

"THE WALLS BEGUN"
NEHEMIAH 1:1 – 4:23
Cheri Bean

In the winter of 1940-41 before Pearl Harbor brought America into what would become World War II, a new United States Senator received mail detailing waste and profiteering at a military camp that was doing business in the Senator's home state of Missouri. The Senator was Harry Truman. Most Washington insiders had taken him for a "go-along, get-along politician" mostly because of the political machine that had made a way for him to attain that public office.

As a newly elected Senator, Truman received invaluable advice to "Work hard, keep your mouth shut, and answer your mail." Truman did all three, and he learned more and more about widespread waste and corruption in America, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt oftentimes referred to as an "Arsenal of Democracy."

Being anything but a "go-along, get-along politician," Truman decided to investigate the matter for himself. He got in a car and drove around the country, alone. He drove an estimated 10,000 miles on the trip – driving as far south as Florida, through the Midwest and on into Michigan, visiting plants and military installations, taking notes on what he saw with his own eyes. He took no aides, he hired no planes, he visited no golf courses and he stayed in no first-rate hotels.

Truman was incensed by his findings—contractors were paid cost-plus to build plants and warehouses. They not only inflated their costs, but they built items that were of poor quality. Surplus equipment was left out in the snow to rust and surplus workers with nothing to do were getting paid to sit around playing cards and smoking.

Upon his return to Washington, Truman reported his findings to President Roosevelt, but no action was taken. So, the Senator from Missouri made his own report to the Senate, describing what he had seen with his own eyes on his road trip. The report was a bombshell and it changed everything for Truman and for the country as a whole. It was a road trip that truly changed our nation.

The Senate established what became known as The Truman Committee to investigate waste and excess in the war boom. It has been estimated that Truman saved the country some \$15 billion, and untold thousands of lives of the men who would soon use the machines of war after America joined World War II.

And one other thing. Harry Truman isn't only known today as the Senator from Missouri. Instead, many believe him to be one of the greatest presidents America has ever known.

It didn't take Nehemiah nearly as long to ride around Jerusalem, but he did, indeed, ride around his city. With a Harry Truman-like determination, Nehemiah rode a horse around the ruins of the city at night, alone. He, too, took notes, made his report, took hold of the problem, and started a great process of change. Like Harry Truman's road trip, Nehemiah's journey changed his nation as well.

The book of Nehemiah records the activity of the exiled Jews after being released from 70 years of captivity by the Babylonians. It was probably written by Nehemiah in first person and edited by Ezra.

At this point in history, the Jews were under the Persian rule of King Cyrus who decreed that the Jews could return to Jerusalem – their homeland, the Promised Land. Out of two or three million Jews deported from the land, only 50,000 decided to return to the Promised Land – approximately only 2%.

This actually happened in three waves. The first group of returnees traveled with Zerubbabel as their commanding officer in 536 B.C. In 478 B.C., the second group left Babylon with Ezra as a commander-in-chief. They rebuilt the temple and laid a spiritual foundation for Israel once again. The third group would make their return trip 13 years following the return of Ezra and his group.

We are now in 445 B.C. One notable thing about this book – chronologically, this is the last of the historical books. As far as the Jews are concerned, the Old Testament goes no further with their history.

Nehemiah was a child of a holocaust in that he was born to parents who had been taken into captivity. As a result, he did not know what it was to live in a free world until his adult years. He was a man who was scarred, but beautifully emerged as a cupbearer for the king. This position was one of trust. The cupbearer would taste the food and drink to make sure poison was not ingested by the king. If the cupbearer was poisoned, the people would yell, "Long live the King! Get another cupbearer." Even though he was expendable, the cupbearer was usually the closest person to the king besides the king's wife. This position was one of great responsibility and privilege. Because he had access to the king, the cupbearer was a man of great influence.

Our study today concentrates on Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem. We will see how Nehemiah used his skills as a leader including his use of authority, investigation, planning, his handling of opposition, ability to stave off discouragement and delegation of work.

We will even take some time to examine some of the walls of our own life as symbolized by the gates of Jerusalem.

