



Nehemiah - Chapter Two

I Nehemiah 1:1-2:20 - Nehemiah Returns to Jerusalem to Rebuild Its Walls (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Two

When Nehemiah was serving Artaxerxes, the king was perceptive to Nehemiah's depressed mood and asked him to explain. Emboldened by prayer, Nehemiah told him it was because of the state of Jerusalem, so the king asked him what he needed. Nehemiah requested letters for free passage and the timber necessary to rebuild the gates of Jerusalem, which the king granted; only Nehemiah had to agree a date for his return to serve the king.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he conducted a covert inspection of the city walls and gates at night with just a few trusted men for he had told no one of his mission.

Following his inspection Nehemiah told the leaders of his plans and they agreed to help rebuild the walls and gates. However, there were three foreign officials probably from Samaria who mocked him and accused him of sedition against the king. Nehemiah answered that the Lord was the king he served in this matter.

I.b Nehemiah 2:1-16 - Nehemiah Given Permission to Return and Inspects Jerusalem's Walls

Nehemiah makes his petition to King Artaxerxes and is allowed to go to Jerusalem (vv.1-8). He surveys the walls, finding them in very poor condition (vv.9-16).

I.b.i Nehemiah 2:1-10 - Nehemiah Sent to Judah

Nehemiah receives permission to conduct a journey to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls but agrees a date for his return.

¹ In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served to him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before.

Nehemiah 2:1

The date, Nisan, in the twentieth year is March/April of 445 BC, and is surprising because Nisan is the first month, and yet the earlier events of Chapter 1 took place in Chislev, the ninth month or November/December of that same year. Of various proposed solutions, the best is perhaps that the author counts the years of Artaxerxes' reign from the actual month of his accession, which is not precisely known today, so that his twentieth year might span two calendar years, i.e. 446-445 BC. In that case, this incident in the month of Nisan would be four months after the news about Jerusalem came to Nehemiah.

I carried the wine and gave it to the king. The last verse of Nehemiah Chapter 1 stated that Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer, a significant position in any ancient royal court. The cupbearer was a personal bodyguard to the king, being the one who tasted wine and food before the king did, thereby making certain no one could poison the king. The king, therefore, had to have a tremendous amount of trust in his cupbearer, who had to be a man of faithful and impressive character. If the cupbearer could be turned against the king, assassination would be easy. The cupbearer also was a servant to the king; he was responsible for choosing most of the foods and wines the king and the court would enjoy. The cupbearer was also a trusted advisor to the king; since he was constantly in the king's presence, and greatly trusted, and a man of character, it was natural the cupbearer would often be asked his opinion on different matters coming before the king.

An Egyptian cupbearer brought Joseph to the attention of Pharaoh even though it meant reminding the king that the cupbearer was once out of favour: <<In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh. Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, 'I remember my faults today. Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard. We dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own meaning. A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each according to his dream. As he interpreted to us, so it turned out; I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged'>> (Genesis 41:8-13).

Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. On that particular day, Nehemiah noted that he had never been sad or depressed in the presence of the

king before, and on this day when the king took notice, Nehemiah became dreadfully afraid. As was true in the courts of many ancient kings, it was forbidden to be sad in the presence of the king. The idea was that the king was such a wonderful person that merely being in his presence was supposed to make a person forget all of their problems and rejoice at being in his presence. When Nehemiah looked sad, it could have been taken as a terrible insult to the king.

² So the king said to me, ‘Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart.’ Then I was very much afraid.

Nehemiah 2:2

Why is your face sad? Nehemiah’s expression of sadness is the prelude to his request. Nehemiah did not show his grief immediately, i.e. during the four months since Nehemiah 1:1, perhaps because it was part of his duty to be positive and encouraging. However, now he has decided to speak and perhaps the thought of this added to his burden so that he could no longer hide his true feelings.

The king’s diagnosis of sadness of the heart perceives some discontentment as the cause. Nehemiah was very much afraid because he was about to say something that the king might take as disloyalty.

When the king said, “This is nothing but sorrow of heart,” Nehemiah knew the king had noticed his sadness, and that the king took it seriously. Nehemiah must have wondered if the next words from the king would be, “Off with his head!” Nehemiah was also afraid because he knew that he was going to the king for something very important. There was a lot riding on what was going to happen in response to this question. Nehemiah understood it was not his place to change the king’s heart. He prayed and left it up to the Lord, instead of dropping hints and trying to manipulate the situation. Then one day, four months later, the king’s heart was different.

