

Nehemiah Chapters 1-2 John Karmelich

1. Why is God's "protection" important? After all, Christians die like everyone else (plus many died from martyrdom). The central focus of the book of Nehemiah is about building the walls around Jerusalem that were in ruins when this book started. There are practical reasons the Israelites did want to build walls around the city. It protected them and the temple from attacks. Still the issue kept bugging me, "Why have a whole book that focuses on building a wall around Jerusalem? We get "Ezra" (written by the same person) was necessary as to build God's temple. Still why does He want us to care about walls around that city? We get that He picked Jerusalem to be where Jesus will rule the world from one day, so in that sense God wants us to care about Jerusalem. With all that, I still pondered, why have a whole book essentially about building walls around Jerusalem? In other words, why does God wants us to care about this stuff?
 - a) Then it hit me. It's about "protection". It's the idea that God preserves us as a people. Yes people suffer and die all the time. Still God promises He will never leave us nor forsake us as stated in Hebrews 13:5. It makes me wonder how does God protect us anyway? Even if He does why do we have to "build" to have that protection? Can't we just pray, Heavenly Father, protect us as we go through our lives and be done with it? One of the reasons that we pray is to remind ourselves that God's there and yes He's guiding us and protecting us as well. We don't know what disasters we've avoided by asking for His protection.
 - b) I have no idea how long I'll live and neither does anyone else. I hope we all live to an old age, but it's not a guarantee in life. All we can do is make the most of the time we've got as we don't know how long that time will be. Asking God for His protection is a reminder of the fact He does protect us. After all, we're alive at this moment or we wouldn't be able to read what we're reading as an obvious example. About twenty years ago, God started me on this project of writing bible commentaries and with decent health and His protection, I should be finished in another year or so. (Then I can spend a decade proof-reading!) All I am saying is God protects us whether we realize it or not.
 - c) Which leads back to our part. One of the important principals to learn as a Christian is the fact that God never does for us what we can do for ourselves. As I state on a regular basis if you study bible miracles, they are never things we can do for ourselves. So if God wants a wall built, His response is, "Hey I gave you a brain, figure it out".
2. Before I get into these two chapters, I should also add, the lessons are much more than just issues on protection. Ezra has great lessons in leadership, doing projects for God and dealing with those who oppose His work. We also will get a great tidbit in Chapter 2 that literally ties to exactly time of the Jesus crucifixion. More on that later. My simple point here is that Nehemiah is more than a book dealing with protection. While it's a key theme, there's more to it than that.
3. With that speech out of my system, time for the who, what's when's and how's of this book. Let's start with a time stamp. It's about 15 years after Ezra came to Israel or about 445 BC. Tradition is that Ezra wrote the book. In fact the Jewish bible combines Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. The name Nehemiah means "God comforts". Yes as he protects us he comforts us a well. The what is Nehemiah's story: A top guy in the Persian Empire goes to Jerusalem to organize a party to build the city walls. In this book we'll discover it was done in 52 days. The "how" is leadership lessons as he basically gets a lot of Israelites to help in the project. We'll also read of other locals who try to stop this project. Nehemiah has a letter from the emperor himself to do this project. By the end of the book not only is the wall built, but Nehemiah and Ezra organize a public bible reading in the city of Jerusalem after it's done. The why is essentially that the city stood unprotected which also means the temple was unprotected. It needed to be done.
 - a) Again, the big "why" question, (in my opinion) is to understand the importance of God as a protector and us taking action to protect ourselves and our worship of God. Oh, and to state the obvious, my lesson title is the single word "protection".

4. With all that said, this lesson will focus on the first two chapters, so let me hit that while I'm in the neighborhood so to speak: It opens with Nehemiah doing his job as a "food taster" and right hand man to the emperor. He gets word from his brother who just came returned from Jerusalem that the city walls are torn down. That caused Nehemiah to break out in prayer? Why because even though he worked in Persia, his heart was in Jerusalem and cared for the people there! Like Ezra, he breaks out on prayer, stating Israel's sins that caused them to be in exile and even the fact that God said in Deuteronomy 24:2 that they would be scattered if they disobeyed Him. Nehemiah is also aware of God's forgiveness and realized he had an opportunity due to his position as a right hand man to the king to do something about this.
- a) By the end of this short chapter, Nehemiah is praying for success because he wants to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. Did he travel with building materials or labor? No. All he had was a desire to rebuild the walls of the city.
