believer who sees him or herself using that knowledge as a vocation. The training that proved to be of the most practical use for this God-assigned task, Nehemiah received as he worked himself up the ladder of secular government. But at the right moment the Lord reached down from Heaven and altered Nehemiah's life-course. The Holy Father didn't suddenly give Nehemiah abilities he never had before, nor did he ask Nehemiah to do something that he didn't already innately know how to do. Rather Yehoveh simply redirected those abilities, knowledge and efforts to accomplish something He ordained, in a circumstance Nehemiah never expected nor probably cared much about until the Lord moved upon him.

This is why I tell you regularly that as Believers, our duty is to be alert to God moving in our lives, and I urge you with every fiber of my being to say "yes" when He calls. More often than not the calling is unexpected. Usually it is not as if lightning struck, but more a thought enters your mind that surprises you. A circumstance arises that intrigues you. More often than not we had never seriously considered what seems to be happening to us as divinely orchestrated and what it is that He is asking us to do. And equally so when we begin to suspect it might be the Lord calling us, we usually think, "Who, me?! I'm too busy for this! Besides, I'm just a school teacher, or a plumber, or a truck driver, or a housewife, or an office manager. I've never been to Seminary, or Bible College, or Yeshiva. What will my spouse think? What will my friends think? How will this change things for me?"

And I suspect that Nehemiah wrestled with those same sorts of doubts and confusion at first; one time excited, the next time fearful, and at other times ready to dismiss the entire thought as impractical if not silly or delusional. But somehow he just kept being drawn along by the invisible hand of God until that fateful hour when he was doing something as mundane as serving wine at a party, and the moment of decision arrived. And at that moment, Nehemiah made the most important decision of his lifetime: he could have said "no", but instead he decided to say "yes" to God having no idea what the outcome might be. Except he knew, as do we when

confronted with these moments, that there would be no turning back and life as we knew it was about to change. The unknown is always full of anxiety, and most of us therefore choose to cling to the known and the familiar even if it has borne little or no fruit in our lives, and at times even if it has brought us little more than pain and emptiness. Let us all vow to be Nehemiahs and say “yes” to the Lord when He comes calling at the most unexpected and perhaps (to us) the most inconvenient time. Let us also agree with God that when He calls us, He is the perfect judge of our qualifications for the task, and not us who will always see ourselves from our own limited worldview. And I can assure you who are listening that if you will do this and be entirely sincere, sooner than later you WILL hear God call, some unexpected door WILL open, and the direction you will go will be very different from the path you are now on. For some of you, that thought invigorates you. For others, you shudder and want nothing to do with it. So choose wisely before you make your decision.

Verse 8 ends the audience with the king, and verse 9 begins with Nehemiah deep into his journey to Judah. We don't know how much time passed in between. Josephus suggests as much as 5 years; that is neither suggested by the text or the circumstance. It is unimaginable to me that once this agreement was reached with the king that Nehemiah would need more than a handful of months to prepare, at most. Everything we read says that this was urgent for Nehemiah and the king certainly would not have been anywhere involved with the preparations.

Nehemiah delivered the royal letters of safe passage to the various district governors and rulers of the enormous Beyond the River province, and there is nothing to indicate that his journey was opposed or interrupted due to lack of co-operation. However, as he approached his final destination, Jerusalem, two fellows called Sanvalat and Toviyah were more than unhappy with Nehemiah's mission and his arrival. It is fascinating to me that the main reason given for their unhappiness is “that someone had come to promote the welfare of the people of Israel”. There is such a powerful message contained in those few words. All throughout history because the Lord has been concerned with the welfare of His people, those who listened to Satan of course opposed Israel's welfare. And now I'm going to say something to the Church at large that is both controversial and polarizing and I fully intend it to be. Since early in the Bible, God foreknew that much (most?) of the gentile world would oppose Israel (the people and the land) and He issued a warning about it. We first get this message from God in the strongest most unequivocal language in the Book of Genesis.

^{CJB} **Genesis 12:1** *Now ADONAI said to Avram, "Get yourself out of your country, away from your kinsmen and away from your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you.*

² ***I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great; and you are to be a blessing.***

³ ***I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse anyone who curses you; and by you***

all the families of the earth will be blessed."