Queen Esther shows just how precarious life in the royal court could be, even for the king’s favourite wife: <<*All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days*>> (Esther 4:11).

³ I said to the king, ‘May the king live for ever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors’ graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’

Nehemiah 2:3

May the king live for ever! Nehemiah first shows his loyalty and explains the reason for his grief, without yet making his request. Nehemiah had probably said this many times before. This was probably almost a motto among professional cupbearers; since they tasted the wine and food before the king did, they naturally wished the king a good long life.

This saying was well known in the courts of kings: <<Then Bathsheba bowed with her face to the ground, and did obeisance to the king, and said, 'May my lord King David live for ever!''>> (1 Kings 1:31), and: <<They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'O king, live for ever!''>> (Daniel 3:9).

Why should my face not be sad. Too frequently when people are troubled they do not answer as honestly as Nehemiah did because they either do not wish to burden others with their problems or they like to make it seem as if their life is OK. Part of the life under God, particularly in the family of the Christian church is to be honest about the problems of life. Others may be able to give practical help, to offer advice, to empathise or even just listen and pray with the person experiencing the problem.

It is only right for the person whom others ask for prayer or whom they come to for help guard against the temptation to know every detail of the problem. Of course, it is interesting to hear the details of such problems, but the finer points do not need to be known. The resulting prayer is still valuable when people do not know all the details. They are no less able to bring them to Jesus for his loving care. Some things need to be talked through more than others, but this should be for the benefit of the person with the problem not for the interest of the person hearing the problem.

My ancestors' graves. Nehemiah may have thought that this way of speaking about Jerusalem would make the king sympathetic. With this, Nehemiah explained why he was sad. Jerusalem was a destroyed, disgraced city. No one had to tell the king this was a disgraceful state of affairs; he would immediately sympathise with Nehemiah's concern for the dignity, safety, and wellbeing of his people. Nehemiah's great tact and wisdom are also shown because he tells of his concern without specifically mentioning the name of the city. The king would naturally have a bad association with the name Jerusalem, knowing from history it was a city that had a history of rebellion and resistance to foreign rule. Nehemiah got the king on his side before he reveals the city!

⁴ Then the king said to me, 'What do you request?' So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 2:4

What do you request? The king then invites a request. Nehemiah would immediately know that the four months he had spent praying over this problem had borne fruit for the Lord answered him in this moment. The king was open to the idea of helping Nehemiah with his problem.

So I prayed to the God of heaven. Nehemiah had prayed a great deal, of course: <<*When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven*>> (Nehemiah 1:4), but here he quickly speaks to God before he answers the king. This was an immediate, silent, ‘Help me Lord!’ prayer. Nehemiah knew this was an incredible opportunity, and he did not want to miss the chance. It is wonderful to labour long in prayer; but prayer does not have to be long to be effective: <<*Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few*>> (Ecclesiastes 5:2). This is especially true when the situation will not allow for a long prayer.

⁵ Then I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors’ graves, so that I may rebuild it.’ ⁶ The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), ‘How long will you be gone, and when will you return?’ So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date.

Nehemiah 2:5-6

Continuing in great deference, Nehemiah makes his request I ask that you send me to Judah. Nehemiah again showed great wisdom as he respectfully asked for a leave of absence and to be sent by the king. Being sent would not only give him royal authority but it would also show that he was still loyal to the king in undertaking this duty to serve.

So that I may rebuild it. This was an ambitious target. Nehemiah was not going on a mere fact finding expedition, or to tell the leaders of Jerusalem what a poor job they were doing. He was going with the intention of getting the work done, trusting in God all the way!

So it pleased the king to send me. He asked the king to share his concern for Jerusalem and to become a partner in getting the city and its people back where they should be. The king agreed without deliberation, apart perhaps from a glance at the queen sitting beside him, and demands only that Nehemiah commit to a date when he will return to Susa. Nehemiah’s sympathetic heart, his months of prayer, his recent brief moment of prayer, his great faith, his big vision, and his wise responses were all answered positively. The king was enthusiastic about

supporting Nehemiah in this venture but he wanted him to return at some point, which he did: <<*While this was taking place I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes of Babylon I went to the king. After some time I asked leave of the king and returned to Jerusalem*>> (Nehemiah 13:6-7b).

⁷ Then I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; ⁸ and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.’ And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.