 - b) One issue standing in his way was his job. He'd have to ask the king's permission to do it and if you've studied the book of Esther, it's a death sentence to approach the king unless one is invited into his presence. The text implies that Nehemiah prayed for months before he actually approached the king, as again, he knew it was a death sentence.
 - c) Bottom line, Chapter 1 introduces us to the main character. Chapter 2's the big scene as he approaches the king, gets permission to go and even gets his first taste of opposition as he arrives in Jerusalem. By the end of Chapter 2, Nehemiah's inspecting the walls as to figure out what needs to be done. Like I said, the chapter has lessons in how we approach God, how to lead others to make a difference for Him, how to deal with opposition to the work of God and finally how we are to appreciate how God protects us.
5. There is one more issue that needs to be brought up before I start: How God uses us. This book's opening focuses on the fact that Nehemiah worked for the Persian emperor. His job was to check the emperor's food and drink to make sure it wasn't poisoned. He ate and drank whatever it was the emperor got. He had the "emperor's ear" so to speak as he must have traveled with the leader wherever he went. While yes, Nehemiah had a heart for God and desired to be in Israel, he knew he had a job to do and did it well.
- a) My point is simply we never know how and when God will use us. I'd say that the most famous line in the book of Esther. "And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14b, NIV). My point is God is well aware of the position we are in, at our lives at the moment. Whatever we're called to do at that time, it may be that we were called for "such a time as this".
 - b) Here was Nehemiah working at the king's side. He had to be positive and besides tasting the king's food and drink for poison, he had the "king's ear" as he was always in earshot of the king. Still to ask the king to "quit his job" for probably a year's time just to go travel to Israel to build a wall would take courage just to ask let alone plan for such a journey.
 - c) Keep in mind the emperor's step mother was Esther herself. I don't know if they spoke at this time, but I suspect Esther's story inspired Nehemiah to ask for "such a time as this" as they both shared the Jewish heritage and both lived in the king's palaces.
 - d) My point for you and me is we may not be at a king's side, but still God can use or He can prepare us for some role greater than we can ever hope to accomplish in our lifetime. All I am saying is to do whatever we're called to do for God well, as we never know how it is He's use us for His glory.
6. Finally I'm going to have a little fun in this lesson explaining one of my favorite bits of bible trivia that ties to a fact in the beginning of Chapter 2. God gave the prophet Daniel a very specific set of predictions about when the Messiah would come, how He would be killed and how He will still rule over Israel and the world in spite of all of that. There's a verse in Chapter 2 that triggers all of this beginning and I'm excited to share that with you in this lesson. Therefore, I encourage you to read with me as I start my verse-by-verse commentary of Nehemiah. Thanks for reading, time for us to begin:

7. Chapter 1, Verse 1: The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa,² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.
- a) This book will open essentially explaining how Nehemiah is and what his mission will be. It's a key point of the book. Let me cover some of the details first.
 - b) Jewish tradition is Ezra wrote this book. It's possible Nehemiah kept a "diary" and that is how this section got written. Possible? Unless you're a historian, it doesn't matter.
 - c) One of the capitals of the Persian Empire was in Susa. It's mentioned in the book of Esther as well. It was called their "winter palace". The month of Kislev is roughly December. I'd suspect those details are here as "diary notes" of Nehemiah recalling the exact time of this event. Scholars debate was 20th year meant. It's not the 20th year of the kings' rule as that length of time doesn't match up with historical records. My guess is it's the 20th year that Nehemiah had this job. He remembers the date because his brother shows up for a visit. His brother came from Israel. Therefore the conversation topic was "How's everything in Israel among the remnant living there?" For those who like time stamps, this is 445BC.
 - d) If there is a simple application to take out of these verses, it is a reminder that we should have a "heart for God". Here was Ezra, with an important job of checking the kings' food for poison. He worked in the capital of the Persian Empire. Yet he still cared a lot about His Jewish heritage and asked how "things are going there" for that reason. A good sign that one is truly a Christian is simply the fact that we have a heart for God and care about how "life is going" in the church, so to speak. OK then, back to Nehemiah.
8. Verse 3: They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."
- a) The key point is Ezra's brother (most likely his literal brother) who came back there from Jerusalem reported in effect, "The Temple is built but the city walls are in rubble." Do not know if it has been like that since the Israelites first came back there, but most likely that's the case here. Anyway, as we'll find out that bit of information inspired Nehemiah to take a trip to Israel as we'll read in the rest of this lesson. If nothing else, this is a reminder that we never know when or how God will "drop something in our laps" and guide us so we'll be using our lives to make a difference for Him.