I'm so blessed and uplifted by how much of the modern Church stands firmly with Israel; and so perplexed at how a substantial and growing portion of the Church stands against Israel and with their enemies. Some try to straddle the fence and say they support Israel and their enemies in an evenhanded way. Let me be clear: I don't care if you're saved or not you are in the greatest danger when you curse Israel and in almost as great a danger when you simply don't bless Israel. I'm not necessarily talking about losing your salvation. But I wonder out loud how one can claim salvation in the name of Jesus the Jew, and have some knowledge of the Scriptures that from Genesis to Revelation reveals God's undying love for His Hebrew people and jealousy for His land, and then turn around and care nothing for His people and suggest they give up their land inheritance. Or worse, intentionally comfort, aid and support Israel's enemies and their anti-Semitic agenda.

Here in this verse in Nehemiah we read about two people that for reasons untold simply despise the Jews. They don't want anything that might be a comfort to God's people to happen. They oppose whatever might advance Israel's welfare. And interestingly, these two political leaders Sanballat and Toviya come from exactly the same place where today the enemies of Israel reside and they, too, want to disrupt any sort of normalcy for the Israelis.

Sanballat the Horonite was the governor of the region of Samaria (today the world calls this place the West Bank). Who he is (as portrayed in the Bible) is completely substantiated by the Elephantine Papyri (an ancient trove of non-Jewish documents discovered at Elephantine, an island in the Nile River in Upper Egypt). These same documents speak of a vibrant Jewish community living there for centuries B.C. These documents give us dates and even the names of his 2 sons who succeeded him. So we know that he was an old man when Nehemiah arrived.

Tobiah was an Ammonite; that is, he was a government official of either the province of Amon (on the east side of the Jordan River, called the Trans-Jordan) or perhaps of only a district within Amon. Amon is today called the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. So we have the ancient rulers of what we call today the West Bank and of Jordan despising Israel and planning to do whatever they can to keep the Jews of Judah from living in peace and prospering. Reasons for their hatred of all things Israel? Not stated. Did the Jews create trouble for them? None that has been recorded Biblically or historically. Sound familiar? The spiritual battle for the land and for God's people began at the moment God created His covenant with Abraham, and set them apart as unique and especially loved; and it will not cease until Messiah returns. And while segments of the Church, many politicians, some segments of Judaism, and most gentile national governments find ways to rationalize their negative attitudes and behavior towards Israel (the latest being boycotts and sanctions meant to harm Israel's economy to pressure them to give up land to the Palestinian Arabs), they don't seem to understand that they are behaving as Satan's minions. How very much Israel needs a 21st century Nehemiah; a governor over Israel who bows only to the Lord, and listens to Him and obeys Him despite the threats and harassment of the UN, EU, USA, and generally most of the world's current powers.

I suspect that Nehemiah was not surprised by the hostile attitudes of Sanvalat and Toviyah; otherwise he wouldn't have requested royal letters demanding safe passage and an army escort to assure it. After all, this entire journey took place within Persian controlled territory so theoretically there should have been little danger to Nehemiah. Upon arrival in Yerushalayim he rested and recuperated for 3 days, just as had Ezra, his spiritual mentor. No doubt he didn't just sleep or lounge, but rather began collecting information. And with this information he determined that a formal inspection of the outer defensive walls (most of which were currently rubble) needed to be conducted under the cover of darkness. In fact he kept to himself what his grand vision was for reconstructing Jerusalem. As we have discussed earlier, while generally we speak of Nehemiah as being the one who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in fact that was only a part of what he set out to do, and it was just one element of a strategic plan. His intent was to revive the economy of Jerusalem, which would positively affect the economy of all of Judah. A vibrant Judah would make the Jews a more prominent society who would then, of course, have more influence on the region and with the King of Persia. A rebuilt Jerusalem would also provide Persia with a strong military presence in the region. And if Judah was a willing and able ally with Persia, then suddenly the balance of power in the region would shift in favor of the Jews. I hope you can see that this is not at all what Sanvalat and Toviyah and others in the Beyond the River Province had in mind. They had their sights set on lording over Judah to expand their own power bases and they certainly didn't want their Persian masters to establish a strong foothold in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's political instincts are on full display. He went out at nighttime to inspect the walls, knowing that there was great opposition against this project. No doubt Sanvalat and Toviyah had allies living in Jerusalem and the minute Nehemiah began to inspect they would have known about it. Any good leader knows that before you take action you need to gauge the size of the problem in order to determine how to attack it. Sanvalat and Toviyah were not the only ones in the opposition; they are just the ones that are named first. And while it wouldn't be long before the Nehemiah's plan was known publically, any time he could gain without having to defend himself was valuable.

Only one animal was taken on the inspection tour and it was for him to ride on; those accompanying him walked. No doubt this animal would have been a donkey, perhaps a mule. Horses snort and stamp, spook easily, and are larger; silence and stealth was the objective. Further, the animal needed to be sure-footed as it would have had to traverse uneven ground strewn with rubble. We're given the route Nehemiah takes on his tour of the wall, and it begins with the Valley Gate. This gate would almost surely have been located on the Tyropoeon Valley (up by the Temple Mount on its west side). By the way today this valley is virtually gone and undetectable having been filled up purposely with rubble and soil over the centuries to flatten it out and make it suitable for building more houses and shops.

From there he followed the remains of the wall to the Dung Gate and the Dragon's Well. Gates in the walls of fortified cities like Jerusalem received names that explained their purpose or their location. For instance, in Jerusalem at Christ's time there was Damascus Gate. This was on the north side of the wall because that's the direction of Damascus from Jerusalem and it's where the road from Jerusalem to Damascus began. But when we

look at the names of the various gates and places mentioned here in Nehemiah we have to take them with a grain of salt; not because they are incorrect, but because many of them do not correspond to the location of gates by the same name in later times, or even in modern times (although some might). And the reason for this is that most of the wall from Nehemiah's time still lays buried under newer construction, and because as we'll discuss later Nehemiah seems to have abandoned some of the destroyed city walls and built some new ones that effectively created a smaller defensive wall perimeter. That is, he shrunk the amount of space inside of Jerusalem probably because it was not practical to rebuild sections of the original wall.

The Dung Gate that is spoken of is certainly not the current Dung Gate that is the modern day entrance into the Western Wall plaza. Rather this Dung Gate would have been at the far south of the City of David, down at the bottom of the hill. It was where trash and any other kind of disgusting waste was thrown thus its name. So if you can picture it, Nehemiah started near Mt. Moriah at the Valley gate, and then went down the slope to the south until he reached the remains of the Dung Gate that was located at the farthest southern extremity at the bottom of hill, and so what we next read means he's turned around and is heading back up the hill. Thus the Fountain Gate (or Spring Gate) and the King's Pool were likely on the eastern slope of the City of David. As the end of verse 14 and beginning of verse 15 explains, the randomly stacked rubble and destroyed gate lentils (probably unchanged for going on 200 years) wouldn't allow him to pass under or through, so he sort of left the line of the wall and went a few yards down deeper into the Kidron Valley, and that back upslope again, to detour around the impassable part. He must have continued north (going uphill), then turned left and went around the Temple Mount towards the west, and then turned left to head back south to re-enter the Valley Gate and his inspection tour ended.

Verse 16 reiterates that it wasn't just Israel's enemies from whom he wished to hide what he was doing until he was ready to announce his plan of action; it was the local Jews of every level of society as well. And these societal levels he calls 1) the Judeans (meaning the commoners); 2) the priests; 3) the nobles (the wealthy aristocrats); 4) the officials probably meaning any kind of community leader and then 5) pretty much anyone else who Nehemiah would approach to be responsible for sections of wall reconstruction.

Although we don't know how long it was after the inspection tour before Nehemiah was ready to announce his vision and implement his plan, we find him calling a meeting in verse 17 to share those plans with his fellow Jews. Remember: Nehemiah had authority. He was the official governor of Judah, so it's not like he had to beg and plead for volunteers. However he did have to sell his plan and get the local leaders on board willingly because so far as we know he didn't have some kind of police force that could make the unwilling participate anyway. I suspect this was no more than a few days after the tour because word would have gotten around about his nocturnal spin around the city walls, so he could only keep things secret for a short time.

His words to the city residents are those of a man who understands how to lead. He encourages the people and makes himself part of the team. He approaches them from three angles: first the practical, then the cultural, and finally the spiritual perspective.

From the practical viewpoint, everyone understands that the ruined walls make the community vulnerable and shabby. It is ghetto-like and until this changes no real progress can be made and the whole place lies in a sad state.

From the cultural viewpoint, Nehemiah explains that until the wall around Yerushalayim is rebuilt “we” (meaning the Jewish people in general) continue in disgrace”. The word translated into English as disgrace is **cherpah**; it indicates shame. Since in a shame and honor-based society shame is a powerful negative incentive, then Nehemiah essentially says that whether you realize it or not we are all in a state of shame. If we rebuild the walls we can regain our honor.

And finally from the spiritual perspective Nehemiah says that this project isn't really his idea, it's God's and that He has enabled this project to happen, and that God even induced King Artaxerxes to be an enthusiastic supporter. So every avenue of escape for anyone finding a reason not to go along with Nehemiah has been expertly neutralized. And naturally he got excellent, even energetic, approval and participation from the Jewish community.

But then in verse 19, as expected, the other shoe falls. Three non-Jewish rulers showed up to see for themselves what was going on. Sanvalat and Toviyah we know about; but a 3rd one now makes his appearance, Geshem the Arab. For many years Bible skeptics claimed that all 3 of these men were made up characters, until the Elephantine Papyri validated the existence of Sanvalat. The same skepticism about Geshem the Arab was put to rest when he was named in several extra-Biblical sources as the King of Kedar in Aramaic inscriptions from this era. So using modern geographical and political terms, we now have the rulers of the West Bank, of Jordan, and of Saudi Arabia coming against Nehemiah and the Jews' plans to rebuild Jerusalem. If that doesn't send your mind reeling and shivers up your spine, then you are either asleep or absolutely numb to world events.

And these 3 rulers begin mocking the Jews and accusing them of rebuilding these walls for the purpose of inciting a rebellion against Artaxerxes, even though nothing could be further from the truth. The king himself wants these walls rebuilt, and the Jews are building the walls not to attack but to defend. Does anyone remember just a few short years ago when Israel was building the protective walls around Jerusalem and the fences along the border with Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian, and Lebanese territory to stop terrorist infiltration and the world (again including the USA, the UN, EU, and others) condemned Israel for it, saying it was immoral and that it was WRONG of them to do this because they would use them for dastardly purposes and would perhaps use them to attack the Palestinians? But in reality the world knew the walls would work; and if Islamic and Palestinian terrorism was subdued, then pressure on Israel to give up more land would decrease. The world wanted, and continues to want, this pressure to continue on Israel. The 3 rulers in our Nehemiah story wanted exactly the same thing. They know that if Nehemiah finishes those walls, they will have little chance to lord over Jerusalem and to harass and

threaten the Jewish residents at their will.

But in a wonderful and timeless response, the fearless and bold Nehemiah simply responds with the truth. And I want to re-read to you what he said that finishes up chapter 2.

^{CJB} ***Nehemiah 2:20 But I answered them: "The God of heaven will enable us to succeed. Therefore we his servants will set about rebuilding. But you have no share, right or history to commemorate in Yerushalayim."***

How I long for the day for a Godly Israeli Prime Minister to respond to every leader in the world with those same words. And my brothers and sisters, you need to memorize those words and that passage for when you come up against anyone Christian, Muslim, atheist, or whomever and they speak against Israel and a Jewish Jerusalem. God gave this land to Israel through Abraham and God will ultimately enable His people to succeed in possessing the land by means of Christ. For the USA or anyone to be in the lead to demand that Israel chop off part of their land and give it to the Palestinians is immoral and is in direct rebellion against God. The so-called Two-State Solution is a satanic political doctrine and it needs to be opposed by those who call the God of Israel their God.

Nehemiah did not speak rashly to these 3 rulers who spoke so arrogantly and sarcastically to him. He didn't propose retaliation. Rather than be deflected from the task God gave to him, and the reasons the task was given in the first place, Nehemiah says that only God's people shall rebuild the walls because it is a place and a land given to them. This is all about the Jewish people. The Samaritans, Ammonites, and Arabs have no share, they have no right, and they have no history and no claim to Jerusalem. Let me say it another way that precisely mirrors in modern political names what is being said here. The Palestinians, the Jordanians and the Arabs have no share of Jerusalem. They have no right to Jerusalem. They have no legitimate history to commemorate in Jerusalem. In fact, in the Muslim Koran there is not ONE mention of Jerusalem in any way or form. The Arab/Jordanian/Palestinian claim to Jerusalem is just as bogus as was that of Sanvalat, Toviya, and Geshem.

We'll open chapter 3 next week.