

## Blood, Sweat & Tears

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part VI

Nehemiah 2:11-20

### Introduction

On May 10, 1940, Winston Churchill was elected Prime Minister of England. It would not be long before Churchill would be responsible to keep his country together when the fury of the Third Reich and the wrath of Adolph Hitler was directed toward England. But England, under Churchill's leadership, would not break. Even during the darkest days of World War II, as Adolph Hitler's bombers pummeled English cities with one bomb after another, Churchill could be heard on the radio, broadcasting his stubborn refusal to surrender and rallying the British people to fight on.

In one particular series of speeches, as quoted from James Montgomery Boice's, *Nehemiah, Learning to Lead*, and Microsoft Encarta's, *Churchill, Sir Winston Leonard Spencer*, Churchill declared,

*We shall not fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France; we shall fight in the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air; we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on the beaches; we shall fight on the landing grounds; we shall fight in the fields and in the streets; we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender . . . I have nothing to offer you but blood, toil, tears and sweat. And, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour."*

And so it was.

In that same vein, as we study the book of Nehemiah, chapter 2, Nehemiah and his people are approaching their finest hour.

So far, the battle has been invisible. Nehemiah has agonized with God for over four months and has seen the miracle of the king's heart turned in his favor.

Now, however, the battle becomes as real as German bombs. It will no longer be waged in the prayer closet, it will become a battle out in the open where everyone can see and hear.

Nehemiah's message will be similar to Churchill's, though given 2,100 years earlier. He will refuse to surrender to the enemy. And, he will promise his people final victory. But, in the days ahead, he will also ask, from them, their blood, sweat, and tears.

They will discover the painful, yet deepening, maturing truth that there is no such thing as opportunity without opposition.

### Opportunity

### Don't Just Do Something . . . Stand There!

Now, let us go to verses 9 through 12, of chapter 2, and join the drama that is now beginning to intensify.

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

*When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel. So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.*

### Three days of quiet “inactivity”

This is not exactly what you would expect to read. Nehemiah has the permission of the king. He has the financing he needs for the work. But, for three days, he has not told anyone in Jerusalem why he has even come.

I would have expected Nehemiah to set up a trailer on the site, unload his gear, unpack his tools, hire the bricklayers, roll in the heavy equipment, interview subcontractors and hire a surveyor to plot the lines. “Let’s build some walls around here! What’s the hold-up, Nehemiah? We’re losing time, man! Let’s go.”

Have you ever felt impatient over a building project? I know that you are going to have to think long and hard for an answer, but can you possibly think of a building project that is not going as fast as you would like? Could it be our church building project?

How long will it take? Will it ever be done? Have you seen it lately? The roof is going on the middle building; the brick work has started on the educational building, and inside there are finished walls and corridors, with ceiling work and painting next in line; the parking lot is about to be paved. Our summer move date is on schedule. But it has been six months since the footings were poured on the first building. That is approximately twenty five weeks or nearly two hundred days. That seems like forever!

Can you imagine being an Israelite? They have waited, in effect, for more than one hundred years? I would have given up. I have trouble with waiting one year.

The truth is, they had given up hope. They had grown so accustomed to their history of failure and defeat that they could not even conceive that somebody would try to build their walls again.

And the man with the plan and permission finally arrives. Had I been Nehemiah, I would have bounded into town shouting the news, saying, “The

king is on our side. We’re going to build these walls again.” Yet, that would have been a mistake.

### Solitude (verse 12)

This man arrived in town and, for three days, he did nothing. Notice verse 12 again, the middle part.

*. . . I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem . . .*

This does not mean that Nehemiah was not doing anything. It was three days of waiting; three days of, no doubt, praying. He probably spent three days talking to the locals about their city and, perhaps, meeting the city officials. I am quite sure that Nehemiah was also taking inventory of their spiritual condition, along with the condition of their walls.

### Survey (verses 13-16)

Then, without any explanation to us, the readers, he gets up late one night and, with a few of his armed escort, takes a closer look around, under the cover of a moonlit night. Look at verses 13 through 16.

*So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon’s Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.*

This is Nehemiah’s famous midnight ride. Is it not true, to this day, that those who are involved in leadership are often awake while others are asleep? I can assure you that the moment you sign on to serve others, the moment you accept the burden of rebuilding your broken world, you will have sleepless nights at times. That is what Oswald Sanders called “the penalty of leadership”.

