

Let Us Rise Up and Build

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[0:00] This is already the fourth lesson in the book of Nehemiah.

! Nehemiah anchored his pledge and his hope on God's promises to Israel, and he saw in the promise of judgment, just as he saw in the promise of restoration, that God keeps his word. Remember that as he was praying, Nehemiah began to realize that God planned to use him to lead the restoration effort. He also realized that King Artaxerxes, whom Nehemiah served as cupbearer, had access to all of the resources necessary for Jerusalem to be rebuilt.

When we covered the first ten verses of chapter 2 last week, we saw how King Artaxerxes noticed that Nehemiah was sad. The king was perceptive enough to deduce that the sadness was caused by sorrow of heart rather than sickness.

Look at 2.2 for review, Nehemiah chapter 2, verse 2. Therefore the king said to me, Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.

[1:26] Nehemiah told the king he was sad because the city where his ancestors are buried lies in ruins and the gates have been burned down. That gave Nehemiah the opening he needed to turn his prayers into action.

Look at verse 2.4. It says, Then the king said to me, What do you request? After he said a short prayer, Nehemiah asked the king to grant him several things.

He asked for a leave of absence so that he could go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. He asked for letters from the king to grant him safe passage on his journey. And he also asked for another letter from the king authorizing Nehemiah to have timber for the rebuilding.

The last sentence of 2.8 told us, And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me. We also learn that Nehemiah received even more than he requested.

The king gave him an armed escort, and the king appointed him governor of Judah. The king's favor was all the more remarkable because the same king had previously halted the rebuilding effort.

[2:36] The political climate had changed now, though, and the king knew that he would benefit from having a trusted ally in Judah. Judah was situated between Syria and Egypt, and the governor of Syria had previously led a revolt against Artaxerxes.

The king needed somebody in Jerusalem who would make it difficult for Syria and Jerusalem to try another revolt because they might actually succeed. We'll cover the remainder of chapter 2 tonight by looking at verses 11 through 20.

In these verses, Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem. We'll see a pivotal response from the local population. They say, Let us rise up and build.

In the passage, we'll read Nehemiah's summary of how he convinced the people to share his passion for the rebuilding effort. The same leadership style that won Nehemiah favor with Artaxerxes also persuades the citizens of Jerusalem to join the rebuilding effort.

Before giving away too much, though, let's go ahead and read the verses. Here are Nehemiah 2, 11 through 20. Nehemiah is speaking. He says, So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

[3:50] Then I arose in the night and a few men with me. I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem, nor was there any animal with me except the one on which I rode.

And I went out by night through the valley gate to the serpent well and the refuge gate and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire.

Then I went on to the fountain gate and to the king's pool, but there was no room for the animal under me to pass. So I went up in the night by the valley and viewed the wall.

Then I turned back and entered by the valley gate and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done. I had not yet told the Jews, the priest, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work.

Then I said to them, You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the walls of Jerusalem that we may no longer be a reproach. [4:57] And I told them of the hand of my God, which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. So they said, Let us rise up and build.

Then they set their hands to this good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us and said, What is this thing that you are doing?

Will you rebel against the king? So I answered them and said to them, The God of heaven himself will prosper us. Therefore, we his servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or rite or memorial in Jerusalem.

We'll divide the verses into three sections tonight. In verses 11 through 16, we see Nehemiah taking stock of the problem. Once again, we see him taking stock of the problem.

Here are those verses again. Starting in verse 11, Nehemiah says, So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night and a few men with me.

[6:12] I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem, nor was there any animal with me except the one on which I rode. And I went out by night through the valley gate to the serpent well and the refuge gate and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and its gates, which were burned with fire.

Then I went on to the fountain gate and to the king's pool, but there was no room for the animal under me to pass. So I went up in the night by the valley and viewed the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the valley gate and so returned.

And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done. I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work.