9. Verse 4: When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.
- a) Keep in mind, Nehemiah like most people couldn't just "at the drop of hat" travel a great distance just because he felt like it. He had an important job in the empire. Yes Nehemiah had a heart for God. Yes he was inspired to lead the Israelites to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. Still, "how"? That's why the next thing we read about is prayer. Nehemiah was a top official in the Persian Empire. While that detail isn't given until Verse 10, it's best if I explain it here and now:
 - i) In effect Nehemiah was a "guinea pig". It was his job to make sure the king didn't get any food poisoning. Therefore, he went wherever the king went and had to stay close by him whenever he ate or drank. The Persians realized because he had the king's "ear" so to speak, that position was elevated since he has the king's ear!
 - ii) I doubt when Nehemiah got that job he ever thought God would ever use him for a project in Jerusalem let alone have a bible book named after him. He probably is just thinking, "I worked my way up to this job and I'll do the best I can at it". All I am saying is we never know how and when God can use us.
 - iii) Again, because of that job, Nehemiah can't just pack his bags and run off to Israel. That is why the next big thing we read of is a prayer. The point for us if God puts it on our hearts to do something, He always makes it possible and provides "how".

- b) So if God was going to do this, why "mourn and fast"? Why not say, "Hey God, if you do want me to do this, make it possible". Why the dramatics so to speak?
 - i) First there are the practical reasons. Let's face it the Persian Emperor could say to Nehemiah "Off with your head" for thinking such a thing! Let's be honest, making a big decision that changes our life can be traumatizing. Taking our fears to God's a great way to deal with such fears.
 - ii) Fasting and praying is a way we show God how "serious" we are about taking on a commitment like this. God doesn't have to respond because we fast. Such behavior does show that we're serious. Remember it's a 900-mile journey to Jerusalem as we learned in the book of Ezra. Plus Nehemiah could permanently lose his job to take on such a commitment. It's much bigger than say "building something for God". It is for Nehemiah about permanently changing his life in dramatic ways. I admit if I was in that situation or God laid it on my heart to do something for Him, I'd be on my knees so to speak, praying about the situation and not eating as a sign to show I am serious about that commitment.
 - iii) OK then, prayer time:
10. Verse 5: Then I said: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands,⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you.⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.
- a) I have to admit, Verse 5 reads like Nehemiah is trying to "butter up" God. In reality, that's not what he's doing. In effect, Nehemiah is reminding himself of what God's can do if He chooses to. Remember we can't force God to do anything, but it's always ok to ask. I have always thought of prayer requests of getting our will aligned with His. To tell ourselves of His promises to us. In this case God promises blessings in exchange for obedience.
 - b) Anyway, after Nehemiah in effect remembers that God is willing "to deal in exchange for our obedience", then he goes into confession mode. He isn't confessing his own sins, it's a confession of the nation's sins. It's the idea of saying, "One of us sins, then we all sin as we can" all suffer from the sins of one person!
 - c) For those of you familiar with the acronym "ACTS", it stands for Acknowledge of who He is, Confession of sin, Thanksgiving for His blessings and Supplication, which refers to our asking God for things. While Nehemiah isn't following that model perfectly, it's close to it in many ways. By the way, I'm not arguing we must pray this way every time. I'm saying it's a great way to remind ourselves of how we should pray before just blurting out all the things we desire of Him.
 - d) With that said, Nehemiah is on the "confession" aspects. He's not claiming he's perfect. It is simply that he's focusing on the issue at hand: The Israelites turning their back on God which is why Nehemiah is focusing on Israel's sins. Nehemiah also realizes that building the temple isn't enough. We also need His protection which is why it was his desire that the walls be rebuilt. Anyway, I'm interrupting his confession. Back to it.
11. Verse 8: "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations,⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'
- a) I've always stated that the bad news of knowing one's bible is God holds us accountable for what we know. The good of knowing our bible far outweighs the bad, but still we got to be aware of that fact. I state that here as in effect Nehemiah quotes a bunch of verses to prove how the Israelites disobeyed God. If you care, he's quoting Leviticus 26:27-33 plus Deuteronomy 4:25-27 and 28:64. Shorter version, "Don't mess with God"

- b) Let me explain this in "plain English". God promises that if we sin, and turn from it, He is promising to forgive us and fulfill His promises for our lives. For the Israelites it's telling them in effect, "God's desire is for His people to be united so they can work together as to make a difference for Him". Does that mean if we obey God He'll give us whatever we do ask of Him? Of course not. God isn't here to do our will, but we're here to do His. That is why He asks for our obedience. Not to earn our salvation but that we use our lives to as a witness for Him.