The city sleeps while a burdened man inspects the damage. Verse 13 tells us that he “inspected” the walls. That is a Hebrew verb which can be translated, “to carefully observe”. It is a verb that is used in the medical profession to describe the probing of a wound to determine, not only the

damage, but the action needed for healing to take place.

Now, if we had a map of Jerusalem, we would notice, from the gates that Nehemiah mentions going through, that he was actually touring the southern portion of the broken down city. He did not see the whole city wall, but he saw enough to formulate his plan.

Between verse 16 and verse 17, some time elapses. We are not sure how much time, but perhaps it is just enough time to announce a meeting.

## **Don't Just Stand There . . . Do Something!**

Having gathered the people of Jerusalem – the priests, the nobles, and the officials – Nehemiah now announces his intentions. Continue to verses 17 and 18.

*Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer be a reproach." And I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me, and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work.*

Now, if you are like me, you are, perhaps, a little surprised that, after such a short speech, the text says, the people responded by saying, "Let us arise and build."

At first glance, or even after two or three closer looks, verses 17 and 18 do not seem to include enough of a motivational speech from Nehemiah to get anybody to risk his life doing something terribly difficult that he has not been willing to do for years.

### **Four Keys to the Cause**

There are volumes in his words, however. Nehemiah has several key components in his speech. As I have dissected it, reading it over and over again, I have found, I believe, four different key ingredients that made this speech so motivating.

#### **An honest attitude (verse 17a)**

1. We will call the first key ingredient, an honest attitude. Look again at the first part of verse 17.

*Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire.*

Nehemiah's honesty is refreshing. He does not sugar coat the problem. He does not start his motivational speech by ignoring the problem and saying something like, "I've seen the walls and it's not all that bad."

That is what you call an optimist. Now I don't want to cause any marital problems, but how many would say that you are married to an optimist?

An optimist is someone who operates in a mist. Right? But, that is better than being a pessimist. Right again?

Someone wrote,

*A pessimist is a person who is seasick during the entire voyage of life.*

I love the story that I recently read in Charles Swindoll's, *Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, about an optimist who tried to coax some optimism out of a pessimist.

There was once a farmer who was continually optimistic – seldom discouraged or blue. He had a neighbor who was just the opposite. Grim and gloomy, this neighbor faced each new morning with a frown.

The optimistic farmer would see the sun coming up and shout over the roar of the tractor, "Look at the beautiful sun and clear sky!"

With a frown, the negative neighbor would reply, "Yeah, it'll probably scorch the crops."

When clouds would gather and much needed rain would start to fall, the positive farmer would smile across the fence, "Ain't this great – God is giving our corn a drink today!"

Again, the same negative response, "Uh huh, but if it doesn't stop 'fore long, it'll flood and wash everything away."

One day, the optimist decided to put his pessimistic neighbor's bad mood to the maximum test. He bought the smartest, most expensive bird dog he could find. He trained him to do things no other dog on earth could do. These were impossible, even miraculous feats that would amaze and delight anyone – surely, even his negative neighbor.

He invited the pessimist to go duck hunting with him. They sat in the boat, hidden in the duck blind. In came the ducks. Both men fired and several ducks fell into the water.

“Go get ‘em!” ordered the owner.

The dog leapt out of the boat, ran on top of the water to where the ducks were floating, and gathered them in his mouth. Then, he ran on top of the water all the way back to the boat and jumped in.

“Well, what do you think of that?” the optimist asked.

Unsmiling, the pessimist answered, “Huh, he can’t swim, can he?!”

Everyone of us would probably say, “I’m not an optimist and I’m not a pessimist, I’m a realist.” Right?

We are all realists! Frankly, we would all like to think that we have found a balance between the two extremes.

Nehemiah was! You could call him a true, genuine realist. He did not overlook the problem, but saw the potential.

He, immediately, earns their respect by verbalizing his understanding of their painful condition. Notice his severe words, “It’s a bad situation . . . desolate . . . burned by fire.”

### **A humble identity (Verse 17a)**

2. He does not stop there, but goes on, secondly, to humbly identify with them.

Look again at verse 17 and be ready to circle three words.

*Then I said to them, “You see the bad situation WE are in . . . Come, let US rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that WE may no longer be a reproach.”*

He did not say, “Man, are you in a bad situation! What you need to do is to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that you will no longer be a reproach.”

No! He said, “we . . . us . . . we!”

If you want to discourage someone whose life is in ruins, just say, “Man, are you a mess.”

It will work every time!

