



Sunday School- September 27, 2009

OVERCOMING PROBLEMS

Unifying Topic: **NEHEMIAH: A MOTIVATOR FOR THE PEOPLE**

Lesson Text

I. Nehemiah's Request (Nehemiah 2:5)

II. Inspecting the Walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:11-16)

III. "The God of Heaven, He Will Prosper Us" (Nehemiah 2:17-20)

The Main Thought: Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work (Nehemiah 2:18, KJV).

Unifying Principle: Life's problems sometimes threaten to immobilize us. Where can we find encouragement to move in the right direction again? The story of Nehemiah shows us that God sends dedicated leaders who pray for

change and motivate people to move in God's direction.

Lesson Aim: To examine the life of Nehemiah, to recount his request to the king on behalf of his people and to understand how he dealt with opposition.

Life aim: To understand that following God will sometimes require us to make drastic changes in our lives, leaving everything we have known in order to obey Him.

2:5 And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it.

2:11 So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

2:12 And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon.

2:13 And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire.

2:14 Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass.

2:15 Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned.

2:16 And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

2:17 Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.

2:18 Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.

2:19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?

2:20 Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.

HISTORY:

The Book of Nehemiah comes at a most dismal time in history, for the vision was lost and the people became corrupted and uncommitted to the Living God. They lived like other people lived, uncommitted. They left God and God judged them. So Israel had given up hope in itself. The returned exiles had been in Jerusalem for many years and the walls of the city remained unrepaired, leaving the people defenseless and vulnerable. **Chapter 1** starts with Nehemiah asking his brother Hanani and the others what was going on in Judah. Nehemiah indeed had a comfortable lifestyle. He had a prestigious position as cup bearer* to the Persian king Artaxerxes. He had little power but he had great

influence. He was trusted by the king and was also a man of God. His name meant "Comfort of Yahweh".

NOTE:

**The cupbearer was a personal body guard to the king, being the one who tasted wine and food before the king did - making sure no one was trying to poison the king.*

The very first thing that happens is that Nehemiah hears about the present situation of his people. He was gripped so much that it interrupted his regular routine. He sat down, wept, mourned* for several days, fasted and prayed because he was deeply grieved about the conditions of Jerusalem and poured out his heart to God to remember His own Promises. He didn't feel like eating. The way it is phrased seems to indicate that this is more a deliberate response rather than an involuntary one. He chose to fast, just like he chose to pray. He prayed about this for 4 months.

NOTE:

**How little we honestly mourn! Our repentant prayers and humbled words are more "lip words" than "heart words." But the Lord wants to see our hearts responding not just our lips. It is so easy for us to say that we care, but are we shaken from our comfortable lives enough to respond? Have you ever fasted for a special need of others or has it always been for yourself? Have you mourned for others more than for yourself? Do you regularly and sincerely pray more for others than for your self? God wants us to pray because there are real needs.*

For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him. (2 Chron.16:9)

A life without prayer, is a life without dependence upon God. If we don't depend upon God, then we don't in fact need a Savior. Some think that being saved is all there is to a Christian life. Salvation is the beginning of the Christian life, not the end.

The former nation of Israel was now in shambles. However, the physical rebuilding of the walls* is the theme through the first half of the book. There were "broken down walls in Jerusalem and its gates burned with fire." The rebuilding of the walls speaks about one solitary spark which relit a small flame of hope for the nation which otherwise would have been snuffed out. The book starts and ends in prayer. It shows him praying day and night.

NOTE:

**One has to understand when we talk about rebuilding a wall, that it is not the wall that is so important. The wall's importance is only as important as what stood behind the wall. Look at a watch case, the more special the watch case, the more expensive the watch. The more guards about a home, the more valuable the goods and people within are esteemed. What made the walls of Jerusalem so valuable are not the walls themselves, but what the walls would protect: the heart of the nation of Israel, the heart of God's people, the Jews. By being down, it brought dishonor to the Lord.*

POINT:

Remember Nehemiah was praying for his nation before he even had seen it, or lived in it. Nehemiah didn't just up and quit his job and make haste to Jerusalem. No he prayed* and worked faithfully for 4 months.

Chapter 2, Nehemiah had gained the King's respect through his competence on the job. He had to wait on an invitation before "Artaxerxes throne" The rule of the day was that no one was to appear before the king with sadness or bad news. He waited to approach the king in the Lord's time. Due to the close relationship that the king and Nehemiah had, the king could tell Nehemiah was upset and asked what was wrong.

