



“They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon” (Nehemiah 4:17).

Fellowship in Building

Central Truth: Churches need faithful people to cooperate in doing God's work.

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“The church is full of willing people: the minority who is willing to do the work, and the majority who is willing to let them” — anonymous.

The key to church growth is threefold: the capable leadership of the pastor, the faithful fellowship of the congregation, and the divine enabling of God. Those principles are illustrated in the historical events to be surveyed in today's lesson. The aim is more than historical, however. The lesson is designed to secure your cooperation in the ministries of your church, that your church might experience numerical and spiritual growth.

God has a place for men of many gifts in His work. In last week's lesson you saw God using a clergyman named Ezra, a priest of God and a scribe of the law of God, to bring a revival of religion in Judah. This week you will see God using a layman named Nehemiah, a governor of the province of Palestine under the Persian Empire, to strengthen the nation of Judah by rebuilding the defenses of the city of Jerusalem. Ezra arrived in Palestine about twelve years before Nehemiah. The events of the lesson are set in the year 445 B.C., but the applications are as current as this morning's newspaper.

Look for applications of truth to your life as seen in the historical review of the great life-work of Nehemiah.

I. COMMITMENT TO GOD

Nehemiah was “cupbearer” to King Artaxerxes, the king who decreed Ezra's return to Palestine. That does not mean he was a table-waiter. He held a responsible office in the government and was a personal companion of the king. The position carried much honor and many luxuries.

Nehemiah was not content with his enviable position in the palace in Shushan, Persia. His heart was in Jerusalem. He had received a report from a certain Hanani of the ruin which still encompassed the capital city of the Jews. The temple had been rebuilt and many of the residences repaired suitable for habitation, but much was left undone. Almost 150 years after the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar it still was in ruins: walls broken down, gates burned, houses in rubble, and the city vulnerable to attack by any marauder who wished. Nehemiah wrote, “*When I heard these words, . . . I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven*” (Nehemiah 1:4). He could not be content in his luxury while his people and the capital city of his nation were in such dire straits.

Prayer is the logical recourse of a person with a burden. Nehemiah sought God. (1) He confessed the sins of his people (1:5-7). (2) He claimed the promises of God (1:8-10). (3) He besought God's help before the king (1:11). Nehemiah prayed, but he did more than pray. He did not pray, “O God, do something about the condition in Jerusalem.” He prayed, “O God, give me grace as I do something about Jerusalem.” He volunteered for service as he prayed.

Having committed the matter to God, Nehemiah presented it before the king. Nehemiah asked King Artaxerxes for permission to return to Jerusalem with the king's authority to rebuild the defenses of the city. To grant such a request was a seeming impossibility. (1) Nehemiah was a foreign servant who was asking to become the personal envoy of the king. (2) Jerusalem had a reputation of being a troublesome and rebellious city during the early Babylonian period and was destroyed to keep her from further insurrection. But a matter committed to God is never impossible. God moved the heart of the king to grant the request of His servant. The day that was begun with petition to God ended with victory through God.

II. CALL TO BRETHREN

Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem incognito. He had been appointed governor of the province, but he returned as a Jew coming back to his homeland. After three days, he gathered a select group of dependable men

and told them his mission. They began a survey of the work that needed to be done, doing so at night so their work would not be revealed. Nehemiah did not wish to reveal his work until all things were ready.

Careful planning is not an indication of lack of faith. Jesus warned about attempting projects without counting the cost (Luke 14:28-33). Careful planning is part of good stewardship.

Having surveyed the work, Nehemiah called the rulers of the Jews together and told them of his mission from God and authority from the king. He recounted what had happened thus far and they responded, *“Let us rise up and build”* (Nehemiah 2:18).

All the people of the nation were called on to help in the work, even those who did not live in the city proper. Workmen came from Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Zanoah, Bethbaccere, Beth-zur, Keilah, and from the plain (Nehemiah 3). Various professions were represented in the project. Priests, goldsmiths, druggists, and merchants all became manual laborers as they worked at rebuilding the gates and replacing stones in the wall of Jerusalem. Men and women worked. There was no distinction on the basis of geography, profession, or sex.

The work of God has a place for all people. Woe to the Christian who hesitates to work because the project will not profit his particular congregation. (World missions, for instance, will not directly add one more person to your Sunday School attendance next Lord's Day. Yet, it must be shared because of the command of the Lord.) None must shirk from any part of the work. What is your place in the work now waiting to be done!

Thank God for those faithful followers who respond to the call of a faithful leader.

III. CHALLENGE BY ENEMIES

Things do not always go well in the work of God. There have always been enemies who do not want to see the people of God working or the things of God prospering. Those enemies will do all they can to hinder the work.

A. Challenge may come by ridicule (4:1-6). A certain man named Sanballat was governor of Samaria as Nehemiah was governor of Judea. Sanballat was of mixed race and mixed religion. He did not want to see Jerusalem fortified, so he launched a kind of psychological warfare against it. He sought to discourage the Jews by ridicule.

“There is nothing but burned rubbish in Jerusalem,” he said. “You cannot build a fortress out of rubbish.” His friend Tobiah the Ammonite

replied, “Even if they build a wall, a fox could knock it down by rubbing against it.”

Nehemiah did not answer the ridicule with ridicule. He turned the matter over to God and kept on working. That is a good example for today.

B. Challenge may come by threats (4:7-9). The Jews continued to build the wall around Jerusalem. Breach after breach was closed up. Leaders of the Samaritans, Ammonites, Arabians, and Ashdodites met for counsel. They agreed the only way to stop the work was by armed attack on the workmen.

Nehemiah armed the workmen with swords, spears, and bows. Half of the people worked on the wall while the other half stood guard armed for war. Those who worked on the wall worked with one hand and held a weapon in the other hand. For days the situation was so tense the men did not remove their clothes day or night, except for bathing. Seeing the workmen were armed for defense, the attack was called off.

C. Challenge may come by discouragement (4:10-23). The task of rebuilding the walls seemed almost impossible. In some places the rubbish was so great that the way was impassable (2:13-15). After the first flush of excitement over the project, depression set in. The magnitude of the task caused many to become discouraged.

Nehemiah did not condemn or rebuke. He reminded the people of the provision of God thus far in the undertaking. He urged them to work for the safety of their wives and children. The people took new courage and the work continued. Blessed is the leader who is able to keep up his spirits when others grow discouraged, who can inspire zeal in those who follow him. Such a man can be used of God.

D. Challenge may come by erring brethren (5:1-19). Not all problems in the work of God come from the outside. Sometimes Satan is able to use brethren from within.

Certain Jews were taking advantage of certain other Jews. Money was loaned at exorbitant rates of interest. When debts could not be paid, the rich foreclosed on the property of the poor, even taking a fellow Jew as a slave to pay off the debt. Nehemiah rebuked that heartless custom. He required property be restored, debts to be cancelled and help to be given to brethren in need. He did not receive the salary of a governor (which must be paid from tax of the people) for twelve years, but bore the expenses of his livelihood and his services as a ruler out of his own personal estate.

Thank God for the leader who sets an example in selfless service and insist on principles of right among his followers.

E. Challenge may come by deceit (6:1-14). Again the enemies from the

outside arose. They called for Nehemiah to join them in a conference of governors, intending to kill him when he left Jerusalem. He replied, *“I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease whilst I leave it and come down to you?”* (verse 3). There comes a time when the greatest virtue is to say no. Whether from enemies who want to talk, or from brethren who try to create fear, discouragement or distraction should not hinder the faithfulness of the man of God.

IV. COMPLETION OF WORK

For fifty-two days of grueling labor, Nehemiah and his countrymen worked on the wall. Through steadfastness of purpose, with faith in God, often with a weapon in one hand and a trowel in the other, they worked. *“So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work”* (Nehemiah 4:6).

Rejoicing accompanied the dedication of the completed wall. Trumpets blew, antiphonal choirs sang psalms, praises were shouted, prayers were offered. Men and women rejoiced so that the joy of the people were heard afar off (12:43).

The completion of the city's defenses made possible the reformation of the government and the establishment of greater order in its performance. It made possible the reinstatement of many of the hitherto neglected rituals of the religious system. Sabbath observance was enforced once again (by the gates of the city being closed to merchants on the Sabbath day), and temple services were regulated. Nehemiah's work of rebuilding the wall was, under God, a great contribution to the welfare of the nation.

Thank God for every faithful worker, whether layman or clergyman or male or female, who helps the people of God do the work of God. Thank God for the example of cooperative effort which is given each church through the example of Nehemiah and his companions in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

“God has yet to show the world what He can do with one man who is fully consecrated to His will.” — anonymous. He gave an illustration of it in Nehemiah. If he could so trust and serve God in that ancient day, how much more can men and women trust and serve Him in the fuller revelation which has come in the completed Scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us each resolve to cooperate fully in support of the ministries of our church.

1. What do you know about the man named Nehemiah?
2. How did Nehemiah show his devotion to God?
3. Why is careful planning an indication of faith?
4. How can you know if your spiritual leader is following God?
5. How should a Christian respond to ridicule?
6. How should a Christian respond to threats?
7. How should a Christian respond to discouragements?
8. Why should a Christian never compromise his faith?
9. How can the Christian leave a good heritage to the next generation?
10. What is the best thing you learned from the study?