

109 Rebuilding the walls

Nehemiah lived in exile, in Persia, in what we now know to be 455 BC. Many years had passed since Jerusalem had been defeated and burned, with the Lord's people being carried away into exile in Babylon. This dreadful defeat had been God's act of righteous judgement on His chosen, covenant people, which had finally come after centuries of divine restraint and divine warnings delivered through the Lord's prophets. The warnings were largely ignored, so God judged as He had warned and promised. Babylon, in all its pomp, had in turn been defeated herself - now it was the Persians who were "top dog".

Nehemiah learned of the pitiful state of the great city of Jerusalem. He wept, he mourned, he fasted, and he prayed, for days on end (Nehemiah Chapter 1). He prayed for the children of Israel, confessing their sins on their behalf, and he then reminded "the Lord God of heaven" of His own promises made to His people (verse 9, from eg., Leviticus 26.39-42 / Deuteronomy 4.29-31, 30.2-3, 12.5): if they would turn back, and keep His commandments, then He would truly gather them and bring them back to "the place that I have chosen to set my name there" (AV) - Jerusalem herself.

Artaxerxes the king gave Nehemiah permission to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild the city (and he might well not have done - see end of 2.2 and end of 2.4!), giving him letters of authority and an armed guard. Nehemiah and his party set off and duly arrived in the broken-down city (2.11).

There is a poignant description of Nehemiah's secret inspection of the city wall one night (2.12-16). It was all too clear that they faced a massive task, plus fierce opposition led by Sanballat and Tobiah. But led by Eliashib the high priest, they set to work (Chapter 3), with different groups of builders being allocated their own section of the city wall to rebuild. Gradually the wall rose up once more, "for the people had a mind to work" (4.6b).

Their enemies were mocking and angry, and decided to bring in an army to stop the work, and presumably to knock the walls down again (4.8). Families were put on guard (4.13); those not yet involved were urged to fight, for their brethren, their families and houses (4.14); half the builders worked, while the other half stood on guard (4.16); weapons were kept close to hand and a trumpeter was on call to sound the alarm (4.17-18); all remained "on site", working or guarding, hardly sleeping - and the work went on

Finally, after much opposition in many forms, we read, "So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days" (6.15 AV). Praise God! What a celebration they had as the wall was dedicated! (12.27-43).

The Lord has so much for us, His people today, from these events of long ago. We can understand Nehemiah's anguish at the news of the broken-down city when we look around at so much that is broken down in the world and the Church today.

Nehemiah responded with prayer, real "I mean this Lord!" prayers, supported by fasting, and pleading his case by using the Lord's own promises. How the Lord loves that! - His children putting up a good case, based on the Lord's own character and promises!

Then we see Nehemiah's courage, his guts, his sticking steadily at it. He "kept his eye on the ball"; he grounded all the work, and all the problems, in solid prayer; he thought and planned and used the resources he had - the people - sensibly, carefully, clearly, effectively. They were all in it together, under Nehemiah's godly, gifted leadership - and the Lord blessed them with victory. No wonder they broke forth in praise and thanksgiving!

In our different ways and in our different countries we will all encounter broken-down walls and sneery opposition. In such times we can remember Nehemiah, quietly picking his way through the rubble that night; then looking up, beyond the ruins, beyond even the stars, to "the Lord God in heaven" Himself.

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