

"The Walls Completed"
Nehemiah 5:1-7:73
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In the previous chapters, Nehemiah was in the Persian court when word of the difficulties in Jerusalem came to him. He wept and prayed to God before going to King Artaxerxes to ask his permission to go to Jerusalem. The request was granted and, upon arriving in Jerusalem, he found the walls in ruins and the enemies of Israel mocking any attempt to reconstruct them. In spite of opposition, Nehemiah and the people set out rebuilding the walls but now with weapons by their sides.

And now we come to chapter 5!

We already know a lot about Nehemiah, and in this chapter, we gain some insight into him personally. We see his anger, introspection, determination, and his integrity.

We expect persecution and trials from the enemy, from those that oppose God; however, we see in the beginning of chapter 5 that there is disunity among God's people.

Nehemiah 5:1 "Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews."

What's so interesting in chapter 5 is that we see that the rebuilding had stopped. In chapter 4, when the enemies came against the Jews, they continued to build with a weapon in one hand and a tool in the other. The enemy couldn't thwart the work, God's work. But here strife among God's people brought the work to a halt!

There was a famine in the land and the people were having trouble feeding their families. The work of the Kingdom, the rebuilding of the walls, had kept them from doing what they needed to do to provide for their families. Many mortgaged their fields, borrowed money, or even sold their sons and daughters to slavery to pay their debt!

The greedy rich nobles and officials were making money off the poor! And rightly Nehemiah became very angry with God's people taking advantage of their brethren. **Nehemiah 5:6** says, "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry."

The first thing Nehemiah did was to admit his anger. He did not excuse it, ignore it, or minimize it. Neither did he project it on to others or blame them for the way he felt. The evil in anger comes from harboring it or desiring revenge. By admitting his anger, Nehemiah was in a position to deal with his feelings and respond to the situation.

Verse 7a continues, "I consulted with myself (pondered / thought it over) . . ." Dr. Cyril J. Barber's commentary on Nehemiah offers this thought: "This introspection gave him time to evaluate the situation and decide on a course of action . . . By carefully weighing the circumstances surrounding our frustrations or resentment, we can resolve our part in the conflict and be in a position to tackle the problems others have."

Nehemiah called together a large meeting to confront the nobles and officials and rebuked them saying in **Nehemiah 5:9**, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?" He then charged them to give the people back their fields, vineyards, olive groves, houses and the interest they had charged.

All of this, which they never should have done in the first place, violated the law forbidding charging interest or making slaves of their brethren! **Deut. 23:19** "Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest."

It takes courage to directly confront wrongdoing. Nehemiah knew what needed to be done, and he did it. He also knew human nature too well to place confidence in verbal assurances.

The nobles and officials responded by saying, "We will give it back, and we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say." To seal their commitment, they formally committed themselves to the course of action they had promised by making an oath. And the people said, "Amen" (so be it, verily, truly). Then the people did as they had promised.

In the final six verses of the chapter, we see Nehemiah explaining his example that, not only was he calling out what was done as being wrong, he lived in such a way that people could look on his example of how a person, claiming to do the work of God, should live:

- He worked on the wall and never required the people to support him. He certainly had the right to ask the people to support him, but he knew this would most likely impede the work being done. I often think of Apostle Paul building tents when he was in Corinth to supply his needs.
- He was also very generous with his supplies, feeding up to 150 people daily from the provision he received for himself (which he could have sold for a profit).

Nehemiah was such an amazing example, not only putting his hands to the work but giving where there was need! God tells us in **Proverbs 19:17** "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done."

And **Proverbs 22:9** "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor."

Isn't this the example we are called to be!? The Apostle Paul says in **1 Corinthians 11:1** "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

As followers of Christ, we bear the responsibility of demonstrating to the world what Jesus might look like were He to walk the earth today. Those who will never enter the door of a church or read a Bible or hear a sermon can still know Jesus by watching us!

A quote that is attributed to Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." Nehemiah lived this way; he was a man of integrity!!

Nehemiah concludes chapter 5 with this prayer, "Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people." (5:19) Here we have another insight into his heart. While he was vitally involved with the present, Nehemiah was looking to the future. As with Abraham, he had his eyes set on "a city, whose builder and maker was God." (Hebrews 11:8-10)

"He could forego the temporal advantages of his earthly position because he sought God's approval alone. He was satisfied by the knowledge that his reward would come from the Lord." (Cyril J. Barber, p.106)

Chapter 6 starts with more challenges and opposition for the work Nehemiah was doing, once again coming from enemies of God and enemies of God's people.

It's a reminder to us, that as we do the work of God (building a wall, sharing the Gospel, etc.), opposition WILL come! It's not if, it's when. But we always need to keep our focus, our eyes on Jesus.

One of my favorite Bible passages is **Hebrews 12:1-2** ¹ "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The work of the Kingdom (for Nehemiah, it was building the wall), always needs to be front and center in our minds! Because opposition will come and many times it includes lies of the enemy!

Nehemiah 6:1 tells us that the project of rebuilding the walls was complete except for placement of the doors in the gates.

Four times, messages were sent to Nehemiah by his (and God's) enemies. These 3 stooges, Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, (you may remember them from previous lessons, but let me remind you:

- Sanballat is a Samaritan leader and is "kind-of" the ringleader of this group, and his name means, "Sin has begotten."
- Tobiah the Ammonite
- And Geshem the Arab)

we are told in verse 2, were "scheming to harm" Nehemiah; which is fascinating because clearly Nehemiah had been given discernment in this matter. If they couldn't stop the project, maybe they could stop their leader.

Each time Nehemiah sent them the following message: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" Such a great reply, what a great example for us! "I'm doing great work for the Kingdom, why should I stop!?"

The fifth time, the enemies of Nehemiah and of God sent the following message:

Nehemiah 6:6-7 ⁶"It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king ⁷ and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together."

This attempt at intimidation was a lie! They sent this message "unsealed" so that anyone could read their lies! And really these lies come from the "father of lies", Satan! Who knows how many people read that unsealed letter and spread that false rumor before it ever got to Nehemiah. What does James 3:8 tell us? "...no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Some people are often quick to believe the worst about others. This was nothing less than an attempt at blackmail. Nehemiah knew that by agreeing to leave Jerusalem and meet Sanballat in Ono would only give his enemies an opportunity for assassination.

But Nehemiah didn't bite, didn't give in to these lies, just like we shouldn't! He sent them this great reply, **Nehemiah 6:8**, "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head."

Nehemiah is such an amazing example to us! He is a man of great integrity, focused on doing the work of the Kingdom, and nothing derails him from that mission. And after sending the reply, we are told that Nehemiah prayed to the Lord, "**Now strengthen my hands.**" He knew his goal was to continue with the task God had given him and he was happy to leave his own reputation and future to God.

He needed God's strength because opposition was coming again, this time from a false prophet, Shemaiah (she-MAY-ah), sent by the enemies Tobiah and Sanballat! Apparently, other prophets, including the prophetess, Noadiah (No-a-DI-ah) were also part of the opposition. Hoping to instill fear in Nehemiah, they lied, claiming that people were coming to kill him and that he must flee to the temple. The term "temple" that Shemaiah used was a reference to the Holy Place in the temple – a place which only the priests were allowed to enter. However, Nehemiah discerned the lie, and wasn't about to sin, so he said in verse 11, **Nehemiah 6:11** "Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!"

Once again, Nehemiah prayed for God to deal with his enemies.

In the face of all this, Nehemiah persevered and we are told in verses 15-16, So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

Nehemiah is such an amazing example to us, persevering in the face of adversity.

James 1:12 "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

Chapter 6 ends with continued opposition, both from the people of Judah and the enemies. Tobiah and his son were married to Jewish women, and it's believed that Tobiah had friends in high places (although I would say, "friends in low places"). Some of the nobles exchanged letters back and forth with Tobiah and the chapter ends with the following words, "And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me."