- c) With that speech out of my system, back to Nehemiah.
12. Verse 10: "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."
- a) In Verse 10 Nehemiah reminds himself that God's hand was working through Ezra to lead a bunch of Israelites back to worshipping God. Yes I know many came back before Ezra's own trip there, but you get the idea. The key point is God made it possible for at that time (the first time in history) that a nation was conquered scattered and came back together as a nation. As I state pretty regular, in world history only Israel has pulled that off and they did it twice! If you ever want proof that God is real study the history of Israel! Anyway I would say that Nehemiah figured all this out and now he wants to "get in on the act".
- b) We're on the "Supplication" part of the ACTS prayer in Verse 11. What Nehemiah asks for is success in his desire to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Remember at this point he's still a "guinea pig" for the king so there's still the matter of getting approval from the emperor.
- c) However, before all of that, it was necessary to appeal to God for that request. That's the main purpose of Chapter 1 in a nutshell. Except for one phrase:
13. Verse 11, Part 2: I was cupbearer to the king.
- a) Here's where Nehemiah gets real! He knows he's a top guy in the Persian government. I would argue he's stating this not to remind God of his job, but to state the reality of what's his position and probably wondering how God's going to use him given what his position at this point in his life. OK, then Chapter 2.
14. Chapter 2, Verse 1: In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; ² so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."
- a) Time to talk about Nehemiah's "day job" for the moment. Remember that he had to stay in close proximity to the king because his job is to make sure the king isn't being poisoned. I call it the "top guinea pig" in the Persian Empire.
- b) So why was it so important for Nehemiah to not be sad in the king's presence? Some say it's because it's a party and it's important for people around the king to be joyful as such a function requires the king to greet a lot of official guests. Others argue it was just the way of Nehemiah's personality. He was picked for the job because he had a positive outlook in all that did. If you wanted someone to be around you all the time, would you want a man who's joyful or moody? On a side note, I'd argue it's a Christian's duty to be joyful. We're always "on the clock" as a witness for Him and that means being joyful despite our mood. I am not saying we must be happy when we're in a lot of pain. I'm saying in spite of what we are dealing with we have a sense of joy because we're a witness for Jesus, period!
- c) With all that in mind, keep in mind that Nehemiah's been fasting and praying for a while now. He's with the king but his heart is already traveling to Jerusalem! Therefore he was sad because he wasn't where he wanted to be, using his life as a witness for God!
- d) The king was observant. He noticed Nehemiah's negative mood probably because it was so unusual to see him act this way. He didn't say, "You're fired or off with your head", but he was inquisitive enough to ask, "OK Nehemiah old buddy, what's the deal here?"

15. Verse 2 (cont.): I was very much afraid, ³ but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"
- a) Here's where Nehemiah blurts it out. He's been praying for a long time over this. Now it is "boldness" time. Let's face it, the king could react anyway from "whatever, to death" so this had to be a scary moment for him.
 - b) Keep in mind the king's step mother was Esther. I'm sure the king had knowledge of that situation. Plus the job of being the king is to know the "big things" happening in the land he ruled over! I'm sure the king was thinking at this point, "Where's he going with this?"
16. Verse 4: The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵ and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."
- a) Before Nehemiah blurted out the big request, he fired up one more prayer. I doubt he got on his knees or went through "ACTS". This is simply a "big moment" and he wanted to do a quick prayer for boldness and the right words to say to the king. I'm willing to bet that Nehemiah practiced this speech a thousand times and now it just came out of his mouth!
 - b) If you've studied the book of Esther, you'd know it was a capital crime to approach a king without his permission. Therefore, the fact the king asked about Nehemiah sadness was a necessary starting point to this conversation. It shows how God was behind all of this!
 - c) You can sense that Nehemiah desire was to return to the land of his ancestors. He states how they were buried in Judah (the territory of one of the tribes of Israel) and it was his desire to go rebuild that city. Obviously he can't do it alone, but a desire to begin a work for God usually begins with one person with a desire to make a difference. Yes I know it means many of us have to join other's causes, but again, it begins with a desire to use our life for His glory. Then as a team we can find ways to make a difference for Him. That is what we're reading here, starting with one desire to make a difference for God!
