

Nehemiah issues a challenge

- Nehemiah 2:9-20
- So far we have seen Nehemiah's relationship with God in chapter one. And his relationship with his authority, the king, in the first part of chapter two. Today we will begin to see his relationship with those whom he will lead. This is a timely book, not just because our nation is in moral crisis right now, facing enemies within and without, and trying to navigate those battles without a moral compass and for the most part, without leaders who place their highest value on righteousness and the kingdom of God. This book is timely because of the walls that are crumbling in the churches of the land, mostly because the truth has been exchanged for something less offensive, something less pointed, and something, anything, that will keep people happy and in the seats. We can learn from Nehemiah.
- Today I want to hang my teaching on 7 points represented by 7 words, and I promise to try and move through each one briefly.
- **Journey**
- The journey would have taken three months and the group would have traveled through some difficult terrain. Again we see the respect that the king had for his cupbearer, because he did not let Nehemiah go alone, armed only with papers that bore his signature. No, he sent army officers and part of the cavalry with him! This would have been a message to those along the way who would not think twice about challenging this Jewish man, but it would have also raised quite a few eyebrows as they made their way into Jerusalem. What is this? And who is THIS man coming in here with an armed escort? If God is for us, who can stand against us? Oh, but wait. In the next verse (**verse 10**), we are given a heads-up on what is coming. Any good work of God will be opposed by the forces of darkness, the people who follow the course of this world, and the prince of the power of the air that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Meet Sanballat and Tobiah, both believed to be leaders of the Samaritan faction that opposed the rebuilding of the temple and the wall of Jerusalem. It displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. History is filled with such people and groups, and there are perhaps more today than ever.
- **Rest**
- Notice in verse 11 that Nehemiah did nothing for 3 days upon arrival. Why wouldn't he jump in with both feet, hit the ground running, as we like to say? There may be a handful of reasons. First, he's tired. It's been a 3-month journey. It also may have been the Sabbath, so he took the time to observe it and to rest. It's important also to remember that there are lots of things we should not do when we are tired. Make big decisions. Start new projects. End old projects. Spend big money. Leave your church. Or your job. Or your family! The second reason why Nehemiah may have delayed is because he was a newcomer. To start in the first day with a public campaign to build the wall without any firsthand knowledge of the extent of the problem would have been foolish and would have ended in disappointment. As we saw last week and as Jesus teaches us in Luke, Nehemiah needed to count the cost. A third reason for the 3-day delay which some have suggested is that it was a strategy on Nehemiah's part to get the buzz in town that may have occurred on his arrival with an armed escort to reach its peak. Not sure about that, but maybe. PR is not necessarily a bad thing, is it?
- **Inspection**
- Not just an inspection. It was a secret inspection! We see several things of importance in verses 12-16. He went under cover of darkness, with a few men and one mount (a horse or a donkey, I suppose), and did a thorough inspection of the entire wall and of every gate, starting at the Valley Gate and ending up there after circling the city. I believe the reason he went in the dark without telling anyone else about it is simple: he did not want to be dismissed even before he got the chance to see the extent of the problem. If he had gone to the leaders of the city and the Jewish leaders and told them what he proposed to do, that would very possibly have been the end of it.

He was wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove. (Matthew 10:16) So he went in secret, and did a thorough reconnaissance. In fact, he was so detailed in the account of what he found, that it is still considered today to be the best historical record available of the extent of the city and its damages. So, Nehemiah was doing two things with this inspection. First, he was getting information, to know exactly what the problem was. Second, he was formulating a plan for reconstruction. Information that would lead to transformation. But notice something else. After one night of inspection, there was no way that Nehemiah knew EVERYTHING about the extent of the damage and every contingency for reconstruction. It is important for any leader to understand that you will never have all the information and you will never understand every single contingency and every single possible obstacle. Some leaders see that as the goal, and they just keep gathering more and more information and never start the project, which means transformation never takes place, which calls into question whether that is leadership or just busyness masquerading as leadership. Here's one simple example for all of us, myself included: If you have read dozens of books about witnessing, telling people the Gospel, sharing your faith, but you never do it, what's the information good for? Transformation only takes place when information leads to a plan of action. Information does not equal transformation. In fact, information without application equals frustration. Information PLUS application leads to transformation. What are the areas of your life where you collect information but rarely if ever act on it?

- **Difficulty**

- Let's not underestimate the size of the task before Nehemiah, and the absolute miracle that it was accomplished in just 52 days. First, the circumference of the wall, by conservative estimates, was between 1 and ½ and 2 and ½ miles. Not only that, but this was not a chain link or a picket fence. This was a massive wall on top of a hill, built to keep intruders out, made of huge stones that would have been toppled by the Babylonians, and rolled down the hill. It would take manpower and muscle and engineering to get the available stones back in place and replace the ones that were destroyed. Second, remember that 13 years earlier the work had been halted. They have tried this before and were defeated. Ever heard people say that? We have tried, already! A man says, "I tried to pray with and for my wife, but I crashed and burned. Not going there again." Or a woman says, "I tried to reconcile with my friend who hurt me, but it didn't happen. I'm not even going to try." One of the hardest obstacles to overcome is inertia, getting people off zero, sometimes getting people out of bed, sometimes getting teenagers off the video game console. Third, Nehemiah would be dealing with discouraged people, people who were living in the rubble as if that were normal. It would be a test for any leader. Arnold Toynbee said, "Apathy can only be overcome by enthusiasm, and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things: first, an ideal which takes the imagination by storm, and second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice." Nehemiah had both.