In other words, he pretty much hadn't told anybody yet. That just about covers every category you could think of there. Think about the situation here. Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem undoubtedly disturbs the power structure of the city.

It may have been broken down, but surely the people who were in charge like their position of authority. And from what we later learn of the priests and the rulers, we may be sure that they viewed as coming with concern.

[7:27] But all Nehemiah says about it is, so I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. From verses 12 through 16, though, we can make some educated guesses about what Nehemiah did during those days.

Some writers believe that the three days were occupied with ceremonial purification after his journey. And that's possible, but from verses 12b and 16, it seems likely that Nehemiah did more than that.

We can see that he also looked the situation over and obtained first-hand information. And from what we'll see in chapter 3 next week, it seems probable that during these three days, he was planning his strategy for rebuilding the wall.

He was also assessing the leadership of the people, calculating the needed resources, and providing effective channels of communication. Possibly he also was waiting for the right psychological moment to make his plans known to the people.

You get the sense that he's building up the suspense on purpose for the people that are there. Look at verse 16 again. Nehemiah said, And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done.

[8:42] I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work. We already talked about how Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem disturbed the power structure of the city.

Regardless of how bad the conditions were, the people who were in power would want to remain in power, and Nehemiah's arrival as the new governor would have been impossible for the existing city leaders to ignore.

Try to put that in our times a little bit. Think how curious we get when we see a moving van pull up on our street. And of course, when we have a moving van pull up on our street, that's not much of a threat to us.

But when you have somebody arrive in your town with papers that says, Hello, I'm the new governor, that's quite a bit more of a threat to the leadership. To travel from Shushan to Jerusalem

would have taken Nehemiah about three months, depending upon if he traveled the longer route, or whether he cut straight across the desert on a shorter but more precarious route. Given that Jerusalem was in ruins, nobody from Shushan would simply drop by there on vacation. So even before they knew he was the governor, they knew he must have had a reason for being there.

[9:59] Plus, before they knew he was going to be the governor, he arrived with an armed escort. And it's not every day that somebody would roll into town with an armed escort. So the city's leaders would have been very concerned about how this new governor would impact their positions.

We can see from verses 13 through 15 that Nehemiah made good use of his first three days in Jerusalem. And from the verses, we can see how thorough Nehemiah was.

He was very thorough in his inspection of the ruins of the walls of Jerusalem. He made a diligent investigation of the facts, and his thorough inspection is seen in the route that he took to look over the ruins of the walls.

He began at the valley gate, and he continued in a circuit all around the city and came back to the valley gate. So he took a good look at the entire broken down wall, and he saw firsthand how bad things really were.

Remember that this is the first time he's been able to see Jerusalem for himself. He just had reports from other people. He even noted that in one place there was no room for the animal under him to pass.

[11:09] So you can just get a feel for how much debris and rubble there was all around. The secrecy of Nehemiah concerning this inspection was probably very wise for at least two reasons.

First, the secrecy delayed the enemy from hindering the work. It delayed the enemy from learning Nehemiah's strategy. We'll see as we continue on that the enemy will find out soon enough what is going to be done.

But keeping them in the dark at the beginning delays their attack and helps him have some time to better figure out how to overcome their attack. And second, the secrecy deterred the Jews from hindering the work themselves.

Nehemiah wanted his plans well laid out before he presented them to the Jews. And if he had told the Jews too early, some would have blabbed it to the enemy. And furthermore, they would cause problems for him either by criticizing the project or by trying to tell Nehemiah how he should do it differently.

There's a good lesson for us today too. And that is that all people cannot be trusted with important information. And we need to be as discreet as possible about whom we inform of important matters.

[12:19] Nehemiah also inherited a group of people who had a history of defeat. That was another reason why it was prudent for him to take a few days to assess the situation when he arrived.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, which was 445 B.C. The work had actually begun in the second year of King Cyrus in 538 B.C., more than 90 years earlier.

And at the time, the first contingent of Jews tried to rebuild the temple, but even that lesser task proved difficult for them. It took them 15 years to get the temple finished.

And then when the first attempt to rebuild the walls was made, the opposition arose. We saw last week how the appeal by other governors of the region successfully stopped it.

So this first attempt to rebuild the walls after the return of the second wave of exiles occurred in the seventh year of Artaxerxes. So when Nehemiah arrived, the most recent failure was only 13 years ago.

[13:25] Likely, several of the same people were still there since only 13 years had passed. So Nehemiah faced not only a difficult task, but inertia as well. If he had approached the matter without careful preparation, the people probably would have said, We can't do it. We've tried several times already, and we've failed each time.

It's a hopeless situation. We can't change our circumstances. Before he spoke to the king, though, about wanting to go to Jerusalem, he formulated a plan for how he could accomplish his goal.

And here in the second chapter, we find him doing exactly the same thing. He's on the site now, and the plan needs to be much more specific. Just like he won the king over to his side, Nehemiah now needs to win the people over to his side.

After gathering the necessary information, Nehemiah developed a concept for how the rebuilding could be done. We're not told about it in chapter 2, but we know he developed it quickly, because as soon as Nehemiah presented the people with his challenge to rebuild the wall, he was ready to move forward with it.

We'll see that next week when we get into chapter 3. We might wonder if after one nighttime inspection of the damaged walls, he possibly could have acquired enough information to rebuild them.

[14 : 45] The answer probably is no. Most likely he didn't have all the information he needed, and all the information that he was going to need before the task was finished. But the point is important for this reason.

Although he probably didn't have all the information he needed to complete the rebuilding, he had enough to formulate a sound, workable plan for doing it. Have you ever worked with somebody who spends so much time planning, they never actually get to the actual execution part of what they're trying to do?

Nehemiah was striking the right balance between having a good plan, but also being ready to execute that plan quickly. And he also demonstrated one more aspect of producing a good plan that is often overlooked, and that involves planning how to get the people who will do the work to respond.

So that includes knowing how to motivate subordinates effectively. We're not told that psychological planning was part of Nehemiah's thought process, but we know it was because of the way he handles himself in the remainder of the chapter.

Arnold Toynbee, the great English historian, said, Apathy can only be overcome by enthusiasm, and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things. First, an idea which takes the imagination by storm, and second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice.

[16 : 08] So Nehemiah was confronted by a situation filled with apathy, and his first step was to formulate a plan to carry out his vision. The second section of the lesson shows us how Nehemiah overcomes the people's apathy.

In verses 17 and 18, we see Nehemiah finally telling scores of the people. So now he's telling scores of the people.

Verses 17 and 18 say, Then I said to them, You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire.

Come and let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach. And I told them of the hand of my God, which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words, that he had spoken to me.

So they said, Let us rise up and build. Then they set their hands to this good work. We can tell from the verses tonight that Nehemiah understands the importance of proper timing.

[17 : 16] We see his use of proper timing throughout tonight's passage. We see it first in his three-day timeout after his arrival in Jerusalem. We talked about how if he had acted too quickly without gathering the necessary facts, his ideas would have been dismissed as uninformed or impractical daydreams.

On the other hand, we see good use of timing, though, in the prompt presentation of his plan to the people on the fourth day. If he delayed any longer, he might have lost the initiative that his prestige, as the newly appointed governor had given him.

By the end of his three days, his presence had aroused considerable curiosity, and it was the moment to tell why he had left Susa for the 1,500-mile trip to Jerusalem.

The next step in Nehemiah's plan was a direct challenge to the citizens. Verse 17 records what he said to them. The pronoun them here must refer to the people mentioned in verse 16.

Remember, verse 16 referenced the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the others who did the work. So that's why I said he told scores of the people.

[18 : 28] Nehemiah must have addressed them all, and he could have only done that by calling a large convocation. The advantage of this was that he had an opportunity to speak to each one directly.

Each one got to hear from him and to make up his or her own mind about the challenge. Nobody had an opportunity to interpret or misinterpret his words to the others.

The key people were all hearing the same thing at the same time. Pay attention to the pronouns that Nehemiah used when he addressed the people. In verse 17, did Nehemiah say, Is that what he told them?

Nehemiah definitely included himself with the people he always referred to, we and us. He said, You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the walls of Jerusalem. That we may no longer be a reproach. It's amazing to see what the equal participation of a leader can do to build morale.

[19 : 44] If he had said, You see what trouble you are in, you need to rebuild the wall, he would have gotten nowhere with the people. In his study of these verses, Charles Swindoll distinguishes between external motivation, which Nehemiah avoided, and internal motivation, which he did.

Most managers use external motivation exclusively, even though studies show that this is generally least effective. And by external motivation, we're talking about people being motivated primarily by outside factors, such as money.

Harvey S. Firestone, who founded Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, said, I have never found that pay and pay alone would either bring good together or hold good men.

I think it is the game itself. Winston Churchill is another example of good motivation. He was a superb motivator, but he seems to have promised only internal satisfaction.

He never promised anything external. He never said there would be prosperity, leisure, or the return of good times. He only offered the satisfaction of having done the difficult task well.

[20 : 55] Listen to this quote from Churchill. He said, I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. What is our aim? I can answer in one word, victory.

Victory at all cost. Victory in spite of all terror. Victory however long and hard the road may be. For without victory, there is no survival. We shall not fail or flag.

We shall go on to the end. That quote could literally apply to the people of Jerusalem too because without the walls, there likely would be no survival for them.

Getting back to our text tonight, it seems strange that Nehemiah would have to impress upon the people in such strong language the seriousness of their condition. You'd think they would have been aware and burdened by their conditions, but as is frequently the case with people, we sometimes get used to bad situations in our lives, our church, and our country, and we fail to recognize our own great needs.

It's like the frog and the water analogy. If you drop a frog into boiling water, he'll jump out, but if you gradually heat it up, he won't realize it and he'll be boiled to death.

[22 : 13] Let's move on to verse 18 now. After Nehemiah had captured the interest of the people, he tells them how he knows that the rebuilding will be successful. 18 A says, And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me.

We'll stop there for a second and just consider that part. God was moving in wonderful ways to make restoring the walls possible. And when we see God dealing with difficult circumstances or people, it should prompt and encourage us to move forward in our own work for God.

God had powerfully worked on behalf of Nehemiah already to make it possible for him to come to Jerusalem to gain permission and provisions for the work. That was good reason enough for the Israelites to roll up their sleeves and help Nehemiah build the wall.

When God is working in great and obvious ways, it is not only a good reason to get busy and help the work, but it's also a great encouragement to help the work. Nehemiah then told them that King Artaxerxes, under whose rule the Jews lived, had given a decree, which was basically Nehemiah's commission for the project.

This decree not only evidenced God's wonderful dealings in the promoting of the project, it also gave official government sanction and validation of the work. In as much as the king's previous order had stopped the rebuilding several years before.

[23 : 43] We also need to notice that this order of King Artaxerxes did not contradict his previous order, but it simply added to it. His previous order, which said to stop the rebuilding, ended by saying, to stop the rebuilding until the command is given by me.

That comes from Ezra 4.21, which we saw last week. This decree that's now part of Nehemiah's commission and what Nehemiah brought with him was the new command, and this would give good reason and much encouragement to get involved in building the walls.

Nehemiah masterfully won the support of the people. He may have been fortunate that the walls had yet to be rebuilt because you get the sense that by this time the people were ready to run through a wall for him.

Instead, they're going to be building the wall for them, and we see that in 18b. They say, let us rise up and build, and then here's the important part. Then they set their hands to this good work. So this was a great response to Nehemiah's appeal for workers. We can see three things from it. It was an essential acceptance, an essential acceptance, an encouraging acceptance, and an energetic acceptance.

[25:01] Let's talk about each of those three things. It was essential that the people helped Nehemiah build the walls. Nehemiah couldn't do it by himself. He needed to have help of many people if the project to rebuild the walls was going to be successful.

Churches need to understand this truth more, too. Too often, churches' thinking is that when they hire a pastor, he's supposed to do all the work. And we need to let the pastor lead the people, just as the Jews heeded the leadership of Nehemiah, that the pastor can't do all the work himself. How often so little gets done at church because God's people refuse to do the work themselves. That's important for us to remember as we're searching for our next pastor.

Secondly, the people's acceptance was an encouraging acceptance. The Jews in Jerusalem did not grumble and complain after Nehemiah presented them the project.

Instead, they used their mouths to encourage one another to help build the wall. Mutual encouragement is very important. It's a significant factor in getting any kind of work done.

[26:12] Finally, the people's acceptance was also an energetic acceptance. They said that they would rebuild the wall. Then they actually set about doing it.

They did the work with great energy and that helps us understand why we'll see that the walls were rebuilt in the short time of only 52 days. When we get to chapter 6, we'll see that.

But that's just a little bit of a preview. Think about the difference. It took them 15 years to rebuild the temple and they never got the walls rebuilt in the whole 90-year span since they started coming back.

Yet when they finally got energized, they did it in just 52 days. In the introduction, we talked about how we would see Nehemiah use the same approach to win over the people that he'd used to win over the king.

Last week, we saw Nehemiah start his request to the king with the phrase, if it pleases the king. So Nehemiah let the king make the final decision. He just made a suggestion about what the king might want to do.

[27:16] In tonight's passage, he did essentially the same thing. He laid out the plan in such a way that the people made their own decision. Notice that he never had to ask the people to rebuild the wall.

They were so enthused about the rebuilding effort that they took it upon themselves to go do it. Some of the people who'd previously failed at the rebuilding effort decided to try again, and this time they were going to be successful.

Not everyone is thrilled about Nehemiah's budding success, though. Last week, we were introduced to the perturbed rascals of Sanballat and Tobiah. In our final section tonight, they're back with a reinforcement.

This time, they directly confront Nehemiah. Nehemiah responds by touting sureness of the power. Touting sureness of the power is the third thing that we'll see.

And we see the sureness of the power in verses 19 and 20. Here are those verses again. But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us and said, What is this thing that you are doing?

[28:32] Will you rebel against the king? So this is Nehemiah talking now in verse 20. So I answered them and said to them, The God of heaven himself will prosper us.

Therefore, we his servants will arise and build that you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem. Last week in verse 10, we learned that the enemy was deeply disturbed.

Now they do more than grieve. Here they try to take action to stop God's work. The opposition is growing and that shouldn't surprise us. When the efforts of God's people increase, the efforts of the enemy will also increase.

And we can see that the enemy attacked in a two-fold way here. First, they attack by scorning and then they attack by slandering and both are frequently used tactics of evil against good.

Satan is always characterizing God's way as stupid and ridiculous to do. God's will is often laughed at as impractical or unintelligent and Satan delights in so mocking God's way of life that many people are embarrassed to live that way.

[29 : 47] Today, many ways of God are scorned and ridiculed too. We see that purity is mocked, the church and the home are ridiculed, the primacy of preaching in the church is scorned.

Today, a lot of churches place big emphasis on fun and games rather than preaching of the word. Divine creation of the universe is often laughed at as though it's stupid and unacademic to believe something like that and therefore unworthy of even being considered in our schools.

But even though the ungodly mock and ridicule, it doesn't invalidate God's working way, instead it only condemns the scorers. In addition to laughing at them and despising them, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem accused Nehemiah and the Jews of rebellion against the king.

Were they right that Nehemiah was rebelling against the king? No, the rebellion accusation was nothing but wicked slander. Rebuilding the walls was not rebellion against the king.

In fact, it was doing what the king had commanded that Nehemiah should do. Nehemiah had the papers, he had the decree, he had the commission, and he had the order from King Artaxerxes to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

[31 : 05] The opposition had no excuse for being ignorant of this new order. Many believe that Sanballat was one of the governors whom Nehemiah had to show his papers when he was traveling through the territory.

This would make Sanballat very aware of the fact of who Nehemiah was and what he was doing. It would also make him very aware that what he was doing was sanctioned by the king.

Even though if Sanballat had not seen the papers, however, he and his fellow culprits certainly could have checked with the authorities who had seen them and could have investigated the situation themselves.

Instead, they show that they really have no interest in trying to prove that what Nehemiah is doing is authorized. Nehemiah responds to their attack in verse 20 and from his response, we see faith in God and firmness of purpose.

Here's what Nehemiah said again, The God of heaven himself will prosper us. Therefore, we, his servants, will arise and build, but you have no heritage or rite or memorial in Jerusalem.

[32 : 14] Let's talk about what we should make of the last clause where Nehemiah tells them they have no heritage or rite or memorial in Jerusalem. The lesson here is about separation in God's work.

We must not compromise with the enemies and let them join up with us. If they are permitted to infiltrate God's work, they will sabotage it from within. Nehemiah sounds harsh and many will accuse Nehemiah of a lack of love here, but it never seems to occur to the critics that it wasn't Nehemiah who lacked love for God's work and honor.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were lacking love for God's work and honor. In fact, Sanballat and his cohorts are filled with hate for God's work and honor. Here again, Nehemiah sets us an example.

He avoided the fear syndrome because his confidence was in his God. He believed that his steps were ordered of the Lord, just like it says in Psalm 37, 23. He also believed that God would not allow anything to befall him, which was not ultimately for his good.

This confidence strengthened him as he took over his new responsibilities and began the task of rebuilding the wall of the city and also face the opposition from his enemies.

[33 : 36] Nehemiah came to the people of Jerusalem with compassion, realism, conviction, and faith. God used him to communicate his own vision and motivate the people to begin the good work.

James Montgomery Boyce applied the principles of this passage to a spiritual perspective. Listen to what Dr. Boyce had to say. His words are both insightful and challenging.

He said, the people of Jerusalem were motivated by their earthly citizenship and responded, as the story shows by rebuilding the walls of their city. We have a heavenly citizenship.

Are we proud of that citizenship? Are we motivated to work enthusiastically for the realization of God's kingdom here? There is work to be done, walls to be rebuilt.

Besides, in contrast to the mere earthly building of Nehemiah's days, what are we to build? Truth, character, and good deeds, those things are lasting.

[34:43] John Newton, former slave trader, who wrote Amazing Grace, never lost the joy of being part of the heavenly enterprise. Here's something else that he wrote, and his joy at being part of the heavenly enterprise may have been why he wrote this.

He said, Savior, if of Zion's city, I through grace a member am, let the world deride or pity, I will glory in thy name.

Fading is the worldling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show, solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know. I put that in your handout, but listen to that one more time.

The English is old, but it's also good. He said, Savior, if of Zion's city, I through grace a member am, let the world deride or pity, I will glory in thy name.

Fading is the worldling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show, solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know.

[35:47] That should leave us with a question to ponder tonight, and that question is, how can we apply this passage to Highland Park today? As James Montgomery Boyce said, there is work to be done, walls to be rebuilt, what we are to build, truth, character, and good deeds is lasting.

With that in mind, we really only have one acceptable response, and that response is, let us rise up and build. With that, let's go ahead and close in prayer.

Father, we thank you for the challenge that we've seen from these verses tonight. Just give us strength in our own lives to go ahead and rise up and build. Let us also take these verses as an encouragement to do that, because looking back, we can see your hand throughout all of the efforts.

Please continue to be with us and guide us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. .