

The Realities of Responding – Nehemiah 2:9-20

Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 2:9-20

Introduction

Up to this point in the narrative, the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem has been somewhat academic or theoretical. Early in chapter 1, we saw Nehemiah receive word that the wall was in ruins and his reaction to the news was to mourn, fast, and pray for God to act.

Then last week we saw in the first verses of chapter 2 that, after months of prayer, Nehemiah was challenged by the Persian king and, after several tense moments, he was ultimately granted permission to travel to Jerusalem to oversee the reconstruction of the wall.

In fact, we saw that God so worked in the heart of the king that he agreed to provide Nehemiah with letters of introduction, a requisition for supplies, and an armed military escort to secure the journey and arrival in Jerusalem.

To this point, we have seen Nehemiah's heart demonstrated as he labored patiently and persistently in the discipline of prayer and we've witnessed his honesty and tactfulness in answering the perilous questions posed by Artaxerxes. We've been shown a glimpse of his wisdom in those things, his faith in God, and his ability to envision the work that God had for him and formulate a plan to accomplish it.

We look upon Nehemiah as a special man but many people are just like him in many respects.

They have the heart for prayer, the wisdom of the vision, the strategic mind, and the faith of a Nehemiah –

But they stop short of actually setting out to do what needs to be done for the idea, the goal, to become a reality.

It's not at all unusual for us to substitute talking about something for actually doing it.

It's one thing for us to gather with other Christ-followers and talk about some endeavor or another that we believe God would have us undertake –

To dream about it or even to get busy praying about it, planning it, and strategizing about it – but it's another thing to actually go out and do it.

Today, we are going to see Nehemiah leave the preliminary stages of the account as he has traveled to Judea and Jerusalem to undertake the project of rebuilding the wall.

And we are going to see the realities of responding to what God has called his people to do.

1. We must act
2. We must determine where we are starting from
3. We must enlist the help of those who are necessary to completing the work
4. We must expect that the enemy will oppose us
5. We must know that God will prevail

I trust you already have your Bibles open to Nehemiah chapter 2 and, if not, I encourage you to join me there as we begin our study of verses 9-20 (398).

And the first thing we want to consider is Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem and his assessment of the wall.

I. Arrival and Assessment

We aren't told any of the details of the trip which was approximately 900 miles and likely took the entourage around 4 months to complete.

But when he arrived in the region he naturally met with the governors who ruled under the Persians and presented the letters of introduction that showed he was truly sent by King Artaxerxes –

Surely, the fact that he arrived traveling under armed escort by the Persian military could have only served to bolster his credentials

But we see that the governors weren't exactly thrilled to see Nehemiah arrive – verse 10 [**Neh. 2:10**] says his arrival *“displeased them greatly”* because he had come to help the people of Israel

Nehemiah mentions the two disgruntled governors by name: Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant Sanballat, whose name means “sin has begotten him” or “sin has given him life” was most likely the governor of Samaria which lay to the north of Judea

His daughter was married to the grandson of the Jewish High Priest, Eliashib

Tobiah may have been the governor of Ammon or a subordinate to Sanballat but of Ammonite descent

He might well have been a mixed-race individual since he had a Jewish name that ironically means “Yahweh is good”

As we will discover later in chapter 6, both Tobiah and his son are married to Judean women

So both Sanballat and Tobiah have a familial connection to the people of Judea – that will become important for us to remember later on – but the thing we need to note now is that they were opposed in general to the welfare of the Jews

At this point, they weren't upset about the rebuilding of the wall because Nehemiah had wisely not shared with them what he was sent to do as we will see next

In verse 11 [**Neh. 2:11**] we read that Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and had been there for three days

So it appears that he showed up under military escort, perhaps hauling a load of lumber from the king's forest – and then he just hung out for three days without telling anyone what his mission was

Because, as we read in verse 12 [**Neh. 2:12**] he had *“told no one what God had put in [his] heart to do”*

In this, Nehemiah demonstrated wisdom because it's often best to not commit your plans to others too quickly

Having just arrived in Jerusalem, Nehemiah didn't know who might be a friend and ally and who might be an adversary so he kept his cards close to his vest, as it were, and conducted his audit or assessment of the wall secretly in a nighttime tour around the city on horseback or a mule accompanied by as few men as possible

According to the landmarks Nehemiah lists, it appears his tour took in only about half of the circumference of the city but his inspection was thorough enough for him to make certain judgments about a reasonable rebuilding strategy

The Hebrew word used in verse 15 [**Neh. 2:15**] for “inspected” is a medical term that means “to probe a wound to see the extent of its damage”

Nehemiah demonstrated an understanding of the principle found in **Luke 14:28** of counting the cost before starting a project

One must first assess where they are and accept the facts as they are before progress can be made and that means looking seriously at what is wrong and just how bad the situation is

But this doesn't mean having a critical spirit of negativity – criticism is not one of the Spiritual gifts

The kingdom of God isn't in need of Monday morning quarterbacks and backseat drivers – those who have all the answers only after a project has gone awry

What is needed are those who have a heart for the work, a passion for prayer, a vision for the future, and a desire to be used of God in getting there

Those are the people who are qualified to look at the facts as they are, to diagnose them, and then to rise to the challenge of setting things right and moving forward

Making an accurate assessment is serious work for serious people because it means being brutally honest

We all want to believe things aren't as bad as they are and we would rather maintain a veneer of solidity than admit to having any deficiencies

That's true in our personal lives and in the corporate life and activities of the church but we deceive ourselves if we only look at what is good or what is going well

What is better by far is to take an honest look at ourselves and face the ugly truth with godly hearts that are ready to act because that's the critical first step in allowing God to go to work in us and through us

Faith and planning are complementary forces

In verse 12 [**Neh. 2:12**] Nehemiah makes it very clear that God had put the desire in his heart to help Jerusalem

But that doesn't preclude careful planning because we have no indication that God gave Nehemiah step-by-step instructions as to how to accomplish the task before him

God has given his people minds and he expects us to use them and we are expected to use our own judgments and trust that the Lord is in our decisions and that he will stop us and correct us should we go astray

But again, this level of confidence requires an ongoing relationship with the Lord and a deeply held desire to do precisely what he wants us to do, study of God's Word to know his heart, and prayer to inform him of our plans and seek his approval

God did not create us to act like pieces on a chessboard waiting to be moved about

Nehemiah accepted God's sovereignty in this world and in his life and over the rebuilding of the wall but that didn't cause him to freeze up in a kind of spiritual paralysis while he waited for God's specific instructions

Rather it motivated him to act carefully and wisely as he made his assessment and his plans to move forward with the project God had put into his heart *and* hands to complete

Nehemiah was diligent and persistent in his prayer life but he didn't get stuck in the realm of the theoretical – he acted by going to Jerusalem to oversee the task and get the job done

And he made the proper assessment necessary to prudent and profitable planning so that the task might be successfully completed

But as we see in verse 16 [**Neh. 2:16**], Nehemiah recognized he was going to need the help of many people if he were going to get the wall rebuilt

Up to now, Nehemiah has carried out his work in secret but now he sees it's time to approach the people and seek their agreement to work alongside him

II. Approach and Agreement

Let's look again at verse 17 [**Neh. 2:17**] because it's a master class on how to approach people when seeking a buy-in

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."