 - d) Meanwhile, the king's got questions:
17. Verse 6: Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.
- a) The specific time frame isn't stated, but will be later in the book. When Ezra lead a group to Israel it took four months, so it won't be a weekend pass! So between all of Nehemiah's prayers and the fact the king's step mother was Esther, he was getting permission.
 - b) Before we move on, I need to share some interesting facts that tie to Jesus. It's worth a few minutes for this diversion. Let's begin:
 - i) In Daniel 9, he's told that from the time a king gives the order to rebuild the city of Jerusalem until the time of the Messiah will be 69 "weeks". In Hebrew they have a word that can mean weeks of days, weeks of years, etc. For example, if I said I will be gone for a decade, you'll know I'll be gone for 10 years. The Hebrew concept of "weeks" is similar.
 - ii) The reason it's important here, is Chapter 2 tells us when this 69 "weeks" began. In Verse 1 it read, "Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes". Bottom line that's March 14, 445. (In Hebrew thought, when the specific day of the month isn't stated it's always the first day of that month). Anyway, it's 3/14/445 BC. The next thing we need to remember is the Hebrew calendar has 360 days not 365. The way they make up for it is they add a month every 13 years. Anyway 69 weeks of years (69 times 7 x 360 days) is 173,880 days. A British mathematician was knighted for figuring out that 173,880 days for 3/14/445 BC Comes out to 32 AD. It wasn't the day Jesus was crucified or rose again. It comes out to the day he was presented as a king (Palm Sunday). It was the day Jesus was presented to the nation of Israel as their Messiah. Bottom line, Daniel's prediction in the last four verses of Chapter 9 tie to this date when Nehemiah was told to go rebuilt the city of Jerusalem.

- iii) Yes I have a more detailed study of these facts in Daniel and there's more to that prediction, but I just wanted to take a few minutes to show how it ties to this book.
 - iv) Meanwhile, we left Nehemiah talking to the king about his travel plans.
18. Verse 7: I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?"⁸ And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.⁹ So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.
- a) Well, once Nehemiah got his nerve up to talk to the king, he "went for broke" here. He is not only asking if he could go, but he also asks for letters to get him past checkpoints. He also asks for wood to build city gates and a residence. This is a lot more than asking for a raise. This is asking for big funds and orders from the emperor for safe passage.
 - b) If you studied the book of Ezra, he didn't ask for guards, because Ezra wanted to prove to the king that God was behind the trip. Yet Nehemiah asks for guards. What's the deal? I would say "different personalities". Neither method is a biblical requirement. I've learned that where the bible is silent, we're free to decide what's best for us (prayerfully of course).
 - c) Anyway, Nehemiah got permission to go, got guards with him, got "papers" to show who ever wants to stop him and supplies for the trip. I'd say that's God saying yes to us!
 - d) OK John hold your horses. Those of us who've done projects for God, haven't had things like that happen to us. Of course. God works His way on His timing. The way He works in Nehemiah is not a guide to say, "Unless God does the exact same thing with us, then it is a "no go" decision". What God requires of us is to seek daily Him through prayer and a regular study His word and then make the best decisions we can with the information we have. So all I'm saying is we don't have to "Nehemiah it" to get a green light to do a work for God in our life.
 - e) Meanwhile, Nehemiah got his green light. We don't read about how he got to Israel, just the fact he's there in the next verse.
19. Verse 10: When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.
- a) To sum up a lot of research these two guys were leaders in what we call Jordan today. The first guy was a leader in the area of Moab that existed back then Ammon was just south of Moab. Today they're both part of Jordan. That's not on the final exam! All God wants us to know is that there will be opposition to the plan to rebuild the city. Let's face it, it won't be a good bible story without a villain.
 - b) Wait a minute, if it's God's will to rebuild the Jerusalem, and we had all that drama in the first chapter, why have references to enemies? Wouldn't God just "crush them" and that is that? What we need to remember is God allows problems to occur in our lives ultimately to bring Him glory. As I love to state, He never does for us what we can do for ourselves so He is obviously bringing these characters into the story for us (OK, Nehemiah) to deal with and ultimately bring Him glory!