This is so fascinating, because even though we are told that the enemies of God (and of Nehemiah) "realized that this work had been done with the help of our God," they still try to thwart God's work.

Nehemiah knew, just like we should know, that nothing will thwart God's plans:

- **Isaiah 14:27** "For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?"
- **Job 42:2** "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

Throughout this chapter we've seen Nehemiah's character, his confidence and his courage. The foundation for success is laid in our personal character. This forms the basis of effective leadership. It is furthered by our confidence in God and His plan for our lives. And with that confidence, we have the courage to persevere.

Chapter 7 begins with this beautiful verse 1: "After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed."

- Gatekeepers: trusted officials in the role of protecting the Lord's house.
- Musicians or Singers: those offering praise to God in song.
- Levites: Who were charged in all manner of service of the tabernacle of God.

It was certainly extremely important for the wall to be finished; however, the walls were not rebuilt so the people of Jerusalem could look at nice walls, they were rebuilt so they could worship God. You will study more about that in next week's lesson.

This is also what should be most important to us, the worship of God!

- **Psalm 29:1-2** ¹ Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. ² Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.
- **Mark 12:30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

Chapters 1-6 show us how Nehemiah accomplished his first objective – the building of the wall. Chapter 7 is transitional and records the steps toward consolidating the work. First, he selected new leadership. Then he took a census with the goal being to determine the purity of the people in anticipation of repopulating the city. And last, Nehemiah insured the proper support of those engaged in the service of the house of the Lord.

We see Nehemiah's great wisdom in putting his brother, Hanani (huh-NAY-igh), and the commander of the citadel, Hananiah (han-uh-NIGH-uh), God-fearing men of integrity, in charge of Jerusalem. Clearly men that were just like himself!

I read that the Great Wall of China was penetrated four times, not by enemies breaking in, but by the enemies paying off guards. Nehemiah knew having men of integrity was vital.

Some believe by putting these men in charge, Nehemiah now went back to the king of Persia; however, that doesn't appear to be clear. But what is clear about

Nehemiah is his humility. He did the work for the Lord, not his own glory, and now he delegated his authority to men of integrity.

While placing his brother in such a high position of authority may appear at first to be an act of nepotism, Hanani (huh-NAY-igh) was highly respected in the community. As Theodore Roosevelt once said, "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it." (Cyril J. Baber, pg.133)

Having already insured that the gatekeepers, singers and the rest of the Levites would act as watchmen during the day, at night the citizens were given the responsibility of guarding the wall "each at his post, and each in front of his own house."

Since there were relatively few residents in the city, God prompted Nehemiah to take a census. The implementation of that would not take place until chapter eleven.

Just as Nehemiah had secured its city with walls, he also wanted to secure the spiritual safety of the population. His harsh treatment of those priests who were not in family records caused them to be excluded from the priesthood and considered unclean. If the priesthood was corrupt, its influence would ultimately destroy the moral and spiritual fiber of the people.

That concept is true today. Only those who have experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ for themselves, and put into practice the benefits of His salvation, can hope to be an effective minister to others. Knowing His Word, as you're doing here at People of the Word, will keep you from falling prey to those who would lead you astray.

Chapter 7 closes with this great list of those that made the choice to return to Jerusalem and many pledged their financial support for the Levites. Those returning are mentioned here and in Ezra chapter 2. This certainly would be a great list to be on. We are told that the number was 42,360. Many believe that this amounts to less than 2% of the population of Jews that were in exile from the Babylonian captivity. So, many made the decision to stay in Babylon where life was much easier, but wasn't their homeland. But this group had made the choice to return; to take the more difficult path to return to the "chosen land"; to return to Jerusalem and in so doing, they are listed in God's Word.

We as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to take the "narrow gate" in **Matthew 7:13-14**¹³ "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Like those that made the choice to return to Jerusalem, our Christian walk isn't the easy way based on the world's view. It will lead to enemies of God attacking us, challenges, and being uncomfortable, but in the end, nothing is better than having your name "written in the book of life!"

AMEN!

Please stand as we sing the Doxology and I'll close in prayer.