The **first** thing I want you to note is that Nehemiah didn't come off as an outsider

He used inclusive language throughout his initial statement – he included himself with them using the words "we" and "us"

I don't know about you but I do a lot better when someone comes to me and says, "Let's do this together" rather than "Go do this"

And that's exactly what Nehemiah does as he identifies with them and includes himself in the problem and the solution rather than breezing into town as an official of the king from Susa pointing out *their* problems and giving orders

The **second** thing we want to note is that he asked them to face reality – to really notice the obvious problem that surrounded, or in this case, literally didn't surround them – the walls are in ruins and the gates are burned

The walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed 142 years earlier and the reality was the people had adapted to the status quo to the point it didn't really bother them all that much that their city was without walls

In a sense they were living in what we might today call the "new normal" only for them it was a very old normal they had simply gotten used to and now accepted to their obvious detriment

It's so easy to allow that to happen as the changes often come at us rather more gradually than a wall being destroyed

And we can get used to things being a little worse each day and just accept that's the way things are today

Oh, sometimes someone who remembers the way things used to be may wistfully talk about the "good old days" but even when the decline is noticed, people just shrug and accept that our best days are behind us

And that's where the Judeans in Jerusalem were in their thinking as they had just come to accept things as they were

So Nehemiah issues a wake-up call and says look around and he presents the problem in the same terms in which he had instinctively understood it himself back in Susa – the sense of shame they should be feeling

Shame and disgrace that reflected the punishment of exile due to rebellion rather than the state of restoration of relationship with God they should be enjoying

Nehemiah reminds the people of their identity and the humiliation they should feel at being a laughingstock to the people around them

But again, Nehemiah had no intention of simply pointing out the clearly observable problem and stopping short of offering a solution

He wasn't being what we might today call a "Captain Obvious" bomb-thrower as we see next the **third** thing Nehemiah did – he invited the people to join him in effecting the solution

Notice that he didn't ask them for their opinions about the situation or command them to get busy building – he invites them to join him in the task that God had laid on his heart with a "*Come, let us build...*"

He didn't give an order, he made an appeal

And he finishes by relating to them what had happened in Susa when the king who had forbid the reconstruction of the wall now ordered it completed as proof that God's good hand was upon Nehemiah and this project

So we see that Nehemiah opened their eyes to the problem, identified with the people in the problem, invited them to join him in the solution, and gave them assurance of God's providence in the endeavor

And the people are commendable in their response as we find it in verse 18 [**Neh. 2:18**] – "*Let us rise up and build*"

I suspect the gathering took on the aura of a pep-rally as we see they began to encourage one another in anticipation of the work – that's what it means when it says "*they strengthened their hands for the good work*"

They didn't grudgingly agree – they bought in completely and fired each other up

Compare that to how they could have responded

They might have denied the need for walls and said, "We've gotten along without walls for 142 years, we have the temple, and we've been doing okay. No one has tried to attack us so why rock the boat?"

Or they might have determined having a wall wasn't their priority and wished Nehemiah well in completing the project without them

Or they could have considered their chances of success and determined that it was simply unwise to even try since their ancestors had begun to rebuild and been stopped

But they didn't do any of those things – they enthusiastically agreed with Nehemiah's proposal and determined to get busy building

And they immediately faced opposition as they were attacked by three detractors

III. Attack and Answer

We were introduced to two of the attackers in verse 10, Sanballat and Tobiah, but now there is a third who Nehemiah identifies in verse 19 [**Neh. 2:19**] as "*Geshem the Arab*"

Historians tell us that Geshem was a powerful individual who ruled the league of Arab tribes to the east, south, and southwest of Judea

And although these three didn't have much in common with one another they were able to unite against a common enemy as soon as they got wind of the plan to rebuild the wall

How often this happens today as people and groups who might never have anything to do with one another commonly unite in their opposition to the things of God and Christianity

But opposition is a good sign that positive progress is being made by God's people

Our enemies don't tend to care about what we are up to as long as we are simply gathering together or even when we are praying and planning

But let us start *doing* something beyond our walls and things change quickly and opposition will typically come our way as it did for the Judeans when they determined to rebuild the wall

And I want you to notice what form the opposition took because it wasn't violence – it was mockery

We read in verse 19 [**Neh. 2:19**] that the three adversaries "*jeered at us and despised us*"

Mockery is a very powerful weapon because no one likes to be laughed at and, even though we should certainly care more about what God thinks of us than we do about what men say about us, being ridiculed stings

Far too many people are scared away from serving God simply because they fear being laughed at for trying and many a well-meaning church member has been the unwitting tool of the enemy all for the sake of a laugh at the expense of a brother or sister

And the three adversaries want Nehemiah and the Judeans to feel stupid for even thinking they could be successful but they didn't just mock the Judeans they also accused them of rebelling against the king

Without a doubt, as we've already stated numerous times, any attempt at establishing a defensive fortification could be seen as a form of rebellion and an attempt to gain some measure of independence

And the charge came with a thinly veiled threat that they will take the matter to Artaxerxes and make an accusation against Nehemiah and the Judeans

After all, it was a similar accusation by three other dissenters that we read about in Ezra 4 early in Artaxerxes' reign that caused him to issue the decree that brought construction to a standstill

So, with this accusation and threat, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem gave the impression that pleasing Artaxerxes was more important than pleasing God in an attempt to intimidate the Judeans into not beginning the work of rebuilding

But as we see in verse 20 [**Neh. 2:20**], Nehemiah wasn't intimidated

He ignored their words of derision and refused to be put on the defensive

He knew what God wanted him to do and given the choice of pleasing them or pleasing God, he determined to let them mock all they wanted – he was going to serve the Lord

Notice also that he didn't get into a point-by-point debate with the detractors – he didn't even try to defend himself
 We need to realize, as Nehemiah apparently did, that there are minds that can't be changed and hearts that won't be softened no matter what we say or how we try to convince them simply because there are people who refuse to be convinced

And when there is nothing you can say that will make a difference there is no point in entering into a debate

One of the best questions you can ask the other person when you think you might be in one of those situations is, "What could I say to you (or what evidence could I provide) that would change your mind?"

And if the answer is "Nothing" then you know that it's foolish to keep talking

Debating in those instances simply stops progress and wastes your time when there is work to be done so you might as well get on with the work

Nehemiah recognized the debate would be endless and fruitless so he basically told them, "God is with us and God's work is going to be successful so take your best shot. We have a wall to build."

Rather than being sidetracked Nehemiah chose to focus on those who desired to serve the Lord and the work at hand

As Nehemiah put it in verse 20 [**Neh. 2:20**] – "*...we his servants will arise and build*"

Then he told the three attackers to take a hike because they had no rights or privileges in God's city

It may be difficult to hear but the truth is, when God is doing a great work there is no place in it and no time to be spent on those who don't want to be a part of it – they either need to get on board or they need to move on

Like Sanballat and Tobiah they may have deep connections to the church but if all they can do is try to hinder what God is doing it would be best for them to move along

Because like Nehemiah's adversaries they will find themselves opposing God by opposing God's work

Unfortunately, Nehemiah's adversaries didn't move on and their opposition didn't end quickly as they hung around and opposed the work until it was completed but Nehemiah never let them put a stop to it

Conclusion

When the time for action comes around, God expects his people to harken to the call and get busy even in the face of opposition

It's understandable that we have the tendency to want to shy away from opposition because we can wrongly begin to believe that coasting effortlessly through life is better

After all, no one really wants to face the criticism and challenges that taking action invites but what we have to recognize is that we have been assured that difficult times are going to come our way no matter what we do

And we will find that when we are growing spiritually and stepping out for the Lord, we are far better equipped to deal with those challenges when they inevitably come

God expects his children to pray for guidance and insight, to make an accurate assessment, to engage in careful planning, and then to take the necessary steps to further his agenda with joy and vigor

And when we act we know that we will almost certainly face opposition as Nehemiah did because Satan is always acting in opposition to what God is doing

After all, as God makes headway in the world, Satan's kingdom is threatened so we should expect him to attack

So when we are subjected to the typical lies, innuendo, insinuations, and the like we should recognize them and their source knowing that if God is with us no one can stand against us keeping our focus on who we are and whom we serve

The greatest need we have is for us to maintain faith that God will give us success as we pursue his stated purposes because our ability to respond to the challenges we will surely face will flow from that inner confidence

And then we need to act

Let's pray