

Nehemiah: Captive Cupbearer Rebuilds a Nation

Nehemiah 2:11-20

¹¹ So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days.

¹² Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. ¹³ I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been 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 place for the animal I was riding to continue. ¹⁵ So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. 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 rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." ¹⁸ I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good. ¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab

heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, "What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" ²⁰ Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem."

Theme Statement

Nehemiah, a trusted servant of the Persian king Artaxerxes, learned that Jerusalem remained in ruins nearly a century and a half after its destruction. Inspired by God and with the aid of Artaxerxes, Governor Nehemiah traveled to rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

Exploring the Word

Though the complicated history of how the books of Ezra and Nehemiah emerged from an original book of Ezra need not detain us, it is helpful to remember that the two were originally a single volume. In that larger prototype, Nehemiah emerged as the third leader needed for the full return of God's people:

- Zerubbabel oversaw the restoration of the temple.
- Ezra reestablished the Torah in Judah.
- Nehemiah reconstructed Jerusalem's walls, protecting the temple and Torah observance.

We first meet Nehemiah in the city of Susa, in the province of Elam, a winter residence of Persian kings (1:1). Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer, a position of prestige and trust (1:11; 2:1). Nehemiah learned the extent of Jerusalem's ruination from Hanani, his brother (1:2-3).

When Nehemiah next appeared to serve the king, Artaxerxes immediately noted his servant's unprecedented sadness. After explaining the condition of Jerusalem, Nehemiah was granted permission to return to rebuild the

city. He would serve as Artaxerxes's governor (5:14; 8:9; 10:1; 12:26). Nehemiah's departure, however, was not to be permanent; he set a date for his return (2:6).

Nehemiah 2:11-16 A nocturnal inspection

Three days after his arrival, the new governor made a surreptitious inspection of the ruined city walls. The one-hundred-fifty-year-old debris field around the remains of the city was massive. Indeed, Nehemiah could follow around the walls only on the south side, from the Valley Gate as far as the Fountain Gate before the pathway became impassible (2:14). Descending to the Kidron Valley, he circumnavigated the city, inspecting the wall's ruins, until he came again upon the Valley Gate and reentered the city (2:15).

Nehemiah 2:17-20 Acceptance and opposition

Soon after, Nehemiah shared his plans with all who would do the work of rebuilding the walls. The governor's appeal was twofold. First, "we" suffer disgrace because "Jerusalem lies in ruins" (2:17). Although he had been in Jerusalem only a few days, he identified himself as one of the people. Second, he supported his appeal by noting that he had been both blessed by "my God" (their God as well) and by support from the king (2:18). With both divine and human support, the project could not fail. Popular support came immediately and the people "committed themselves to the common good" (2:18).

If Nehemiah and the citizens of Jerusalem had only to deal with the arduous task of reconstructing the walls and city gates, that would have been difficult enough. But as had Zerubbabel sixty years previously, Nehemiah also met a new generation of local opposition in the persons of three troublemakers: Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab. These three both mocked and threatened Nehemiah and the construction

workers to the point that the workers kept weapons at hand by day and set guards by night (4:7-9, 13-18).

None of Nehemiah's antagonists succeeded in derailing his plans. As he said at the beginning, the gracious hand of God and the support of the king were more than sufficient to bring him success (2:18).

The Word Today

It would be unusual to meet a Christian who claims that Nehemiah is the primary book they read for guidance or comfort. Nevertheless, this odd book about a Jewish governor and his inspired construction project does offer points worth pondering.

God can and does use the government. Nehemiah's success would not have been possible if Artaxerxes had not lent his support. Lutherans and others familiar with Luther's "two kingdoms" doctrine know that God's work in the world is also done by the work of good government. In pursuit of the common good, the church does well to seek out ways to effect public policy by engagement with local, regional, and national governmental officials.

There is a common good. Nehemiah's contemporaries "committed themselves to the common good" in ways that called for hard work and sacrifice (2:18). During the first spring of COVID-19, we cannot dispute that some among us, including misguided believers, lost sight of the common good. The pleasures of Memorial Day on the beach and refusals to practice social distancing in grocery stores and churches were signs that too many lost sight of our obligation to one another as members of a society, let alone as beloved children of God. Friends of the Lord can perhaps point the way as we try to love contemporary Sanballats.

Further Study

Psalm 24; Psalm 48; Revelation 21:9-27

Daily Readings

M. Daniel 9:4-6, 15-19

F. Nehemiah 13:23-27

T. Nehemiah 13:4-9

S. Nehemiah 2:1-10

W. Nehemiah 13:10-14

S. Nehemiah 2:11-20

T. Nehemiah 13:15-22

Memorization

Nehemiah 2:17

You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.