Nehemiah 2:7-8

Nehemiah, emboldened, now asked for specific authority to show letters to the governors of the province Beyond the River, who no doubt included the very people who had previously persuaded Artaxerxes to halt the rebuilding of the city; refer to Ezra 4:7-9. He went further, however, requesting timber from the king’s forest for specific projects. The location of this forest is unknown. It might refer to Lebanon, or to some area nearer Jerusalem, or it might be a generic term for all the woodland that was controlled by the state. At that time the land in general was more forested than in modern times. The name Asaph suggests that he was a Jewish royal official.

Nehemiah did not ask because he wanted to take advantage of the king. Instead, he showed honour and respect to the king by inviting him to participate in a worthy work. He knew the king was able to provide these things; he sensed the king’s heart was willing, and so he showed the king how he could do what his willing heart wanted to do!

The temple fortress was a special defence of the temple, probably on the northern, most vulnerable side, where later the Roman Antonia Fortress stood. It may have included the towers mentioned in Nehemiah 3:1.

For the wall of the city the wood would have been needed mainly for the gates. Finally, Nehemiah asks for wood to repair his own house, possibly an existing house passed down in his own family. Artaxerxes agreed, following his own previous generosity to the project in Jerusalem recorded in Ezra 7:21-24, and also that of his predecessors, Cyrus (Ezra 1:4), and Darius (Ezra 6:8-12).

And the king granted me what I asked. Although this was a pagan king, Nehemiah still understood that God could work through him in a mighty way. God can provide for his people’s needs in totally unexpected or unlikely ways.

For the gracious hand of my God was upon me. This recurring expression in both Ezra and Nehemiah recognises that God was orchestrating blessing for his people. The people had to see that their current situation was not irreversible because God could change things.

⁹ Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me. ¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

Nehemiah 2:9-10

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. This is another example of Nehemiah's godly leadership. He actually went - he travelled the 900 miles from Persia to Jerusalem to do the work of rebuilding the walls and the people. Many people have a heart touched like Nehemiah's. They may also have the heart for prayer, the wisdom, the vision, the plan and the faith of a Nehemiah - but they stop short of actually going out and doing what needs to be done for the goal to become a reality. Sometimes people substitute talking about something for actually doing it. It is one thing to stand around with other believers and talk about doing some evangelistic work; praying about it, planning it, talking about it - it is another thing to actually go out and do it. God is in the doing of the thing. The church's spiritual enemies do not mind as long as all they do is plan and pray and talk; but when God's people start doing something, they take notice.

Beyond the River was the name of the province that was beyond the Euphrates River from the perspective of the Persians. Once a traveller crossed the river, they were on the road to the region of Judæa and the city of Jerusalem. At this point Nehemiah spoke to the governors of this region who ruled under the Persians. It is likely that he stopped off in the city of Samaria to see them as this was the provincial capital.

Nehemiah came prepared. Nehemiah's imperial authority is visible in the officers and cavalry sent with him. He had letters showing he was truly sent by the king. He also had authorisation to receive ample supplies of timber from the king's forest. Truly, the king of Persia had responded to Nehemiah's invitation to become a partner in the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

It should not be seen that Nehemiah lacked faith because he travelled with a military escort whereas Ezra would not ask for one: <<Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might deny ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and

cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king that the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him. So we fasted and petitioned our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty>> (Ezra 8:21-23). Nehemiah was technically engaged in the king's business and therefore an escort was appropriate.

Sanballat the Horonite is known from other sources to have been governor of Samaria at a later time, and may have been so at the time Nehemiah arrived. His Babylonian name does not necessarily mean that he was Babylonian; he probably came from Upper or Lower Beth-horon near Jerusalem; refer to Joshua 16:3-5.

Tobiah is a Jewish name, yet as an Ammonite he belongs to a people that were one of Israel's historic enemies; refer to 2 Samuel 10:1-11. He probably was also an official from Samaria. These Samaritans apparently wanted to assert their authority in Judæa.

It displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. These two cared nothing as long as Jerusalem was weak and vulnerable; even though the temple was there, and worship conducted, that was fine - as long as the people of God were not strong, secure, and free from stress. This was a key point in the story of Esther where the wicked Heman wanted all the people of God to be killed but they had a champion in Mordecai: *<<For Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was powerful among the Jews and popular with his many kindred, for he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his descendants>> (Esther 10:3).*

Notice when this opposition came: not at the heart stage, not at the vision stage, not at the prayer stage, not at the planning stage, but when progress came in doing something. Some people fear ever stepping out for the Lord, because they know opposition will come. They somehow think their life will be better or easier if they stay in their low, mediocre state before God. What deception! A better life from holding back for Jesus Christ? Tough times are going to come anyway: *<<Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted>> (2 Timothy 3:12);* but when people are growing and stepping forth in the Lord, they are far better equipped to deal with them.

I.b.ii Nehemiah 2:11-16 - Nehemiah's Inspection of the Walls

On arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah went out one night with a small party of men to inspect the damage to the walls and gates.

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.

Nehemiah 2:11-12

So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. This is a similar length of time that Ezra and his party apparently rested and settled into their new life in Jerusalem: <<*We came to Jerusalem and remained there for three days*>> (Ezra 8:32).



Then I got up during the night. Nehemiah aims to keep his mission secret from potential enemies as long as possible, but also from his own people until his plans are fully formed; refer also to v.16.

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.

Nehemiah 2:13-16

Nehemiah surveys the walls chiefly on the southern and eastern sides, i.e. the so-called city of David and the Kidron Valley. For the first time, Nehemiah saw with his own eyes what had been reported to him, and what God had called him to repair. There is no way he could have made this tour with a dry eye, knowing the

extent of the damage and the fear, poverty, and insecurity the broken walls meant in the lives of the people.

The Valley Gate was probably on the south western side of the city of David, and the Dung Gate, leading to the city dump, at its southern tip.

The Dragon's Spring, Fountain Gate, and King's Pool are unidentified, but were no doubt on the east side of the city where the Kidron Valley's water sources were. In fact, the King's Pool has been identified with the upper pool: <<*The king of Assyria sent the Tartan, the Rabsaris, and the Rabshakeh with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. They went up and came to Jerusalem. When they arrived, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the Fuller's Field*>> (2 Kings 18:17).

I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Nehemiah knew the job of rebuilding the walls could not go forth unless he saw exactly how bad the situation was. Nehemiah could have focused on all that was right with Jerusalem. They were back in Judæa and the forced exile was over. The temple was rebuilt having been completed in around 516 BC, had been dedicated and was once again in use as the focal point from which to worship the Lord, i.e. sacrifice and worship were being conducted there. Progress was being made, slow as it was. There was much to be thankful for in Jerusalem; however, sometimes one must look at what is wrong and that is what Nehemiah did. As much as anything, Nehemiah took time to count the cost before starting the work. He had a heart, he had faith, he had a vision, but before that vision could become a reality, he had to see exactly what had to be done and what it would cost in terms of time, effort, money, and leadership.

The valley is the Kidron Valley, to which Nehemiah had to descend because he could not pass close to the walls higher up, since the rubble from their destruction had made passage impossible. He returned by the Valley Gate, having apparently made only a partial circuit.

I.c Nehemiah 2:17-20 - Decision to Restore the Walls

Nehemiah now exhorts his countrymen. They are willing to work, but opposition quickly emerges, as vv.9-10 have already hinted it would.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.'

Nehemiah 2:17

Then I said to them. Now, when Nehemiah came and explained his vision for the rebuilding of the walls to the leaders of the city, there was a tremendous amount

of importance attached to the meeting. Nehemiah could not do the job by himself, and he was in a lot of trouble if leaders did not support him. No doubt this was something Nehemiah prayed about a lot. He might have prayed something like this, “O Lord, prepare the hearts of the leaders of Jerusalem to support this work you have called me to. Let them see I do not come condemning or criticising them, only to help. Give me the right words to say, and speak to them ahead of time about this work you have called me to.”

You see the trouble we are in. The citizens and leaders of Jerusalem were not sitting around waiting for a superman to come along and rebuild their walls. In all probability, they had come to accept that it was an impossible task. It seemed that no one could fix a 100 year old problem. Years ago, when someone tried, enemies simply stopped them. So they had learned to live with it.

Nehemiah wisely approached the leaders of Jerusalem. He had to. In the accomplishment of any vision or goal, or at least of a God-sized vision or goal, there will be certain people essential to accomplishing the goal - leaders must have their help. Nehemiah’s wise approach provides an example to follow:

- Wisely, Nehemiah asked them to notice the obvious: The distress is seen; sometimes, the obvious is the hardest to see.
- Wisely, Nehemiah did not come as if he was there to fix their problem: the distress that they were in. Nehemiah owned the problem as his also, even though he might not have. Nehemiah did not play the blame game. He did not criticise the leaders of Jerusalem. He simply identified right away with them regarding the problem.
- Wisely, Nehemiah asked for their partnership: “Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem together.” Nehemiah figured if God could move upon the heart of a pagan king to partner in this work, he certainly could move upon the hearts of his own people to join in! Nehemiah was not there to do it for them, but to partner with them in the job of restoring Jerusalem and its people.
- Wisely, Nehemiah pointed them to the result: “that we may no longer be a reproach.” This was not really about bricks and mortar; it was about removing a condition of shame, fear, poverty, and insecurity among God’s people. The hard work involving bricks and mortar would be worth it because it would have real spiritual impact in both individuals and the community. When David saw Goliath and was outraged that this monster was casting disgrace on the people of God, he simply said: *<<Is there not a cause?>>* (1 Samuel 17:29b 21KJV). Everyone else was self-focused and working out the odds against survival, yet David in effect said, “let’s get the job done. I’m willing for God to use me to do it.”

- Wisely, Nehemiah encouraged them in the Lord: “I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me.” Nehemiah assured the leaders this was not his project, it was God’s project. If people sense that the vision is really all about the person with the vision, and raising them up, and making them seem great in their own eyes or the eyes of tohers, they will rightly be hesitant. However, if it is from God and they can see it, they will be enthusiastic partners.
- Wisely, Nehemiah gave them confidence by telling of what God had already done: “I told them of the king’s words that he had spoken to me.” Nehemiah could say, “Look, you can know this is of God; the heart of the king of Persia has been touched by the Lord to support this project!” If something has God’s fingerprints all over it, people will want to support it; if it has only man’s fingerprints on it, they will rightly hesitate.

Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. His own heart having been stirred up for the Lord’s work, Nehemiah calls on others to join him.

So that we may no longer suffer disgrace. A direct reference to the shame brought upon Jerusalem by God’s former judgement on it: <<*I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth – a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them*>> (Jeremiah 24:9).

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.

Nehemiah 2:18

I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me. This recurring expression in both Nehemiah and Ezra, for example: <<*On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the gracious hand of his God was upon him*>> (Ezra 7:9), recognises that God was orchestrating blessing for his people. The people had to see that their dire situation was not irreversible because God could change things.

It should also be noticed what Nehemiah did not do; he did not beg or make deals. Nehemiah had a high calling from God, and asked others to be part of that vision, but he never stopped treating it like a high calling. Nehemiah did not offer rewards, incentives, or holidays on the Mediterranean Sea coast for the ones who got the job done. Those are all external motivations, and are not God’s highest calling. Nehemiah simply said, “Let’s stop messing around. We know there’s a job to be done, and God is leading us to get it done now.” He

relied on the Lord and the leaders to create a true inward motivation. External motivation - manipulation, guilt, pressure, and carnal rewards can work for a while, but are never a part of God's vision for getting things done.

Let us start building! This response of the leaders of Jerusalem was of God. They said, "Yes, Nehemiah, we're with you!" This was all the more remarkable considering the ways they might have responded - ways Christians today might respond when they are challenged to partner in a work. They might have denied the need for the walls. "You know, we have been without these walls for a hundred years now! After all, we already have the temple!" But God's people want to do far more than simply 'get along.' God has more for them, and now is the time to commit to him. The leaders might have seen the project as too much work. "Well Nehemiah, it's a fine work, and we hope it goes well for you. Do not think we can help you now." But God's people are willing to pay the price for something that is truly of God. They might have seen the opposition as too strong. "Nehemiah, why even start? We tried before and our enemies stopped us. It will just happen again." But God's people have more faith than that.

So they committed themselves to the common good. This shows God's hand at work here. Nehemiah's heart, his prayer, his boldness, his big vision, his action, and his wisdom, were all rewarded. This was a God-inspired thing; God moved the hearts of the leaders to do this. It is known that Nehemiah was a great leader because people followed him. The people he was meant to lead were genuinely influenced by his leadership.

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?'

Nehemiah 2:19

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem heard of it. The mission seemed to have got off to a good start and things were going well so it is no surprise that opposition to God's work appears. The opponents of the people allege that they are rebelling against the king, an extremely serious charge, one that Artaxerxes had previously believed; refer to Ezra 4:12-13 and 4:19-22. The opponents now include Geshem the Arab, perhaps from Kedar in Arabia; Kedarites had settled close to Judæa, east and south; refer to Isaiah 21:16-17 and Jeremiah 49:28-33.

Sanballat and Tobiah had a low view of God's authority. Their question showed that they considered that the king of Persia was the highest authority in the land. Firstly, they were completely ignorant. They did not seem to know what they spoke about even though they had been presented with the king's letters of authority. The king was a partner in the work. Many times, those who are

being used by the spiritual enemies against God's people simply do not know what they are talking about. Secondly, they were not concerned with God's authority. Really, it did not matter if the king of Persia was against this work, if the God of heaven and earth was for it. One with God makes a majority. Nehemiah could have turned the question back on them: "Will you rebel against the King of kings and Lord of lords?"

They mocked and ridiculed us. Sanballat and Tobiah used scorn in their attack. They wanted Nehemiah to feel mocked, stupid, and foolish.

Many are turned away from God's will because they experience or fear scorn. People who were not afraid of death have been manipulated because they did not want to be laughed at. It seems that sooner or later, God will allow every Christian to be tested at this point; as to whom they regard more, man or God. Christians must never be more concerned about what people may say about them than what God requires. After all, Jesus withstood mocking: *<<After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him>> (Mark 15:20), and taught others that he had faced what they will face: <<If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you>> (John 15:18).*

The way that Sanballat and Tobiah used laughter and scorn as weapons against the work of God should also make others reflect on their own use of what they see as humour. Some Christians who are otherwise well-meaning are tools of the enemy, all for the sake of a few laughs.

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.'

Nehemiah 2:20

Then I replied to them. Nehemiah ignored their mocking. His bold, straightforward words showed he had not been put on the defensive by their mocking, scornful attack. When faced with the choice of pleasing man or pleasing God, Nehemiah knew exactly what he would do. Let them mock - he would serve the Lord: *<<Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord>> (Joshua 24:15), and: <<Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him"'">> (Luke 4:8).*

Nehemiah did not give a point-by-point reply. He did not show the document proving the king's support of the project, a document he probably showed

them at the previous meeting. If had done, Sanballat and Tobiah would have just claimed it was a forgery and confiscated it, or they would have come up with another objection. Nehemiah knew that hearts that refuse to be convinced will never be convinced.

Nehemiah knew that the king is on his side, but he attributed his authority to the God of heaven. Nehemiah proclaimed his confidence in God. “It does not matter if you are against us. God’s work will succeed.” It always will!

Nehemiah did not put the work on hold while a crisis response team figured out the best way to answer Sanballat and Tobiah. He was not going to let them sidetrack him. He had work to do and he was going to do it. If enemies are allowed to get a person to stop what they should be doing and that person then gives all their attention to them, then the enemies have won. There is a touch of holy boldness in Nehemiah’s response. “Go ahead and take your best shot. It won’t work. God is with us. He is not with you. You will fail. We will prosper under the hand of the God of heaven!”

Nehemiah’s stance here is like that of three young Jews before King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon when they faced death for non-compliance of one of his statutes: <<*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defence to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up’>> (Daniel 3:16-18). For them, death was a better option than disobedience, yet they had faith that God would intervene.*

We his servants are going to start building. Nehemiah and his followers were servants of God. Sanballat and Tobiah felt confident because they were servants of the king; but Nehemiah is a servant of God. Nehemiah and his followers had a job to do. Not for a moment did he say, “Perhaps this is not God’s will after all!” They had agreed to rise up and build (v.18), and they would do it. In facing enemies, Christians must always keep focus on who they are and what they should do. Failure in these aspects of life will always lead to defeat. These are exactly the things the spiritual enemies want Christians to forget! And sometimes, people just have to proclaim it as Nehemiah did here.

But you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem. Nehemiah clearly distinguishes between God’s people and the enemies of God who oppose the work. Once he is convinced that they are opposing the work of the Lord, he makes no effort to include them or even to pursue further discussions with them. A share is an allocated portion, as given to the tribes by Joshua: <<*They shall divide it into seven portions, Judah continuing in its territory on the south, and the house of Joseph in their territory on the north. You shall describe the land in seven*

divisions and bring the description here to me; and I will cast lots for you here before the Lord our God>> (Joshua 18:5-6), and: <<*The inheritance of the tribe of Simeon formed part of the territory of Judah; because the portion of the tribe of Judah was too large for them, the tribe of Simeon obtained an inheritance within their inheritance*>> (Joshua 19:9); it is also used metaphorically of belonging: <<*Now a scoundrel named Sheba son of Bichri, a Benjaminite, happened to be there. He sounded the trumpet and cried out, 'We have no portion in David, no share in the son of Jesse! Everyone to your tents, O Israel!'*>> (2 Samuel 20:1). Right is entitlement, and claim is literally 'memorial,' i.e. a claim based in ancient tradition, and possibly referring to the right to worship in Jerusalem.