

Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 3 Mission and Mockery (Nehemiah 2:9–20)

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The God of heaven will make us prosper.
— Nehemiah 2:20

Thus far into the story, we have seen that even though the city of Jerusalem had been in ruins for 141 years, not all hope was lost. Working roughly one hundred miles away for a godless foreign king, Nehemiah had God's heart for rebuilding the city and the city within that city: the church. Nehemiah spent three or four months praying, fasting, mourning, and planning, along with his prayer support team. Eventually, God granted him an opportunity to seek the support of the king who, by God's miraculous hand, agreed to allow Nehemiah to return home to rebuild the city and the church. Not only was this a startling reversal of his public policy on the matter established thirteen years prior, but it also meant that the king would lose both a trusted servant and his own money, which would fund the projects. This week, we see Nehemiah's entry into the city and how he begins to prepare for the enormous task God has called him to.

⁹ Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

The king granted Nehemiah's humble request for public support and military protection. Subsequently, Nehemiah's entry into Jerusalem would have been a significant event for its residents and surrounding towns.

¹⁰ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah, the Ammonite servant, heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

For the first time in the story, a unified opposition begins to rise up against Nehemiah and his critics are the first to greet him in Jerusalem. Likely political leaders from surrounding areas, these men joined together to voice their displeasure with Nehemiah and his mission to rebuild the city and church. We see that even humble leaders who are acting in obedience to God will find that there are always critics and opponents of their work. This even includes Jesus, who was often opposed.

¹¹ So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days.

The journey to Jerusalem was some one hundred miles and would have taken a few months (e.g., Ezra 7:8–9). Upon arriving, Nehemiah curiously did not immediately launch into his work, but rather took three days to presumably pray and sabbath. He was wisely gathering up his energy for what was certain to be a long and exhausting season of work and opposition.

¹² Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. ¹³ I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon

Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. ¹⁵ Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

Nehemiah began his work under the cover of darkness so he could discreetly investigate the condition of the walls firsthand. A leader must know the most strategic place to begin their work and should discover that fact by their own on-site investigation. Leaders make decisions based on information; without accurate information, a leader is prone to make a poor decision. To compensate for this, Nehemiah took the time to travel to Jerusalem and inspect the entire wall himself. The various gates were essentially the doorways to the city and without a rebuilt wall and gates, God's people could not return to the city and worship as the church.

In this section of his journal, Nehemiah reveals two important things. First, a leader must make a realistic appraisal of what is before them. Nehemiah uses words such as "broken" and "destroyed" to describe how dire things had become. The large stones from the wall were so scattered that the donkey or horse he was riding could not even travel through certain areas. Too often leaders underestimate the difficulty that they face and, as a result, lack the proper plans and resources to be successful. Second, a leader for God will only be able to proceed boldly and recruit others to join them if they are convinced that they have been called by God and are acting in obedience to him. Despite 141 years of failed attempts, seemingly no experience for the job, an overwhelming task with only a handful of discouraged people, and a powerful group of vocal critics, Nehemiah proceeds. As he says, it was "what my God had put into my heart to do" (2:12). Without this kind of clear call from God, a leader is destined to eventually grow weary, lose heart, and retreat.

¹⁶ And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

A gifted leader, Nehemiah waited patiently before airing his plans and recruiting others to join him. These discouraged people had become accustomed to various other leaders entering their town over the years to recruit them to work for the rebuilding of the city and the church. Every leader over the course of 141 years had failed. Knowing this, Nehemiah made sure he had sufficient time in both prayer and planning before speaking about God's vision for His people. This patience was a demonstration of great wisdom because he would be calling the people to a very difficult work and needed to be sure that he was able to lead them to success before giving them hope. As the old adage says, timing is everything.

¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me.

Finally ready to cast God's vision to the people, Nehemiah called them all together so that he could speak to them directly, rather than risk being misrepresented through his critics or misunderstood by his hearers. There are many leadership insights in his speech/sermon.

1. He identifies with the people as one of them working for their good by repeatedly saying "us" and "we."
2. He assures them that his motive is one of humility and not pride; his goal is to spare God's people from further derision.
3. He assures them that God has already answered his prayers and that God's hand was joining them in the work.
4. He recounts the victory God had already given them by the support of the king. He was giving them hope and assurance of success because they would be joining God in something He was already doing.
5. He takes the time to look the people in the eye, speak to them directly, and answer their questions so that they can trust him.

And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

Courageously, the people who had been without success or hope for many years believed in Nehemiah's God-given vision, trusted his integrity, and agreed to work together for the good work that God had prepared in advance for them to do. The task was a monumental one. Estimates are that the wall was anywhere from one to two and a half miles in circumference, three to four feet thick, and fifteen to twenty feet high. In addition, it had been broken for many years and the large stones were scattered. To make matters worse, the gates in the wall had been burned. The work to be done was seemingly overwhelming.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"

Despite the reason for joy, there loomed nearby a quick response of criticism and mockery. God tests the resolve of His people through such critics. Such discouraging and continual opposition is as prevalent a matter as ever for God's people today in the age of media spin and blogger fodder.

²⁰ Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

Rather than allowing the critics to get the final word, Nehemiah wisely spoke to reassure his people by focusing them on the ability of their God. They could trust that God would make them succeed, make His name great, and mock His critics.

The lessons of Nehemiah are wondrously insightful for all leaders, especially leaders in our church. As we labor to see our city built into a great city, and the church built into a great city within that city, we too have been lying in spiritual desolation for roughly the same number of years as was Jerusalem. But God has likewise given us an enormous vision for what can be if His people labor together for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, I would encourage us each to spend more time focusing on our tasks and our God than our critics. God has

called us to love them, but not labor for their approval, since we work for Him alone.

Verses for next week: Nehemiah 3:1–32