- **Challenge**

- In verse 17, we see Nehemiah speaking to the leaders of the city and the Jewish leaders for the first time. Notice how he comes with humility, as part of the problem, not with a bony finger of condemnation. "You see the trouble we are in." He doesn't sugar-coating the problem: "We are in trouble!" But he doesn't point fingers. "WE are in trouble."
- Notice also how he challenges the leaders: "Come, let us build the wall, that we may no longer suffer derision." Hey, we are getting our teeth kicked in. The bully is walking by every five minutes and throwing sand in our face. What are we going to do about it? I must say that men will (usually) respond to a challenge. That's just how God wired us. I love the story of the three recruiters who were given an opportunity to speak to a high school assembly, and then meet with interested students afterward in the cafeteria. The principle had told them they had five minutes each. Well, wouldn't you know it, the Army recruiter got up there and spoke for 7 minutes. The Navy recruiter, not to be outdone, got up and gave a 7 minute pitch. The Marine recruiter got up to speak and glanced at the principal, who was holding up one finger. You have ONE minute. Do you know what he did? He stood before the high school assembly for 45 seconds, just looking at the crowd, and them looking back at him. Then with 15 seconds left he said, "If any of you think you

have the guts to be a Marine, meet me in the cafeteria.” You know what happened, right? There were 2 people meeting with the Army recruiter, 3 with the Navy guy, and 116 lined up to speak to the Marine. Men like a challenge. Dale Carnegie used to tell the story of a steel mill manager whose workers were not producing much. The owner of the mill, whose name was Charles Schwab, heard about the problem and asked the manager why it was. The manager said he had coaxed the men, pushed them, cussed them out, even threatened them with eternal damnation and with being fired. Nothing helped. Schwab asked how many heats (or lots) they had produced that day, and he said 6. So he wrote a big 6 on the floor of the mill and left. When the next shift came in, they asked the manager what the number meant. He said that the big boss was here and that’s how many the first shift made. The next morning, the men on day shift came to work and saw that the night shift manager had rubbed out the 6 and replaced it with a 7. “So the night shift thinks they can make more than we can? We will show them!” At the end of the day, they rubbed out the 7 and replaced it with a 10. It was a 66 percent increase in just 24 hours.

- Let me ask you: where has the Lord been challenging you? And how have you responded?
- **Encouragement**
- In verse 18, Nehemiah shares his testimony, which is a powerful one. He lets them know how God has already shown him favor and how the king responded to his request, and the words the king spoke to him. That was the final nudge, a word of encouragement that caused the men of Jerusalem to say, “We’re in.” Don’t forget that the greatest asset you have to come alongside your enthusiasm for the Lord and His work is your testimony of how He has helped you and blessed you and taught you and provided for you and protected you all along the way. David convinced Saul that he could take on Goliath by sharing his testimony of the lion and the bear.
- Notice also that his encouragement includes a recognition that what he and they were about to do was a good work. Verse 18: “I told them of the good hand of God that had been upon me for good.” And they responded, “Let us rise up and build,” and then: they strengthened their hands for the good work. This is not just a building campaign, but a struggle between good and evil. In fact, in verse 17 when Nehemiah says, “You see the trouble we are in,” the word for trouble in Hebrew is *ra*, which is also translated bad, or evil. He is saying, “Hey, look at the evil we are in, here. But God has sent me here to stand with you for good.” You will see Nehemiah refer to the goodness of God many times, as he is aware that he is battling with evil, not just fatigued workers and a very difficult task. In fact, evil steps up next in three primary antagonists.
- **Opposition**
- Sanballat, Tobiah, and now a third man, Geshem hear, jeer, and despise Nehemiah. And they start with the age-old trick of undermining a person by questioning his motive. David’s brother Eliab did it when he showed up at the battlefield. “Hey, why did you leave those *few* sheep to come here? I know your heart is evil: you just wanted to see the battle.” And these three characters do the same thing here: “You, Nehemiah, don’t even know what you are doing, and what you are doing is a rebellion against the king!” Opposition to leadership is inevitable. It is a given. No matter what the venue, the situation, leaders will face opposition. But not all leaders respond the right way. We can certainly learn from Nehemiah. He plays his trump card by replying to them, “The God of heaven will make us prosper.” Now one quick caveat. If Nehemiah had been rebelling against the king, could he have played his trump card, here? No! Be careful, believers, that you don’t appeal to the Lord if you are not first a man or woman under authority. In other words, if you use the Lord’s name as a shield to protect you from hard work, from showing up on time, from paying your bills, from being a man under authority, then that shield is paper-thin.
- Nehemiah has come to Jerusalem under the king’s authority because of the good hand of his God. He also knows that his detractors have neither a past, a present, or a future with respect to Jerusalem.
- Baby dedication: Julianne Heafner