NOTE:

**Nehemiah understood it was not his place to change the king's heart. He prayed and left it up to the Lord, instead of dropping hints and trying to manipulate the situation. Then one day, four months later, the king's heart was different. Are we making the mistake of trying to change someone else's heart, instead of leaving it up to the Lord to do it?*

Nehemiah 2:5: Nehemiah's Request

After the king had asked about Nehemiah's request, Nehemiah prayed* (v4) silently and quickly to the Lord, to be with him in making his request. He told the king exactly what was bothering him. He answers the king confidently & respectfully! He was tactful when he refers to Jerusalem, not as the capital of Judah, or even by its name, for it had a reputation as a troublesome city and had been the source of revolt in the empire before, but he designates it as "the city where my fathers are buried." Now he makes the request: "Send me to Judah to rebuild it."

NOTE:

**We consider the value of prayer many times, but we don't often consider the value of the short prayer that is uttered between the question and the answer; between the first statement and the second, the prayer that invites God into the conversation because we know that we can really mess this up if we do it on our own.*

Nehemiah 2:11-16: Inspecting the Walls of Jerusalem

Nehemiah has been given letters of safe travel and provision of timber from the king's forest, and sent with an army of officers and horsemen. Nehemiah was in Jerusalem for three days before he inspected the condition of the wall and gates, and even then he did it by night. He didn't yet want the public to know what he was doing until he had both an accurate picture and an executable plan.

Nehemiah 2:17-20: "The God of Heaven, He Will Prosper Us"

Nehemiah didn't believe in a one-man band! He challenged the leaders to work with him, not for him! Sanballat – chief political enemy of Nehemiah and governor of Samaria. Tobiah – is thought to be a Jew with lands in Gilead with many family ties in Jerusalem. Sanballat and Tobiah are joined by GHEH-shem the Arab in opposing the work of the Lord. They mock, despise, and accuse in hopes of causing the Jews to fail. But Nehemiah stood strong and said that God would give them success. This is not the last we've heard from them, though. They are like Satan himself, who, after tempting Jesus.

POINT:

The "weapon of ridicule" is the only weapon some carry! A smirk, a raised eyebrow, or a mocking laugh, have kept many Christians from teaching Sunday School, playing an instrument, following a call to the mission field, moving towards full time ministry. Have you ever run into a Sanballat or a Tobiah? What have you been talked out of? Embarrassed by?

SUMMARY / APPLICATION:

The book of Nehemiah is like a gift dropped from heaven so that we could gain a glimpse of how God can work miracles in desperate situations. Nehemiah performed no signs, no wonders, nor any prophesies. He just faithfully did his work and prepared a city for the coming of the Messiah (Dan.9:24-27)

¹Nehemiah had a lot of tools as well. He pulled them out, one by one, just when he needed them.

1. Waiting: The first tool Nehemiah used was the tool called waiting in verse 1. He was a man of decisive action, and when he prayed it was natural for him to ask God to provide an early, if not immediate, opportunity to speak to the king. Remember the closing verse in chapter one indicates that Nehemiah wanted success "today" in the presence of the king. However, he waited patiently on the Lord for an answer, just as we're urged to do in Hebrews 6:12: "...imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what was promised." Nehemiah could weep and pray and he could also wait and pray. Quiet reflection may have provided Nehemiah with fresh insight about how to approach the king.

2. Trusting: The second tool he fished out of his toolbox was called trusting in verses 2-3. Fortunately, Nehemiah's faith was greater than his fear. The king asked him a question to find out why Nehemiah was not his chipper self. He knew that he was expected to be perfectly content just to be in the presence

¹ Taken from, "How to Tackle a Tough Job" by Brian Bill

of the king. He did the right thing because he believed the Promises of God. Courage filled him when he realized it was no longer possible to hide his grief. Then, using wisdom, he affirms the king by saying, "Long live the king!" What Nehemiah also said was, "I want to honor the burial place of my fathers." This made a lot of sense to the King because the Persians honored their dead as well.

3. Praying: Nehemiah pulls out another very well-used tool – the tool of praying. Verse 4 begins with a direct question from the King: "What is it you want?" Before answering the King of Persia, Nehemiah needed to speak briefly with the King of Heaven. This is encouraging to me. You and I can pray at any time, in any place by sending up a brief prayer to God. Right before we have to give an answer to our boss, or before responding to our spouse, or when disciplining our kids, or when looking for a way to impact our neighbors for Christ, just shoot up a prayer. It doesn't have to be long or even audible.

4. Planning: The next tool is planning. Some people think that all you have to do is pray; others focus almost exclusively on planning. We are called to pray and plan; to worship and work; to make requests and to fill out requisitions. Notice that he knew how to answer the king's questions. He anticipated the question related to how long his journey would take, so when the king asked, Nehemiah gave him a timeframe. He also knew how to plan the dangerous journey by asking for letters on the king's stationery, which would give him safe passage through the different territories he came across. He didn't stop there. Look at verse 8. We see here that he wanted permission to take some timber out of the king's own forest. Nehemiah asked for, and received three things from the king: permission, protection, and provisions.

