

Nehemiah: Inspection

Nehemiah 2:9-20

By Dr. Derek Thomas

*The Lord's Day Evening
August 17, 2008*

Please be seated. Now we return this evening to our study of the book of Nehemiah. We've been following his return to Jerusalem. The year is 445 BC. The Persians and the Persian Empire now dominate the then known world, stretching from the Aegean all the way to the other side of what we would now today call India. Nehemiah has returned as the cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. Some friends, possibly his blood brother, Hanani, have returned from Jerusalem, given him news that distressed him. Seemingly between the book of Ezra and the beginning of the book of Nehemiah, a space of about twelve or thirteen years, work had begun on the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, but evidently Artaxerxes, the Persian king, had put a stop to it. Well, we've watched Nehemiah in prayer, persevering in prayer for upwards of three, possibly five months, praying over and over and over that God would give him strength at the right moment and the God-given opportunity to speak to the king that he might be granted to return. And last week we came to the point when Nehemiah made that request. We watched him as he sent up that arrow-like prayer that the king would be gracious to him, and so we pick up the reading tonight in verse 9...Nehemiah 2:9.

Before we read the passage together, let's look to God in prayer.

Lord, this is Your word. It is written by the finger of God; every jot and tittle given by inspiration, and profitable for doctrine and reproof, and instruction and correction in the way of righteousness, that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. Now grant Your blessing as we read it together. We ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem. It's taken him four months. (We know that from the length of time it took Ezra to return to Jerusalem.)

Verse 9:

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave

them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision. 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. 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?' Then I replied to them, 'The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.'

Amen. May God add His blessing to that reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now in one sense, civil engineers amongst us — I guess graduates of Mississippi State rather than Ole Miss? — will be just bursting with joy at this particular passage of Scripture. It's all about civil engineering, after all! It's all about building walls. You may be wondering what in the world are we doing tonight studying a piece of civil engineering two and a half thousand years ago...what possible interest except for those who are addicts of the History channel or the Discovery channel...what possible interest is that to us?

I. Great leaders count the cost.

Well, of course there is a principle at work here. This is God's work. Jerusalem is God's city. God's redemptive purposes still hang in the balance from a human point of view. They're never in the balance, of course, from a divine point of view.

There's a principle here that God's people are facing opposition once again, and fear. George May mentioned in the prayer tonight the fear possibly of his own heart, and undoubtedly of all of our hearts, about leaving our loved ones, our children, away at college. And we trust the Lord, and we trust God with the task that He has given to us. That's what this passage is really about.

I've just returned from London. I'm still a bit jet lagged. I've done in the last few days what I often do when I'm across the pond: I catch up with things British. I was fascinated in the papers to read of the equivalent of our History channel here—there's a history channel there, too—of a series of programs on The Fifty Most Important Events in British History. Of course there was to be 1066, and the Battle of Hastings. Of course there would be the execution of Charles I in 1649. There would be Lord Nelson's famous victory at Trafalgar in 1805... *The Soccer Rule Book*, in 1863! Monty Python humor in the late twentieth century. But no mention of Francis Drake, no mention of Captain Cook, no mention of Florence Nightingale, and no mention of Winston Churchill. Yes. It shocked a lot of folk in Britain, too, how quickly we forget.

Winston Churchill was one of the great leaders—I say that as a Brit, to be sure, but he was one of history's great leaders, by any standards. In 1940, when Hitler had invaded Holland and Belgium and Luxembourg and France, and Britain had withdrawn in almost a miraculous way 338,000 soldiers from the beaches from the beaches of Dunkirk, it was Britain's darkest hour. And on June 14, Paris fell, and four days later Winston Churchill spoke to the House of Commons his famous “This will be our finest hour” speech:

“Let us brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire lasts a thousand years, men will still say this was their finest hour.”

Well, like Winston Churchill, and Alexander the Great, and Napoleon Bonaparte, and General Douglas MacArthur, and General George Patton, they were all great leaders—leaders of men. They knew how to inspire men in times of great difficulty.

Now Nehemiah is hardly on a par with those giants of history; I'm not about to say that. But he was a great leader, and he knew how to speak. He knew how to give a good speech. He knew how to inspire men with a sense of confidence — not worldly confidence, but confidence in God in the time of great need.

Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem. He's gone, first of all, to the Persian satraps with his letters and documentation of authority from King Artaxerxes, and then having met some opposition (which we'll talk about later), he goes to Jerusalem. Just a few days later he begins a survey. Great leaders need to know how to plan well. If you're going to present something — a document, a plan, a proposition of some kind that's going to involve costs in manpower, in financial outlay, with possible repercussions and opposition, and possible death — as

there was in this case — you need to speak well, and you need to plan ahead. And so three days after Nehemiah gets to Jerusalem (effectively as Jerusalem's chief Persian administrator), he makes an unannounced nighttime expedition with just a few chosen men, and one — was it a horse or a mule? — some beast of burden.

And we have to imagine now...and we don't believe in overhead projectors here at First Pres, so we don't have a picture of old Jerusalem...some of you may have one in the back of your Bibles. And probably you don't, so you need to consult a dictionary or go online on the internet to look at the city walls. We'll have occasion to talk about these again, but he makes this expedition around the fallen walls of old Jerusalem going from one gate to another, finding at one point that it was impossible for the horse or the mule or whatever it was he was riding to pass through, and he has to go down into the valley and up again to inspect another gate. He effectively goes half way round the old city of Jerusalem. It was enough for him to get a picture of what the state of things was like.

Why the secrecy? Well, he didn't know who his friends were. He didn't know who his enemies were. He didn't know who could be trusted, who was in the hands of Sanballat or Tobiah or Geshem. Had he announced beforehand his plans to rebuild the city walls (the folk in Jerusalem did not know this yet), they might have stopped the necessary supplies, for example, that would have been needed to engage in such an enterprise. He needed first-hand knowledge. When he first spoke to the Jews, the priests, those in authority, those who would be responsible for putting this plan into operation, he would need to know his facts. It wouldn't do for him to present a case that was half-baked, without knowledge, without real statistics as to manpower, what would be needed. He's counting the cost.

Jesus speaks about counting the cost. No one, He says, goes and builds a tower without first of all counting the cost. We did that here with this building we're sitting in tonight. I remember as some of you do several years ago, and there were estimations of the cost. You wanted to know, and rightly so, how much was this going to cost. God had told him, God had put it into his heart, but the details he had to work out for himself. He had to employ his wisdom. He had to wait upon the Lord; he had to engage in all of the necessary stratagems in order to effectively work out what it is that they would need. Careful planning in everything that you do...in Christian work you need careful planning. Every aspect of church life, every aspect of ministry needs careful planning. You'd be amazed how many meetings take place in the course of a week in this church in all the various departments. I couldn't even begin to tell you how many there would be...all the meetings that take place at lunch time and early in the morning, and emails...all of it engaged in this process of careful planning.

II. Great leaders can inspire and motivate.

But then, powerful motivations...powerful motivations. Leaders like Nehemiah know how to inspire people, how to motivate people. Jerusalem was filled with deadbeats. This wall should have been constructed a long time ago! It had taken eighty years for Ezra to come and engage in religious reform and reinstitute certain ritual ceremonial practices. When Ezra had first returned, it had taken a long time before the temple was rebuilt. Nehemiah needs to motivate.

And you notice how he identifies with the people. When he comes, he says to them after he has done his survey, "You see the trouble [verse 17] we are in." That's first person plural—"the trouble we are in." You know, he doesn't come as the great official from Susa, the winter capital of the Persian Empire, and say, 'You bunch of deadbeats, don't you see the trouble that you're in? Now listen to me, because I can help you!' No, that's not motivation. That's not inspiring. He puts himself among the people. It's [verse 17]

"...The trouble that we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer derision."

What's he doing? He's motivating by appealing to a sense of national and ethnic pride, to be sure. They were Jews, they were the people of God. They had a history, they had traditions...God-given history, God-given traditions. And they were a laughingstock. They were held in derision—not by the Persians so much; the Persians had a very tolerant policy about ethnic groups, even about their religions. When Cyrus was marching west into Greece and Macedonia expanding his kingdom with phenomenal speed, he passed by the razed cities and temples that the Assyrians centuries before him had demolished, but Cyrus left those cities intact. And the Persians had a tolerant policy. It's not the Persians that Nehemiah is speaking of. After all, he's an ambassador of Persia. It's the Sanballats, it's the Tobiahs, it's the Geshems representative of surrounding territories of Jerusalem. They were the enemies. And he's appealing to the sense of disgrace, the sense of derision that they're held in. 'Remember who you are,' is what he's saying. 'We are the people of God. We are the Lord's covenant people.' Isn't that what you find over and over again in the New Testament as a motivation for action? 'Remember who you are. Remember that you are the blood-bought people of God; that we are children of God; that we are heirs of God; that we are joint heirs with Jesus Christ.'

And he's actually using — isn't it interesting? — he's actually using the motivation of shame. Now in our therapeutic culture there's a great deal of disdain about the motivation of shame, but Nehemiah has no problems with the motivation of shame. 'If you don't do anything here, you should be ashamed. We're held in disgrace. We are held in derision. We need to fly the banner of the covenant of God. We need to fly the banner of the gospel. We need to declare to the world

who we are,' is what Nehemiah is saying. Like all great leaders, he's motivating. Remember your identity, remember your past, remember who you are. All great leaders have done that. We talked about Churchill earlier. Some of you will remember, of course, those famous lines from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, at the Battle of Agincourt:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close up the wall with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing but so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility;
But when a blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of a tiger;
Stiffen the sinews; summon up the blood...

He's motivating by reminding them of who they are.

Notice, too, in verses 12 and 18...he says in verse 18, "I told them of the hand of my God...." That's not just the motivation of ethnic pride. It's not just the motivation of who they are. It's not just the motivation of their wonderful history. It's the motivation that this is God's work. This is God's plan. This is what God wants to do. This is the Lord's doing. And Nehemiah's greatness, do you see, as a leader is different from the greatness of so many leaders of world history. He's not in fact drawing attention to himself, he's drawing attention to God. This is God's plan. This is the Lord's doing. This is God's work that you're involved in. And so much was the motivation that in verse 18, we read at the end, "So they strengthened their hands for the good work." There was an immediate response. There was a sign of God's blessing.

III. Great leaders face persecution.

But there's of course the ever-present persecution. There is Sanballat — a Babylonian name ; a Horonite, according to Nehemiah, from the house of Beth Horon, which is about eighteen miles or so northwest of Jerusalem. And according to an ancient Elephantine papyrus he was the governor of the kingdom of Samaria. Suspicious, then, of what was going on in Jerusalem. There's Tobiah — Tobiah, an Ammonite servant, governor of Ammon, another territory surrounding Jerusalem. You perhaps don't remember, but in Ezra there was a Tobiah...in Ezra 6. And you remember there were certain folk who wanted to return to Jerusalem, but they couldn't provide the necessary documentation to prove their ancestry? Well, Tobiah was one of those. They did return, but they weren't allowed to participate in many of the features of life in Jerusalem until a verdict was given by the Urim and Thummin. Presumably the verdict had gone sour on Tobiah, and the family of the Tobiahs had grown in resentment over the years. And there's Geshem, a chieftain from Arabia who had been given power over kingdoms like Edom and Moab and territories of Judah that lay in the

direction of Egypt.

Now these three, Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, they had nothing in common. But as is often the case...and we see it in the time of Jesus with the Pharisees and the Sadducees...they had nothing in common. The Pharisees and Sadducees had nothing in common, but they united together in opposition to Jesus. And three men here, Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, they had nothing in common. But they unite together in opposition to Nehemiah.

What is this passage about? That the work of God, no matter what it is, will often suffer opposition; that persecution is often a facet of the advancement of the kingdom of God.

And what Nehemiah is doing here is providing the powerful motivation that we need not be afraid.

I spent two weeks with a two-year-old who loves to sing, "My God is so big, so strong and so mighty..." [I'll spare you the hand motions!] "My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing that He cannot do."

My friends, that's not a song for a two-year-old. That's a song for you and me. The theology of that song is about the invincible power of God. He is [verse 20] the God of heaven. He's the God of heaven. He's the only God there is. He's the creator and sustainer and provider. You're not building a wall (maybe you are...I wish you well), but maybe there is a project in your life that God has laid upon your heart, but you are afraid...but you are afraid. What did the choir sing this morning from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*? "Be not afraid. Be not afraid." Trust in the Lord. Trust in this almighty, sovereign God.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You that Your word is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. Hide it now within our hearts, that we might not sin against You. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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