If you want to encourage them? Start by saying, “Man, are we in a mess! How can we, together, get out of it?!”

### **An honorable invitation (verse 17b)**

3. The third key ingredient is Nehemiah’s honorable invitation.

He does not say, “Listen, let’s build a wall so that we’ll have a nice wall,” or “Let’s build a wall around our city so we can sleep at night without fear of invaders,” or “Let’s build a wall so we can have a wall like other cities.”

All of the those would be true – but not honorable. He says, in verse 17b,

*. . . let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer be a reproach.*

The word reproach means, “to speak down or to speak poorly of the character of”. In other words, “Let’s rebuild the wall so that the people of God will so represent their living God that the people around us can’t speak poorly about our character, which is a reflection of our God.”

### **Two kinds of motivation**

One commentator insightfully points out that there are two kinds of motivation in life: extrinsic and intrinsic.

#### **Extrinsic**

Let me illustrate the difference.

“I want you to go out and cut the grass.”

“Why?”

“Because it looks terrible.”

He is not motivated.

“Listen, go out there and cut the grass because there are strange creatures moving in to our jungle.”

He is not motivated.

“Son, go out there and cut the grass because, if you do, I’ll give you some money.”

Zooooooooom!

That is extrinsic motivation.

#### **Intrinsic**

Intrinsic motivation is when you do what you do without getting anything except the knowledge and fulfillment that you did the right thing. And, one step beyond is that in so doing the right thing, you bring glory and honor to the God you say you represent.

Will your boss ever pay you for honesty? Will your classmates ever praise you for purity? Oscars are never given out for character. But, you live that way because you do not want to be a reproach before people who ultimately bring reproach to your God. You are intrinsically motivated to honor God.

That is the motivation Nehemiah used here.

### A hope filled testimony (verse 18)

4. There is one more element to his speech. He, fourthly, includes a hope filled personal testimony.

Look again at verse 18a.

***And I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me, and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me.***

Can you imagine how they must have hung on every word? For all we know, Nehemiah told them every detail of his burden – how God had prepared him through prayer for four months, of his sadness before the king, and about the king's personal response. God has been good to him, and it now involves all of Jerusalem!

“God is here with us,” Nehemiah declares. “God has prepared the way. He has turned the heart of the king. He has supplied our financial need. He has not forgotten you, oh Jerusalem.”

For those of you who work in a position where you are ministering to other people – whether it is teaching a class, helping out in a program with children, discipling teenagers, greeting visitors, praying, serving as a vocational missionary in this community or in some other country, or in any conceivable capacity of ministry – you have probably discovered, by now, that one of the most discouraging things about ministry is that you are never finished. You are never finished. And, because of that, you are often left wondering if God is really accomplishing anything through the efforts of your hands and your prayers.

I received, in the mail recently, a letter written by a young lady who has left our church to attend college in another state. While her remarks are written to me, it is obvious that she speaks of our church at large. We have, together as a body, become the kind of church that this college freshman now writes of with fond memories.

She writes,

*One thing that I really appreciate is how our church has been so focused, from meeting in a middle school building all the way to this huge building program, on the greatness of God.*

I have read that a dozen times. She believes that we are focused on the greatness of God.

She continues,

*Another thing I think is so cool is how missions has stayed a priority in our church. No matter how we may have struggled financially in the past, and especially in raising money for our new land and building, we never stopped giving to missionaries. I think that is so neat.*

*I know I will never be able to express all my gratitude to you about what an impact our church has had in my life. But, I want you to know, that it's because of this church that I am a believer today and am now headed towards missions full time in the future.*

*I guess the best I can say is, thanks for everything. I hope you have a great day.*

This young lady began attending this church when she was around eleven years old. There are people in our audience who were once her Sunday School teachers. Can you imagine trying to teach eleven-year-old girls anything? Sitting here are youth workers who played, disciplined, taught, and kept the standard high. There is a mom and a dad who prayed and taught, and prayed and guided. There is a missions committee who planned and strategized. And, a pastor who preached. There were times when we thought nothing was being accomplished.

There is nothing more encouraging than a personal testimony that reminds us that God has been, and is, at work through us all. How encouraging it must have been to the people of Jerusalem to hear a man say, “I know you've lived, for years, surrounded by these broken down walls. You don't think God is even noticing anymore. But, I want you to know, that God has been favorable to me. He's been at work in my life and He is at work, even now, among you.”

No wonder they all shouted in unison, in verse 18b,

***Let us arise and build. So they put their hands to the good work.***

No wonder!

