

Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 10 Completion, Critics, and Continuation (Nehemiah 6:15–7:4)

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... this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

— Nehemiah 6:16

This section of Nehemiah marks an important transition in the book and his leadership and mission. Thus far in the book we have seen that Nehemiah accepted God's calling on his life to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and build the church there as a city within that city. In less than a year from God's calling, Nehemiah had completed the first and arguably the most difficult part of his mission with the completion of the rebuilding of the city wall. This mission was incredibly difficult for Nehemiah personally; he spent time in prayer and planning, gained permission from the king, raised the necessary financial resources, moved from the capital city to Jerusalem, endured external critics and death threats, as well as internal sin as the rich were taking advantage of the poor. Nehemiah then had his own character slandered publicly and lost a great deal of money because he underwrote the project himself and collected no salary or compensation in return. However, after roughly 141 years of failed attempts, we now see the completion of the wall and continuation of the ministry within that wall.

Completion

6:15 So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.

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. It had lain in ruins for 141 years until God called Nehemiah to lead the mission to rebuild it. In just fifty-two tense, stressful, exhausting days, the work was completed. Curiously, the completion of the wall is essentially mentioned in passing, with little reflection on Nehemiah's own emotional feelings about the matter. This may be due in part to the fact that his focus remained on the task ahead of him—his labor was transitioning from things (stones, walls, gates) to people (new residents and converts). After completing one task, leaders recognize that their work is never done, but transitions from one season to the next. One success leads to new opportunities to pursue additional success.

Critics

16 And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

Some of Nehemiah's critics who had hounded him so mercilessly lost their courage once the wall was completed. In the end, the success of a leader is

perhaps their best defense against false allegations and criticism. Furthermore, by finishing the task God had called him to, Nehemiah evidenced to those who opposed him that God was with him. He also remained humble by giving God all credit for his success. This humility allowed Nehemiah to continue to be used by God beyond this one mission and to continue on as a faithful servant of the Lord. The basic principle here is that completing one's work while remaining humble are the marks of a truly great leader.

¹⁷Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. ¹⁸For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. ¹⁹Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.

Not all of Nehemiah's critics, however, lost heart and moved on with their lives. Tobiah, who was probably a Jew, established himself as Nehemiah's foremost opponent. He remains steadfastly at odds with Nehemiah through the final chapter of the book. He was a powerful and influential man because he had both marriage and business ties to many people also connected to Nehemiah; his son had even married the daughter of Meshullam, one of the men who had helped rebuild the wall (3:4, 30). To make matters worse, Tobiah seems to have hired a PR firm to improve his public image, thereby ensuring that he would remain a powerful foe no matter what Nehemiah did to be on good terms. The leadership principle here is that sometimes those who seem as if they should be supportive set themselves up as a leader's greatest enemy and there is nothing that can be done to make peace. In that case, the leader must proceed forward with the continuation of their mission, which is exactly what Nehemiah did.

Continuation

^{7:1}Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, ²I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. ³And I said to them, "Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes." ⁴The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.

Once the work of things (stones, walls, gates) was completed, Nehemiah's work focused on how to care for people. He wisely understood that he could not simply work *in* the city and church, but also had to work *on* the city and church. For that to happen, he needed to establish working teams with clearly defined missions headed by trustworthy, godly leaders. These leaders and working teams included:

- *Gatekeepers* — overseeing parts of the city much like our campus pastors.

- *Singers* — leading God’s people in corporate worship much like our worship teams.
- *Levites* — pastors with deacon-like assistants to care for and counsel people.

Overseeing these teams were two primary leaders who reported directly to Nehemiah. Hananiah oversaw the security of the city and church. Hanani was the equivalent of Nehemiah’s Executive Pastor who took much of the administrative load off of Nehemiah. This man was Nehemiah’s brother and he had been with him from the beginning of the project (1:1–2). He was chosen because he was a godly man who had proven himself through the entire project. The leadership principle here is that the most empowered leaders must have lengthy seasons of testing before they are given the authority to lead other leaders and teams, or in the words of the New Testament, they must be “tested and approved.”

In addition to leaders, Nehemiah also began leading through the establishment of policies to govern the people and ensure their well-being. These policies included setting the times when the doors to the city could be open, setting security guards on duty, and preparing the people for growth. As an organization grows, the leader begins to lead less through personal contact and more through appointed assistant leaders and policies, so that things do not bottleneck relationally at the senior leader.

Having completed the wall and established leadership to care for people in the city and church, the stage was now set for an influx of people and their conversion to the God of the Bible. A leader labors to establish a world of facilities, leaders, care, systems, etc., that can then welcome, convert, and care for people. The people whom God brought into the city and church are listed later in chapter seven, which we will examine together next week. In the meantime, it is beneficial to remember that Nehemiah’s work for Jerusalem was preparatory for the coming of Jesus to that city. Like Nehemiah, Jesus completed His mission; He lived without sin, died for our sin, and rose for our salvation. Furthermore, despite the ongoing opposition of His critics and opponents, including Satan himself, Jesus continues His work today in the church through leaders and biblical principles that He has given to us.

For more free resources on Nehemiah, go to:

- http://covenantseminary.inmotionhosting.com/OT230_Lecture_36.mp3 (for seminary lectures)
- <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf> and <http://reformedperspectives.org/search.asp> (for study notes)
- <http://www.ccel.org/wsb/Nehemiah/index.html> (for older commentaries and similar resources)

If you can only buy one commentary on Nehemiah, I recommend J. I. Packer’s *A Passion for Faithfulness*.