 - c) Let me talk about this opposition another way: Why would they care if Jerusalem got new walls and became a real city again? How is that a threat to them? I suspect it's about who has "power" in that region. Just because one isn't a "Persian official" a lot of men crave for power because it gives them control over other people. I also suspect the religious Jewish people were still a minority at that time. If you recall, a problem near the end of the book of Ezra was the Israelites intermarrying with other people. My point is that these officials from the neighboring country didn't want the religious Israelites uniting to grow in their power and influence in the area. The issue for us is about Christians working together to make a difference for Him. For one reason or another, opposition will always emerge!

20. Verse 11: I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.
- a) We got no mention of the long journey from Susa (a Persian capital) to Jerusalem. Only a brief introduction to the opposition who'll we'll read more about later in the book.
 - b) When one is taking on a project for God, first one has to size up the situation. That's what is the first thing we read of Nehemiah doing. Keep in mind Jerusalem wasn't a crowded city at that time. A city with no walls is not a desirable place to live. Too easy to be robbed in a situation like that. Anyway, with a top government official like Nehemiah in town, it had to be news and people must have been watching what he was doing there.
 - c) So why not go riding into town saying, "God told me to build the walls, the king gave me the supplies I need, it's His will, so what are you all standing around for?" In other words, why all the secrecy about Nehemiah sizing up the situation? Maybe it was fear of enemies wanting to mess with God's plans. Since the locals were living with no walls, Nehemiah's not willing to "rock the boat" until he sizes up the situation first! So he made the decision to assess the situation privately and secretly. As we'll discover, this was all part of God's plans that Nehemiah chose this method. Let's continue:
21. Verse 13: By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; ¹⁵ so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.
- a) Here we learn more details about the ancient city of Jerusalem than we probably want to know. I doubt Nehemiah has ever been to that city before. Yet from talking to others, he instantly became an expert on Jerusalem geography and markers.
 - b) OK John, we get the idea that Nehemiah wanted to work in secret and he assessed what's the damage from "gate to gate" within the city. We get that. Why are all of these details in the bible? Why should we care? It's not to make us experts on Jerusalem as it stood at the time of Nehemiah and Ezra. It's to understand leadership. Before we take on a project for God let alone for business or personal, it's necessary to size up the situation. Nehemiah is teaching us leadership skills in making a difference for God. That's the real lesson here.
 - c) That leads us to Verse 16. Notice Nehemiah was aware those who live in Jerusalem and in the vicinity will be the one's doing the work of building the wall. So before he was willing to break that news to those who will be building the wall, Nehemiah wants to assess what has to be done.
 - d) So again, why not tell them in advance? Why not announce to the local Israelites, "God is making it obvious to me that we are to rebuild the walls of this city, so we can have some protection against enemies and be united in our worship of God? After all God called for all Israelites in Israel to gather together three times a year for the holidays. So I'm asking, why not just announce his plans stating all of that? Why the secrecy? The answer is when we are called to do a work for God often He'll lead us in the "how". We may not realize it until hindsight that He was behind the whole plan. Anyway, Nehemiah decided to work secretly to assess the situation before announcing to the townsfolk the plans.
 - e) I'll explain it another way. Asking a big group of people to take on a project for you first will require some convincing that not only it'll work but that the leaders are willing to be the leader and even "get their hands dirty" so to speak. If Nehemiah was going to ask all of them to do this, first he need to assess the situation to figure out how many people are needed to do the work. The point is we pray for God's guidance then we make decisions based on what's the best plan for the moment. That's what Nehemiah is doing here.

22. Verse 17: Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." ¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.
- a) In these verses, it was time for Nehemiah to go "public". He announces why he came and what was in his heart, to rebuild the walls of the city. He told them how the king made it all possible and got a positive response. Verse 18 effectively says, "Let's get started".
 - b) Notice Verse 17 says, "we will no longer be in disgrace". Keep in mind it was a disgrace at that time to have "God's city" not have walls. No they didn't say, "God wants walls, let us pray for God to plop walls in place and we can all call it a day!" As I stated earlier, God is never going to do for us what He expects us to do for ourselves.
 - c) So you know it's going to take 52 days to build the wall as we'll read later in the book. I'm just saying this wasn't a multi-year project like rebuilding the temple. It was smaller in its scope than the millions that went into rebuilding the temple. The walls are bigger in scope as they cover more territory, but we're talking block walls and wood doors. Nehemiah got the "thumbs up" from the locals. He got permission from the king and building supplies.