## Opposition

### Trouble in the Middle East Is Not Something New!

This would be a wonderful place for the book of Nehemiah to end – but it does not. There is this little word “but,” that changes the sunshine into clouds of gray.

### Three Enemies of the Cause (verse 19a)

Look at verse 19 to discover the opposition.

*But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, “What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”*

There were three enemies of the cause:

1. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria,
2. Tobiah ruled the kingdom of Ammon,
3. Geshem, and his sons, ruled the Arab nations.

These are powerful enemies of God and enemies of God’s people.

Ladies and gentlemen, when you decide to build anything for the glory of God, whether it is a godly home, a pure mind, or an honest character; when you desire to honor and glorify God, then everything that opposes God will oppose you.

There is no opportunity from heaven without opposition from hell.

If you think that walking with Christ is a path strewn with flowers . . . think again.

Jesus Christ said the object that would grace the necks of his disciples would not be garlands but a cross. Turn to Matthew, chapter 16, verse 24.

*Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”*

Christianity is not always blessings, sweetness and triumph. Sometimes it is blood, sweat, and tears.

### Two Forms of Opposition (verse 19b)

The enemies of Nehemiah opposed the work in two ways.

1. First, by public ridicule.

The text says, in verse 19b,

*. . . they mocked us and despised us . . .*

2. Second, by intimidation.

The verse continues,

*. . . What is this thing you are doing? . . .*

Public ridicule was intended to produce embarrassment. Intimidation was intended to produce fear. Fear and embarrassment have worked wonders in keeping Christians from doing or saying anything for God. Perhaps it would work here.

### Nehemiah’s Six Part Response (verse 20)

Nehemiah responds in verse 20.

*So I answered them and said to them, “The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem.”*

Nehemiah says six things in response:

1. This is God’s work.
2. We are God’s servants.
3. This work will be accomplished by God’s power (what courage, but he does not stop there).
4. You have no portion here (literally “no property”).
5. You have no right (that is, no claim of authority over Jerusalem; it could also imply that they have no right to require taxes or tribute from the citizens of Jerusalem).
6. You have no memorial (this is a religious implication that could be amplified to read, “you have no place of worship within Jerusalem’s community of believers”).

## Application – Avoiding the Pitfall of Discouragement

Let me give you three ways to avoid the pitfall of discouragement.

1. First, remember the truth that God’s will is not always easy, but it is never impossible.

Let me say it another way. Remember that the fact that God’s will is not always easy, does not mean it is impossible.

2. Second, rest in the fact that God will never command you to do something without providing the strength to do it.

A quote by Jack Handey, from his book entitled, *Fuzzy Memories*, was quoted in, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching*. He writes,

*There used to be this bully who would demand my lunch money every day at school. Since I was smaller than he was, I would give it to him. Then I decided to fight back. I started taking karate lessons. But then the karate instructor told me I owed him five dollars a lesson. So I just went back to paying the bully. Too many people feel it is easier just to pay the bully than it is to learn how to defeat him.*

God never commands you to live for His glory without helping you to overcome the obstacles you will face.

You say, "I can't love my spouse."

Yes, you can.

"I can't witness for Christ to my relatives or friends."

Yes, you can.

"I can't remain pure on this college campus."

Yes, you can.

Paul, in Philippians, chapter 4, verse 13, said, "I can do," some things. I am sorry. Did I say it wrong? Let me try again. Say it with me.

***I can do ALL THINGS . . .***

How?

***. . . through Christ who strengthens me.***

Imagine what Nehemiah must have thought as he toured the city that night. There were huge stones lying on the ground, even piled up at places. There was a century of weeds and underbrush, as well as the rotten wood of former gates crumbling in his hands. Had you or I been Nehemiah, we would have probably taken the first camel back to Persia.

Oh, but he knew that God's good hand was upon him, strengthening him for the task at hand.

3. The third way to avoid the pitfall of discouragement is to rejoice in the principle that opposition only means opportunity is close at hand.

There is no opportunity without opposition. So, you welcome not only the opportunity, but the obstacle as well.

That most difficult hour you experienced? By refusing to surrender, you can say, looking back on it now, that it was your finest hour. That most difficult hour was your finest hour!

And so, refusing to surrender as Christ's disciple, you remain, as it says in I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 58,

***. . . steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.***

Your toil is not in vain. It is labor that included blood, sweat, and tears. And, in spite of it all, you say, even today, "Let us arise and build!"

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/26/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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