When the book of Nehemiah began, we know that the year was about 445-444 B.C.- the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, who became king of Media-Persia after Cyrus died. The place is given to us in verse 1. Nehemiah lived in Susa, the capital of the Media-Persian Empire, the Washington D. C. of the day. More significantly, Susa was recognized by the Jews as the capital of the then-known world. It was a hub of activity, the place of ultimate decision-making; often late-breaking news of the empire came to King Artaxerxes's attention through the lips of his cupbearer Nehemiah, the king's right-hand man.

In Nehemiah 1:2, Nehemiah's brother Hanani (huh-NAY-igh), came from Judah with some other men, and Nehemiah took the opportunity to ask about the remnant of people that had survived the exile, and also about the condition of Jerusalem.

What did Nehemiah learn about Jerusalem and the Jews? Three words summarize the bad news: remnant, ruin, and reproach. Instead of a land inhabited by a great nation, only a remnant of people lived there; and they were in great affliction and struggling to survive. Instead of a magnificent city, Jerusalem was in shambles; and where there had once been great glory, there was now nothing but great reproach.

It has been said that the true Jew never completely forgets Jerusalem. This was certainly true of Nehemiah. He wanted to know about the people; he wanted to know the condition of the beloved city.

Nehemiah was brokenhearted. Verses 4 through 11 contain his reaction, and it is here that we begin to see his gift as an empathetic leader unfold. His immediate reaction to the news was extreme as he sat down and wept and mourned because he cared deeply about his people and Zion. We might think that a prominent man like Nehemiah had more important things to think about than a distant city to which he had never been, and a people to whom he was a stranger. This man who lived in the palace, had access to the king and lived more than 800 miles away from Jerusalem; yet, because his heart was for the things of God, his heart was not for himself, but for others living in a city with a wall that was broken down and whose gates were burned with fire. He cared about the remnant of the people of his faith and their destiny.

Nehemiah mourned for many days. God had been preparing Nehemiah's heart and mind to tackle and complete this significant project for a long time. God had developed in him a heart curious about the welfare of Jerusalem and its people. I think it's no coincidence that the name Nehemiah means "Comforter from God." God knew the need, but little would be done until the right man also felt that need. God would do something great to meet that need through Nehemiah.

Nehemiah had the heart of Psalm 137:5-6. *"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!"* If Jerusalem was special to God, then it would be special to Nehemiah.

The bad state of the people and the bad state of the city walls were intimately connected. In the ancient world, a city without walls was a city completely open and vulnerable to its enemies. They had no defense, no protection at all. No wonder the people lived in constant distress, in constant disgrace (reproach), living only as survivors. God has more for His faithful than to be mere survivors. God not only wants us to be conquerors, but more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37).

Nehemiah was called to rebuild the walls, but first he wept over the ruins and I'm sure he said something to this effect: "The walls are down. Oh, God! How can these walls be down and these people continue in safety?" This is contrary to the normal response of today when we hear the response of people that are playing the blame game. That goes something like this, "Oh, the walls are down! Who fouled up? Who blew it?" Or, "They've been back there all these years and nobody has built those walls? Send me their names; I'll deal with them." These reactions are wrong. A leader must have compassion.

The balance of chapter 1 is a prayer...Nehemiah's prayer is simply this...Lord God, if it is at all possible, trust me to build the wall around the city that I love – that You have raised up as the apple of Your eye. The city that had been in ruins for almost a century.

Like Ezra, Nehemiah said, "I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you." We hear Nehemiah humbly ask the Lord to forgive His people, regather them to their land, and restore them to His favor and blessing. He closed the prayer with an expression of confidence. He had confidence in the power of God. Nehemiah had faith that God would work on his behalf.

God chastened the Jews sorely; but He did not forsake them! God had brought the Jews out of Babylon. Surely, He would help them rebuild the city.

Verse 11 closes the chapter with Nehemiah's prayer asking the Lord to be attentive to his prayer and grant him favor from the king.

The temple in Jerusalem was completed, but the wall of the city still lay in ruins. A city without a wall might as well just invite the pillagers to walk through the open doors. Chapter 2 tells us that Nehemiah decided he would lead the people in rebuilding the city's walls.

A mission of this scope required permission from Artaxerxes, King of Persia. After praying for God's help for four months, God had the king ask Nehemiah why he looked so down-hearted. Nehemiah approached the king, who was pleased to send Nehemiah on his way with letters for safe-conduct and supplies. Hard work lay ahead, long days and restless nights, but Nehemiah packed and led his caravan toward Jerusalem.

After making the very long trip to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, Nehemiah slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with him to assess the project that was before him. Only after he assessed the situation, did Nehemiah meet with the priests, nobles, and officials to let them know of his plans and to inspire all the people to help rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. He explained that the gracious hand of God was on him as was the support of the king. The people replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

Chapter 3 is one of those chapters that appears to consist largely of unpronounceable names and long forgotten people who did the work of repairing the gates and walls of Jerusalem. One commentator has said, "God is a great believer in putting names down." That is true. There are many chapters like this in the Scriptures. But that should really encourage us. It means that God has not forgotten our names either. He loves to record the names of obscure people.

I believe the central teaching of a chapter like this is that, in putting lives back together, we need and must seek help from each other. We cannot do it alone. Nehemiah teaches us about the importance of working together in cooperation. This book illustrates the New Testament truth concerning the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12, and Romans 12 teach that believers in Christ are part of a worldwide body made up of many members. We belong to each other and so we are to help one another and bear each other's burdens.

In summoning the people of Jerusalem to rebuild their walls and their gates, we learn from this chapter that all the people were involved in the project. The whole city gave itself over for a period of 52 days to building the walls and the gates. That portrays for us a very important principle: Everyone was involved. For example, look at verses 1-2:

Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated and as far as the Tower of Hananel. The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them. (Nehemiah 3:1-2)

Notice that everyone is involved. The priests began the work. That fact may encourage some who think that preachers never do any work except on Sundays! And with them the Levites worked. A number of rulers are also mentioned. Two men, each of whom ruled half the city of Jerusalem, got their hands dirty working on these walls. There were gate keepers, guards, farmers, even perfume makers involved in the work. I don't know what they did. Their hands probably were pretty soft, but nevertheless they worked on the walls. There were jewelers, pharmacists, merchants and temple servants. Even women were directly involved, as verse 12 points out:

"Shallum, son of Hallohes, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters." (Nehemiah 3:12)

And did you notice...They all worked near their home. This is an important truth that emerges in God's design for ministry. God has placed us all strategically where he wants us to be. Your neighborhood, office, or home is where your ministry should be. That is why God put you there.

In John 15, Jesus said to His disciples that He had "appointed" them. That word means "strategically placed them."

One other important principle found here is: Each one completed his assigned task. They kept on until they had finished the work. Only the "nobles" of Tekoa, who would not dirty their hands, failed the task. I have learned through the years that responsibility is one of the marks of spiritual maturity. The most mature members in a congregation are those who stay with the work that has been assigned to them.

Before heading on to Chapter 4, I want to take a moment to emphasize the symbolic importance of the gates of Jerusalem and how that symbolism relates to the walls in our own lives. I know I am preaching to the choir here, but I believe that we can use spiritual reminders as tools to help us come closer to the Lord as we want try to become more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first gate mentioned is the **Sheep Gate** which is now known as St. Stephen's Gate and sometimes called the Lion Gate. It is at the northeast corner of the city. It was called the Sheep Gate, because it was there where the sheep which were to be sacrificed in the temple courts were kept. John the Baptist greeted our Lord with the words, "Behold, the Lamb of God

who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29). Sheep are therefore a symbol of sacrifice in Scripture. This description of Gate #1 begs the question: Do we take the time to honor Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin?

In this counter-clockwise tour around the wall of Jerusalem, the next gate is the **Fish** Gate (Damascus Gate). It is called the Fish Gate because the fishermen from Galilee and the coast brought their fish into the city through this gate. This reminds us of what our Lord said to His disciples: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men," (Matthew 4:19). Throughout the Old Testament fishing is a symbol of witnessing to others. Do you acknowledge that you belong to Christ? Can this be observed by others through your words and actions?

Then we come to the **Jeshanah Gate**, which in Hebrew means the "**Old Gate.**" It would be located somewhere near the present Jaffa Gate. This gate represents the old ways of truth versus the new illusions of error. The world is constantly proposing something new – the New Age movement, for instance – but Scripture calls us back to the old way. Jeremiah 6:16 says, "...ask for the old paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." Do you ask for the "good way" and walk in it?" (Jeremiah 6:16).

In Verse 13, we come to the **Valley Gate**. This would be located at the southwestern corner of Jerusalem. A valley in Scripture always represents humility and the judgment of conceit in our lies. John Stott calls humility "that rarest and fairest of Christian virtues." If pride is the ultimate sin, then humility, its opposite, is the ultimate virtue. Peter tells us, "God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble," (1 Peter 5:5). Have you been introspective in checking on your pride recently?

Then in Verse 14, we come to the **Dung Gate**. That is not a very pleasant name, but it is necessary to have a gate of elimination, the gate where all the rubbish and corrupt things in the city were brought to the garbage dump in the Hinnom Valley, outside Jerusalem. It is necessary to have an elimination gate in our lives as well. Paul urges us, "Cleanse yourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit." (2 Corinthians 7:1) Ask yourself, "Are there any secret or unconfessed sins in my life?

The sixth gate (Verse 15) is the **Fountain Gate**. This was at the end of the Pool of Siloam, low in the valley in the south. It speaks of a fountain springing up and reminds us of Jesus' words in John 7 where He spoke of "rivers of living water." (John 7:38) By that, He describes the ministry of the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle Paul said, "Keep being filled with the Spirit," (Ephesians 5:18) You will notice it comes immediately after the Dung Gate. After the corruption is cleansed away, then the cleansing of the Spirit washes clean. Have you allowed your Spirit-filled life to overflow to others recently?

In Verse 26, we come to the **Water Gate**. In Chapter 8 we learn that this is the place where Ezra reads the Law of God to the people. Water, in Scripture, is the symbol of the Word of God. This is the gate that reminds us of our need for the Word of God. The interesting thing about this account is that the Jews did not repair the Water Gate. The Word of God never needs improvement or repair for it lasts forever. We are reminded of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone. Man lives by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," (Matthew 4:4). If you want your life filled to the full and experience the joy that

God intended you to have, it will only be as you come to understand the Word of God. I know it is important for us to keep studying the Word and what better way to do that is there than to continue your participation in People of the Word.

In reading verse 28, we read about the **Horse Gate** which is found on the eastern wall of Jerusalem. The horse has always been a symbol of battle in Scripture. This is the gate that reminds us that we are on a battlefield. We are going to be under attack and assaulted by surprising events. The Christian life will not be free of struggle. Are you putting on the full armor of God mentioned in Ephesians 6 each day?

Then we come to the ninth gate, the **East Gate**, mentioned in Verse 29. Today this is called the Golden Gate. It is on the eastern side, opposite the temple area and facing the rising sun. This is the gate that speaks of hope and expectation. It is the gate through which the returned Messiah will enter the city of Jerusalem. It tells us that God has yet a glory awaiting those who trust Him. Jesus said to His disciples, "When you see all these things coming to pass, lift up your heads and rejoice, for your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:28) Are you expectant and excited about our Messiah's re-entry into the city of Jerusalem?

The last gate is the **Inspection Gate** mentioned in Verse 31. The word in Hebrew means "the appointed place." If you are familiar with the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, you will recall 9:27, "It is appointed for man but once to die, and after that the judgment—the inspection. It is a reminder that we must give an account of our journey. And yet, Scripture assures us that it is not a place of condemnation, but rather, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3, "everyone shall receive commendation" from God. (1 Corinthians 3:8, 3:14) It is the place for the giving of rewards, for the acknowledgment of faithful service. Can you imagine your joy when Our Lord addresses you with the words, "Well done good and faithful servant?"

Then at the end of the chapter, we come again to the **Sheep Gate**, where we began. The **Sheep Gate** stands for the cross and the cross must be at the beginning and at the end of our lives. We know that the way of the cross leads home.

As we compass the walls of Jerusalem, each gate instructs us of the part of our life which needs to be watched, and rebuilt, and repaired. You may find some areas that need repair as you look at your own life today. This is what Nehemiah and Peter call us to do: to repair these gates and help ourselves become all that God intended us to be.

In chapters 2 and 4, we see that, just as the Jews had received opposition from the neighboring peoples when they worked at rebuilding the temple a century earlier, they came under attack for trying to rebuild Jerusalem's wall. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, a leading official and perhaps governor of Transjordan, were undoubtedly particularly threatened by the fact that King Artaxerxes had not only provided for Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem, but I have a feeling that knowing the fact that God had His hand on Nehemiah was evident to all even non-believers. A strong Jerusalem would endanger the balance of power in the region, which would also rob Sanballat and his friends of influence and wealth.

Opposition can be evidence that God is blessing; however, it can also be an opportunity for us to grow. The difficulties that came to the work brought out the best in Nehemiah and his

people, and that can work for us as well. Satan wanted to use problems as weapons to destroy the work, but God used them as tools to build His people.

Charles Spurgeon is credited with these words, "*God had one Son without sin, but He never had a son without trial.*"

Chapter 4 describes the struggles that the people had to endure during the work. The chapter begins by describing the response of the opposition to the work and the efforts that they made to disrupt it. This chapter presents some of Satan's devices for opposing the Lord's work, and it also tells us how God's people can be steadfast and defeat the enemy. If you start building, you will soon be battling; so be prepared!

This passage describes the different attacks of the enemy used against the Jews. In verses 1-6 the strategy of the enemy was mocking and verbal attacks. However, as the people began to make obvious progress on the completion of the walls, the strategy of the enemy began to intensify.

In verse 7, we see that the Jews were being threatened from every direction - Sanballat and the Samaritans from the north, Ashdod from the west, Tobiah and the Ammonites from the east, and Arabs from the south plotted to unite and fight and stir up trouble against Jerusalem.

Nehemiah responded to the first wave of attacks with prayer (4:4). The Bible does not record any other response at this point. Nehemiah simply led the people to work. According to verse 4:11, the Jews heard about a plot for a surprise attack which would scare the workers into ceasing their work. As the opposition intensified, Nehemiah again responded with prayer. He also led the people with wisdom. Here are the strategies that he used:

- Nehemiah organized the people by family units.
- He set people in the most vulnerable places with weapons.
- He challenged the leaders to trust God and to continue the work.
- He motivated the people to not become discouraged.

The attacks intensified as the enemy began to perceive that completion of the wall was a reality. From that point on, half of the men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows, and armor. They would work with one hand and guard with the other.

Each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But there was a man who would sound the trumpet as a warning to all the workers that they were being attacked. That man stayed with Nehemiah. The trumpet was the rallying cry and a reminder that no one was alone.

Nehemiah was in a unique position to speak to the king as the trusted cupbearer who ensured the safety and quality of the king's food and drink. Nehemiah was concerned, prayerful, and prepared as he looked for the right opportunity to tell the king about God's people. Each of us is unique and capable of serving no matter what our position. Just as Nehemiah used his place as the king's servant to intercede for his people, we can use our present positions and/or circumstances to serve God.

You have to love the heart of Nehemiah. Jerusalem was in shambles; and yet, rather than criticize, Nehemiah agonized. Nehemiah prayed for success in their venture, not just for the strength to cope with his problems. Yet the success he prayed for was not for personal advantage, position, or acclaim. He requested success for God's work. When God's purposes are at work, don't hesitate to ask for success.

I would be remiss if I did not talk about the importance of prayer in our lives. I was recently emotionally hurt by a close friend. My first reaction was to hurt back. After being derailed emotionally for a couple of days, I followed God's lead and started praying for my friend. After reading about the way Nehemiah mourned... Here's the thing... because his heart was for the things of God, his heart was not for himself, but for others. I had to look deep inside my heart and I knew that this whole situation and hurting back should NOT be my response. I started praying for my friend immediately because this life is NOT about me or how right or wrong I am. It's about the things of God and how He wants us to show others LOVE, no matter what! So, I stand up here preaching at you and having been humbled by the Holy Spirit without a happy ending to my story to share with you. That relationship seems to have ended; and yet, who am I to say that???? God is in charge. Yes, once again God changed my heart to be more like His. I am so grateful that He continues to care about my character and He never lets it go!

The message for me was this: Be humble, pray for restoration. I continue to be aware of God's prodding me to get over the "hump" of self-centeredness. God willing, I will be able to pass that test one day. For now, I am a work in progress.

There is one more personal issue that I want to present to you about prayer. I know - now you are saying, "No, no, say it isn't so. She's going to share another personal story?!?" I apologize in advance, but this one does have a happy ending and it has been a powerful lesson to me as we study Nehemiah, the prayerful planner, and wall restorer.

Some of you know and have been praying for my family concerning our property problem. When we bought our house 12 years ago, we inherited a nifty little built-in pool that looks like the happiest place on earth. Because there is a sink hole in our neighbor's yard, city officials came knocking on our door. Through that encounter the city folks told us to remove the pool or produce a permit that gave the previous owners the city's permission to build it. Since we had no proof of a permit, we hired civil engineers to provide land sample analyses and reports to the city verifying that the pool and the land around it were stable which would allow us to obtain the permit. After we were issued the golden permit, we discovered that we had a corroded drainage pipe that was put in by the city years ago.

With the heavy rains, the land around the pipe was becoming soaked causing a hole to develop under our brick wall. Every time it rained, we noticed the brick wall that stands between us and our neighbor's land was starting to sink a bit. Every time it rained, we had to shore up the land and the WALL with gravel, sand, and dirt to try to ensure that our wall would not travel down the hill and take the pool with it.

This was a big concern for my husband who can no longer do the physical work needed to move sand, dirt and gravel, but he is quite knowledgeable about working with the city officials and interfacing with our neighbors. He is also experienced in working with corrosion which is one reason he says he is grateful that we have stayed together all of these years. What? Wait a minute????

You ask, "So what?" Here is the bottom line. We were able to hire a company just two weeks ago which traveled to Arizona to pick up a special thin and pliable material that looks like a slip 'n slide in a refrigerated truck. You see, once exposed to heat, the material hardens forming a fabulous inch-thick barrier. In order to be able to afford this material, we needed to wait until a company ordered the material and then we could have dibs on the affordable leftovers.

God convinced our cranky neighbor, whose reputation preceded him, to allow huge work trucks to enter his yard and lay out the slip and slide material. The workers inserted the slip 'n slide into the pipe. Then the workers blew in hot air which caused the very thin "sleeve" to expand and adhere to the existing pipe. This should last us for many years and we have a new friend.

My point to all of this - Nehemiah prayed with dedication before he moved to the rebuilding of the wall. He waited on the Lord, he planned a solution, and finished the project. God has taught me through this adventure, that He is in control, and that He will continue to provide for us even if I don't understand His strategies or timing. I thank God for providing this solution and we were able to save the pool. He taught me to pray and seek Him in all situations. I understand that God will have a better plan than anything that I could ever imagine. This also provided a way for us to get to know our neighbor and we have started to develop a relationship with him.

Nehemiah was indeed a model of a godly man--a model of tenderness who had a heart that could break, but he chose to love the Lord, serve Him and lean on God's strength and guidance in order to accomplish the massive project of rebuilding Jerusalem's wall. It was completed in only 52 days.

Like Nehemiah who was living in a foreign country with a heart beating for Zion, God will make a way for each of His children to find their way to the Promised Land. Can you feel your heart beating and yearning to be at home with the one true God? I can hardly wait! Let's pray.