5. Testifying: The final tool he pulled out in verses 8b-10 was the tool of testifying. He gave testimony to the goodness of God in answering his prayers, guiding his mind, directing his speech, and meeting his needs. Look at the last part of verse 8: "*...And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.*" Only God could have brought about such a dramatic change in the king's mind and the cupbearer's destiny. Nehemiah was meticulous in his planning but it would not have been enough were it not for the Lord's perfect timing, constant guidance, and overruling provision.

We're still talking about "Overcoming Problems."

Nehemiah was a master builder as well. As we move to the second half of chapter 2, we'll see that he tackled five tasks.

1. Nehemiah first **replenished his resources** in verse 11. When he arrived in Jerusalem, he could appreciate why his brother Hanani was so bummed out. As he looked at the city's shattered walls and useless gates, he was overwhelmed. But, before he could examine them more closely, there was a greater priority. Nehemiah needed a nap! The journey of four months took its toll on Nehemiah – he was probably suffering from 'camel lag'! Ezra did the same thing when he arrived in Jerusalem many years earlier when he rested for three days (see Ezra 8:32). Just as Elijah needed rest under the juniper tree, and Jesus withdrew with his disciples for rest, so too, you and I need to make sure we replenish our resources on a regular basis. Here's a biblical principle: Don't try to make major decisions when you're tired.

2. After getting recharged, Nehemiah **assessed the need**. We see this in verses 12-16. He then scouted out the damage to the walls one dark night. He discovered at least three things as he did his assessment:

- It was a *demanding job*. The circuit of the walls was more than a mile long, and the new wall needed to be three or four feet thick, and fifteen to twenty feet high. This was not going to be easy but Nehemiah knew that he and his people had to give their best to it. The same is true for us – kingdom work is demanding, but it's worth our energy.

- It was a *hazardous assignment*. Nehemiah went at night because there were enemies lurking around. He said nothing to anyone until the time was right. The careless leakage of information might bring the work to an end even before it started.
- It was a *co-operative venture*. It was only by surveying the walls and gates that Nehemiah could calculate how the work should be divided.

That leads us to the third task.

3. Nehemiah now **recruited workers** in verse 17. *First*, he identifies with the workers: *Next*, he presents spiritual perspectives. *Then*, he invites immediate action.

4. That leads to the next task – Nehemiah **inspired confidence** in the people in verse 18. While rebuilding the walls is an important job, the central theme in the book is the sufficiency of God. His mind dwells on the greatness of God and he wants his workers to do the same. By telling the people what God had already done, he was firing them up for what He was about to do. His appeal was positive as He focused on the glory and greatness of God. When you think about it, it's amazing that the people said, "Let us start rebuilding."

5. The fifth task comes almost immediately after the decision to make an impact takes place: He **handled opposition**. Whenever we get serious about kingdom work, Satan will oppose us. The first two enemies have already been identified in verse 10. Now Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite are joined by Geshem the Arab. First, they derided the efforts of the workers. They laughed at the workers and belittled both their resources and their plans. Next, they suggested that they were rebelling against the king – that weapon had worked once before in Ezra 4.

Nehemiah deals with these bad guys. He doesn't answer their lies or engage in a conversation with them. Nor does he just ignore them. He first exalts the God who called him to do the work in verse 20: "The God of heaven will give us success." He wasn't concerned about their fictitious insinuations – he was concerned that God would get the glory in the project.

Nehemiah wanted his people to know that God had everything in control. Even though Geshem controlled the southern approach to the city, and the other two thugs patrolled the north and east, Nehemiah was not ruffled. In his reply, he made three things clear:

- Rebuilding the wall was God's work
- The Jews were God's servants
- Their opponents had no part in the matter.

The last part of verse 20 says it rather strongly: "We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it." Their opponents had no past right, not present prerogative (*privilege*) to be there, and no future role in the city.

Let me just say that as believers we should expect spiritual opposition and even be thankful for it. It's a sign that we've angered the enemy and encroached on some territory that He thinks is his. If there's no conflict or opposition, then we're probably not disturbing the enemy enough. Remember, Satan only shoots at moving targets!

The tools are now out of the toolbox – waiting, trusting, praying, planning, and testifying. Are you ready to pick them up and start using them? And the tasks are ready to be tackled – replenish your resources, assess the need, recruit workers, inspire confidence, and handle opposition.

Nehemiah always put God first before he did anything. Our life's problems sometimes threaten to immobilize us, but we have God on our side 24/7 ! He's our Motivator to motivate someone else!

Hope this has helped you in "Overcoming Problems."