 - d) So Chapter 2's lesson on leadership will pay dividends as we read later in the book.
 - e) Before that of course, it's time for a few words from "the enemy" as they're around during all of this. Let's continue (we're almost done!)
23. Verse 19: But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" ²⁰ I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."
- a) I'll just say now that the plans of the enemies will get more serious soon. How all we get is a few angry words shouted back and forth between the "Jordanians" and Nehemiah. The bad guys didn't know the king gave the order for Nehemiah to do this. So they yelled out (I picture them yelling), "Hey, who said you could do this? Who gave you the right?"
 - b) Notice Nehemiah didn't say, "You guys are enemies of God and will spend eternity in hell so give up now as you're doomed no matter what!" Instead, he's witnessing to them that "God's God. If He says He wants us to rebuild the city, we're doing it. Further you've got no share in this as this is God's holy city and you as "Jordanians" (my abbreviated way of saying Moab and Ammon, same location) have no legal claim to this place.
 - c) Nehemiah is not saying, "You can't be saved. He's saying God's city is the historic home of the Jewish people so "deal with it".
 - d) That leads to a quick discussion of Israel today. There's no other country on earth where it is an international desire to have it destroyed. I'm not claiming Israel is perfect or does not make mistakes. I'm saying they have a right to exist and a right to be a Jewish state. Yes it is mostly secular today. Still if it's God's desire to have Israel around today, who are we to argue? After all, one of the promises that Jesus made would be that He would return to be ruling the world from there. Therefore, I vote to preserve Israel if for no other reason than God's promise that He would bless those that bless you (Abraham and descendants) and God would curse those who curse Israel. (Genesis 12:3). As to when Jesus will return, that is His business. Our job is to be a good witness for Him until that happens.
 - e) OK John, we believe all of that. What does it have to do with Nehemiah? It was his desire to rebuild Jerusalem. Therefore, it's my desire that the city exist and thrive. Psalm 122 is a call for us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. To put it another way, to be a Christian is to care about the things that God cares about. Whether we like it or not, God picked the city of Jerusalem to be the location where the Messiah will rule the world from one day. That's why it's important to care about the city and that means to care about the city standing as well as being in Israelites hands!

24. Let me finish by returning to my theme of protection. Yes the walls need to be rebuilt in order to protect the city as well as God's temple in the center of it. But since "God's God" couldn't He just destroy any attempts to destroy that city? Why has it been fought over throughout city? After all there are no great natural resources there. I'm convinced it's fought over simply because demonic forces are well aware Jesus will rule from there one day, so they work to delay it so Satan will still be ruler over this world as long as possible. Yes I'm well aware that Ezekiel 38-39 speaks of a time when God's going to miraculously stop an attack on that city. Until then it should be the desire of God's people to care about Jerusalem since God cares about it, plain and simple.
- a) So how does all of this speak of God's protection of us? When we work to protect what He wants protected, at the same time He works to protect us as we make a difference for Him at the same time. No it doesn't mean Christians will all live to an old age as most of us do know well. It does mean that the church will be around until Jesus returns. Despite all of the efforts over the last two millenniums to wipe Christianity out, it survived and is still a witness for Him around the world. It's amazing to consider that the death of an unknown man in an obscure part of the Roman Empire ended up being honored as God. If nothing else, the whole way it happened is proof that Jesus is God because unless God was behind all of this, it never would have happened. Is it a coincidence Rome was at it's power peak when Paul and company traveled all over that empire to spread the word about Jesus? Of course not. All I'm saying is God arranges history for His glory. Nehemiah got to be part of that through his effort to rebuild the city walls. We too can also get the privilege to be a part of His eternal plan if we're simply willing to dedicate our lives for His glory. I'm not saying we'll all get Nehemiah sized projects. But we never know how and when God can use us unless we start with a willingness to commit our lives for His glory.
 - b) I'll close on this thought, "It's not the size of ministry that counts with God. It's a simply a willingness to be used by Him and use our lives for His glory." If we do that, our lives are never a waste when we live with that type of attitude. Since I'm on a roll, let's close with a short prayer:
25. Heavenly Father, Father, we don't know why You chose us but You did. Make it obvious to each of us how You desire to use our lives for Your glory. May Your Spirit guide each us so we use the most valuable thing You've given us, "our time" as well as our resources as we use them to make a difference for the God who created us in the first place. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen