

Restoring Your Vision —With Nehemiah [3]

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There are no demilitarized zones in God's world. This earth has been, is and will be the scene of the cosmic battle between God's kingdom and Satan's. No person is neutral, no church immune, no Christian exempt when it comes to the battle. Just when you surmise all is going well with Nehemiah's rebuilding operation, a pregnant little phrase injects itself into the narrative: 'But it came to pass' (4:1 AV). These next three chapters illustrate one large principle of Scripture: the work of God is always opposed.

Maintaining Your Vision Through Difficulties

Say what you will about Satan. He sure is a clever devil. One moment he's an angel of light, the next a roaring lion. Here he works by terror, there by insinuation. The stern warning found in Nehemiah 2:9, 10, 19, 20 was no false alarm. These following three chapters first from without, next from within, then a 'surgical strike' at Nehemiah himself, remind us of an enemy who constantly and cleverly changes his tactics to frustrate and hinder the work of God. 'Not unaware of his schemes' states the apostle (2 Cor. 2:11). These three chapters enable us to be forewarned and forearmed.

God's Will Usually Has Difficulties

Although God's hand and the king's permission were clearly behind this rebuilding work (2:18), the enemy is not so easily defeated. A very powerful weapon is employed by Sanballat and Tobiah in the fourth chapter—ridicule (1–3). Whoever said 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me' needed his head examining! Words can help and heal or hinder and hurt. Derision for the work of God is nothing new and it is spawned from an angry heart (1). The Jews' evident zeal (6) did not impress Sanballat and Tobiah overmuch—why, even the stealthy, light pawed fox could knock the wall down (3). Not all of us have the quickness of wit that the Salvation Army lass speaking in the open air demonstrated. A heckler was making a nuisance of himself, pointing at his head to intimate the

stupidity of what she was saying. At just the right moment she quipped, 'I see it's your own head you're pointing at!' Whether quick-witted or no, when the work of God is insulted we need to follow Nehemiah's lesson: he prayed and continued the work (4–6).

The situation in verses 7 and 8 is dire. Sanballat is in the North, Tobiah and the Ammonites in the East, Geshem and the Arabs in the South and Ashdod in the West. There's a tactical phrase for that—surrounded! This time the answer is not only prayer but the wise precaution of setting a guard (9). As Cromwell reputedly urged his troops, 'Trust God and keep your powder dry.'

How correct was the hymnwriter when he wrote 'My foes are ever near me, around me and within'. The last category is vividly illustrated by the state of near exhaustion that verse 10 draws to our attention. Here's a familiar, twentieth century problem—overwork, pressure, 'burnout', stress, call it what you will. The symptoms are all too common. Strength fails, the rubble seems to increase and the work threatens to grind to a halt. Sometime ago Luis Palau, the Argentinian evangelist, was drawing attention to the three major temptations the Christian worker reputedly faces—money, sex and pride. 'My greatest temptation' he confessed 'is none of these things. Mine is simply to want to give up!' That's how these folk felt—just at the half way stage too (6). The rest of the passage suggests various solutions for 'burnout'.

The first thing to say is that rarely is the answer a complete cessation from what we are doing. Nehemiah sizes up the problem and realizes that the enemy will take advantage of these flagging workers (11, 12). The reminder to the people to 'remember the Lord' and an encouragement 'to fight for your brothers' etc. is not only positive thinking. It is matched by God's willingness to 'fight for us' (20). Note this, it is not either God or us. It is both God and us—100%/100%—his part and our part. Thank God for the part others play too, especially leaders strategically posted (16) to encourage and assist. Since the enemy we face has no Geneva Convention nor fights according to the Marquis of Queensberry rules, Nehemiah reorganizes the troops. The most vulnerable parts of the wall are given

particular attention (13) and as the immediate crisis subsides (15) the work progresses (16–20). The tools for such progress are worth noting. By implication ‘the trowel’ (17, 18) is necessary for building. Of necessity the sword is required for defence (18). In 1865 C. H. Spurgeon founded his magazine ‘The Sword and Trowel’. How necessary both are. Some Christians are very positive and keen on ‘building’, but they never defend the gospel. Other believers see the enemy around every corner and are so busy defending the gospel they never have time to propagate it. We need both, ‘sword’ and ‘trowel’. Moreover a third implement is equally necessary, the trumpet (18, 20). Here was the ancient world’s equivalent to the portable ‘phone. Communication is ever vital in God’s work. ‘Pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up’ (Ecc. 4:10) because he has gone it alone and failed to keep in touch with others building on the same wall. How fellow-believers need to keep in touch with each other to avoid duplication in God’s work and help defend one another when attacked. Two gospel believing churches within a stone’s throw of each other in a needy inner-city area I know illustrate the text: ‘the Jews have no dealing with the Samaritans’. What a pity they have yet to discover, despite their minor differences, that God has placed them in the same kingdom! So on they go with their independent programmes, duplicating the effort and barely impacting their community.

We can’t leave this chapter without noting the sheer dogged determination of Nehemiah. Long hours and sacrifice of personal comfort (21–23) were the name of the game. According to Josephus Nehemiah ‘went about the compass of the city by night, being never discouraged, neither about the work itself, nor about his own diet and sleep, for he made no use of those things for his pleasure, but out of necessity’ (*Antiquities* 11.5.8). Few servants of God have not wanted to quit at some time—Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah for a start. This chapter vividly reminds us that it is always too soon to quit. Despite many struggles and setbacks, in his diary for 25th March 1873, David Livingstone wrote, ‘Nothing earthly will make me give up my work in despair. I encourage myself in the Lord my God and go forward.’ He did. So did Nehemiah. The rest is history!

When the enemy is frustrated one way he tries another. Enter chapter five and internal strife.

God’s Work Often Faces Division

One word adequately sums up the feelings expressed in these opening verses by the landless, mortgaged-up-to-the-hilt and exorbitantly taxed classes—injustice! As it inevitably does, this particular injustice was breeding profound resentment. In a politically volatile situation

like Jerusalem, that would be bad enough news for Nehemiah. What if that became the breeding ground for insurrection? However it was something closer to home so far as he was concerned. The Jewish nobles and officials were responsible for the financial exploitation being perpetrated (7). His fellow Jews and leaders to boot! That stings. The ‘blind spots’ of our fellow believers are often painful indeed. We so easily mistake the imputation of spiritual *life* that the new birth brings for the possession of advanced spiritual *sight*. They are not synonyms. The pages of the New Testament are replete with calls to grow up in our faith, to become mature, to train ourselves ‘to distinguish good from evil’ (Heb. 5:14). New believers not only need the Holy Spirit’s grace and vitality. They equally need the Holy Scriptures’ teaching and training. The apostle who commands believers to ‘be filled with the Spirit’ (Eph. 5:18) equally lays on them the precise ethical demands of Christian discipleship. For instance, and germane to Nehemiah 5, he states, ‘He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need’ (Eph. 4:28). The Holy Spirit and the Holy Scripture need no reconciliation. Who reconciles friends?

So the root of the problem Nehemiah faces is familiar and contemporary enough. As the sage put it, ‘When a man tells you it is the principle of the thing, not the money, you can be certain of one thing: it’s the money!’ Perhaps that is why Scripture has so very much to say about its wise use on the one hand for the glory of God, and on the other its heinous power to blind our hearts to compassion and bind our souls to its destructive force. The love of it, according to the apostle, is still a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). And all kinds of evil are here in Nehemiah 5, right down to slavery (5, 8). So what is to be done?

Thankfully Nehemiah is not one of those ‘peace-at-any-price-turn-a-blind-eye’ types. As we have noted, it may have been political suicide to ignore such injustice because of the resentment it bred. For Nehemiah, however, it was more personal still for he was ‘very angry’ over the affair, though wisely took time to think before acting (7). A whole-scale ‘racket’ was being conducted. Nehemiah was redeeming Jewish slaves one day and discovering he had bought them a second time the next, since they had been resold in the interval. ‘A nice little earner’ indeed for someone! Personal rebuke in this situation, though administered is not sufficient (7). A public meeting and reprimand is also necessary. The perpetrators are shamed into silence (8), and a promise of compensation for financial irregularities and a commitment not to repeat their practices is extracted (12). Nehemiah recognizes the deceitfulness of the heart, especially where money is concerned. So, ever the wise man, he ensures the

promises made are legally binding (12). No wonder there was a fervent 'Amen' and praise offered to God (13). Presumably those who had been sinned against forgave willingly too. Presumably. Sad to say, some believers nurse grudges against their 'abusers' for years, grudges that gnaw at the soul and grieve the Spirit. All a million miles away from 'forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you' (Eph. 4:32). Thankfully such believers are generally the exception. Nehemiah in the rest of the chapter demonstrates the rule: total integrity in my walk with God.

At first reading 14–19 could be misinterpreted as a piece of religious 'ego-tripping'. Such is not the case. Nehemiah simply records for posterity his foregoing of personal rights as Governor (14, 18), his revulsion at financial exploitation of the people by previous governors and their aides (15) and his generous hospitality at personal cost (17, 18). One word sums up the picture—'instead' (16). The stark contrast that is painted is not accidental. It is the result of deliberate decision to be different 'out of reverence for God' (15). If his prayer 'Remember me with favour, O my God' (19) rings an unfamiliar note in our twentieth century evangelical ears, it may not be Nehemiah's fault. For it is we who may be erring. In our right desire to emphasize salvation by grace through faith alone, we have all but forgotten the incessant New Testament doctrine of 'rewards'. You remember the type of thing: 'Well done, good and faithful servant'; 'if you do these things . . . you will receive a rich welcome'; 'to him who overcomes, I will give . . .' etc. My esteemed predecessor at my present church, the late Francis Dixon, had a memorable way of summing up the Christian's 'judgements'. There is a judgement on sin that is forever *past*. I am justified. There is a judgement on sonship that is now *present*. Step out of line and I get disciplined. There's a judgement on stewardship that is *future*. That's rewards. Can you improve on that for simple profundity? By the way, this nineteenth verse doubtless kept Nehemiah both sane and sweet when he was in danger of losing perspective or feeling a little sore that no-one ever bothered to thank him for what he was doing. Try it.

The flow of the book at this juncture is similar to that of part of the Acts of the apostles. There is outward opposition here (the apostles, Acts 5), internal strife there (the neglected widows, Acts 6) and then personal attack (Stephen's martyrdom, Acts 7). Hence our final section finds Nehemiah in the firing line.

God's Worker Always Meets Diversions

One of the principles of spiritual warfare which our Lord refers to on the night of his betrayal is focused for us in this chapter. 'Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be

scattered' (Matt. 26:31 cf Zech 13:7). It should therefore be no surprise to us, if we are in Christian leadership, to discover that we are prime targets of the enemy. How could it be otherwise? Perhaps it should surprise us less than it does when a leader here or there capitulates under great pressure. Such capitulation is not, thank God, inevitable. The apostle's desire is for Christians to put on the full armour of God 'so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground' (Eph. 6:13). Stand Nehemiah does. Let's learn how.

Don't Get Side-Trackd

The invitation for a 'pow-wow' with his enemies in a village some twenty miles from Jerusalem was hardly subtle. However there may have been a touch of flattery involved: 'You are really important, Nehemiah, we need you at this meeting!' The average Christian worker is likewise bombarded by a myriad of seemingly innocuous invitations and well-meaning but distracting committees. Some inevitably flatter. You are seen in the 'right company', at the 'right conferences', saying all the 'right things'. 'Hmm, definitely a rising star—one of tomorrow's men!' subtle voices seem to whisper as they mortgage today. How do you cope?

Nehemiah thankfully had a very clear idea of what his priorities were to be: 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down' (3). The tyranny of the urgent in his case was justified. The urgent was to finish the job God had given him (1) and until that was complete other things must wait. Indeed the repeated invitation (4) merely seems to fortify Nehemiah. 'Meet in the plain of ONO? Oh! No!!!' we almost hear him reply. Happy the leader who knows what God has built him for and called her to and simply gets on with the often unspectacular but real work of the kingdom. What is my chief task? Which is my particular 'wall'? Does my schedule and diary reflect that? Truly?

Having declined the 'train ride' of distraction, Nehemiah now faces a 'roller coaster' ride of personal intimidation.

Don't Be Too Sensitive

We have already learned something of Nehemiah's personal integrity from chapter five. So now a direct assault is made on that reputation in the 'tabloid press' of the day—'an unsealed letter' (5). You know the type: 'Top Secret', 'Confidential', 'Personal', 'Registered Mail'. In other words the kind of letter every Tom, Dick and Harriet wishes to read. That indeed may be the inference from the 'Gashmu says it is true' (6) marginal reading, i.e. 'everyone is saying it, Nehemiah!' Very clever this one. Far more subtle. Jerusalem's politically volatile past would add credibility to the allegation that Nehemiah had had himself proclaimed King and was in the process of leading a revolt (6, 7). Plausibility is often used by Satan to square circles that common-sense told

everyone were triangles in the first place. Innuendo has ruined many good men and women.

How should one respond? First, a curt, if not too courteous reply: 'You are just making it up out of your head' (8). Second, a recognition that the purpose was to sap vital energy so that 'their hands will get too weak for the work' (9). The opposition has simply made him even more determined to finish the job. No 'quitting' just further teeth 'gritting' and on with the wall. The foregoing rests, of course, on the sheer beauty and substantial reality of a godly character. Some time ago a leading tabloid committed a fulltime reporter to a 'muck-raking' piece of investigative journalism on a well-known Christian. After four months the investigation was called off. The Christian was 'squeaky clean'. 'How would I have fared?' is quite a question.

Still Nehemiah is not yet out of the wood. Enter the 'word from God' merchant.

Don't Become 'Over-Spiritual'

What was said of Daniel applies equally well to Nehemiah: 'We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God' (Dan. 6:5). This seems to be the kind of attack that lies behind Shemaiah's word to meet in the house of God. The phrase 'shut in at his home' that is used of Shemaiah may suggest either a state of prophetic ecstasy or was meant to act as a parable for Nehemiah's imminent danger. Nehemiah likewise needed to be 'shut in', though it would need to be in the Temple according to Shemaiah.

Some Christians seem particularly gullible when it comes to assessing 'words from the Lord'. If one accepts the possibility of a 'direct word' today, then the tests referred to in this passage are indeed crucial. First, there is the test of Scripture itself. Numbers 18:7 clearly forbade on pain of death the kind of going into the Temple that Shemaiah's words imply. Although Nehemiah would hardly have such a sentence 'officially' carried out against him—presumably he would have to have signed his own death warrant—he would clearly be compromised by such disobedience and lose credibility (13). Secondly, the message itself did not have the right 'feel'. It clearly peddled the kind of soft option to which Jeremiah alludes in speaking of false prophets: 'They speak visions of their own minds . . . They keep saying to those who despise me "You will have peace . . . No harm will come to you"' (Jer. 23:16-17).

Thirdly, the 'fruit' of such a message needs to be assessed or predicted. Nehemiah clearly saw that such a course of action as suggested would only demean him: 'Should a man like me run away?' (11) and clearly lead him into sin (13). Finally the source of such 'words' needs always to be checked out. Gener-

ally the character of the bringer of the word needs to be known and trusted. In Shemaiah's case he was simply a prophetic charlatan who mused for the money (12).

As we have come to expect Nehemiah again prays, mentioning his well, along with lesser known enemies (14). The whole episode had been an attempt at intimidation with a view to stopping the work. At the end of yet another battle he is still standing firm. The more 'spiritual' temptation has been rebuffed by clear-headed, biblically-based, no-nonsense godliness. What sanity compared to some of the silly extremes every pastor has encountered. Did you hear of the man who was heavily into deliverance ministry? One morning, he later told a friend, he discovered that a fly in his study was demon-possessed! He spent the rest of the morning trying to exorcise it! When asked how he would have handled the situation, the friend wisely quipped 'I'd have swotted it!'

'So the wall was completed' (15). Just like that? Let's see.

Conclusion

On 15th September, 2339 years ago, approximately (!), the walls were finished. Josephus tells us that it actually took two years and four months (*Antiquities* 11.5.8). That almost certainly includes all the finishing touches. Completed. That's Nehemiah's verdict for now. His vision has been amply fulfilled. He has prayed, planned, parried and stood firm. And his enemies conceded that the work had been accomplished with the help of Nehemiah's God. Little wonder they were afraid and lost confidence (16).

So that's it? All done? Unfortunately God's enemies seem to have all the optimism of the average football supporter: 'Defeat? What defeat? There's always next season!' The loss of self confidence is only a temporary blip. The chapter ends (and the book for that matter) with Nehemiah still facing problems—'and Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me' (19). Hence eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. This side of things there will always be battles to face, mountains to climb, valleys to conquer. God has promised to wipe away every tear from our eyes—one day! (Rev. 21:4). So our study draws to a close with Nehemiah finding himself as dependent on God now the walls are up as he ever was when they were down. There are 'broken walls' in our marriages, homes, churches, communities and world. All they need is God's help and a Nehemiah-like tenacity to see the job through. Anyone for 'Jerusalem'?

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