

Arise and Build: Facing Opposition with Faith

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References: **Nehemiah 2-3**, Nehemiah 2:8; Nehemiah 2:9-10; Nehemiah 2:11; Nehemiah 2:12; Nehemiah 2:13-15; Nehemiah 2:16; Nehemiah 2:17-18; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Isaiah 53:4; Acts 9:4; Isaiah 63:9; Nehemiah 2:19-20; Revelation 13:4-6; Matthew 10:32-33; 1 Samuel 17:45; Romans 3:19; Nehemiah 3:1; Luke 15:4

Very good. Well, let's start with a couple of verses in Nehemiah chapter 2. We got down, I believe, to the end of verse 8 more or less last week, but I'm going to start us tonight in verse 9.

So the end of verse 8 says:

[Nehemiah 2:8 NKJV]

and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy." And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

And that's a marvelous end to the introduction. That's what it's all about.

The Royal Mission and Early Opposition

Verse 9 says:

[Nehemiah 2:9-10 NKJV]

⁹ Then I went to the governors in the region beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.

¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.

And just another line in verse 16 says:

[Nehemiah 2:16 NKJV]

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.

So he's come to Jerusalem, or he's coming to Jerusalem, and the first thing he does in verse 9 is he goes to the governors beyond the river. There were probably several of them around Jerusalem and in Jerusalem. He gave them the king's letters, which authorized him to do the work that he was going to do, and for them to pay the payments that were to be made, make the timber available, and so on. He gave those letters to them, and he then says now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.

So it wasn't just that he came; he came with a small entourage, but probably several of the army were with him, and some of the horsemen as well. He wasn't traveling as a single man. He was traveling as a royal official, and he was coming to their community. But at this point, he hadn't told anybody what he was going to do.

And then we're introduced to these enemies of the Lord in verse 10:

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.

So the question is: who were these two enemies, Sanballat and Tobiah? I think history tells us, and the detail of the rest of the book of Nehemiah tells us, that Sanballat was a senior official in the government of Israel from Samaria. He was well-connected, a governor in Samaria. And so who was leading this opposition? It wasn't just a fellow. It wasn't just a guy down the street. It was, in fact, the descendant, historically, of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who had led the children of Israel from Judah to Samaria. So Sanballat was very well-connected.

And Tobiah was the Ammonite, and Tobiah himself was very well-connected. So you had these two senior military opposers. The Ammonites were opposed to the Jews, and the Samaritans were opposed to the Jews. And later they were going to be joined by Geshem the Arabian. You've got three representatives of three countries opposed to what's going on in Jerusalem.

Now, one of the things that's very interesting is that the opposition that they bring comes before Nehemiah tells the people what he's planning to do. As soon as Nehemiah shares some of these letters, immediately the word gets out to others on the parallel of the governors, Sanballat and Tobiah. They were well-connected. They were at the level of the governors; they heard what he was doing, and immediately they were grieved.

I guess I'm deeply moved by the line at the end of verse 10 that says: "they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel." That is a deep spiritual truth in my opinion. There are some people who, it doesn't matter what's going on, as long as people are in favor of the welfare of the children of Israel, they'd be opposed. And it grieved them exceedingly that someone was in favor of the welfare of the children of Israel.

There are many today who are basically opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it doesn't matter who you are, where you are, what you're doing, how, and when—they're going to be opposed. And how opposed? Well, they weren't superficially opposed; they were grieved exceedingly that someone would be supporting the children of Israel.

What is the problem in the world today? The problem is that:

[1 Corinthians 1:21 NKJV]

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

And there are many out there who are opposed to anything that is of God. They would be exceedingly distressed if you were to talk about God, if you were to seek the welfare of those who follow the Lord, and in particular to seek the welfare of Jesus Christ and God.

So you've got the stage set now between Nehemiah, who definitely is seeking the welfare of the children of Israel, and the opposition for that very reason. It's Sanballat the Samaritan, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, and they're going to combine almost as military forces against the children of Israel. So that's sort of the background in verse 11 and following. We'll see what Nehemiah did when he got to town, but that's the background to it. I don't know, Eric, whether you want to comment at that point, or we carry on?

Just a short comment concerning verse 8: we find that the king granted everything that he requested according to the good hand of my God upon me. We looked at that last week a

little bit more, and just to review that, is that any work that is for God, He will supply all the need to fulfill that work. If it's a work for God, He will supply all that is needed.

And so, having said that, we're introduced in verse 10 to the opposition. So you have, on one hand, the supply—all that God supplies—and on the other hand, you have all the obstruction that the enemy can throw at you. What it requires, then, is a man of faith to stand in the middle—or a woman of faith. Seeking the welfare of the people of God should be the desire of every one of us.

And Nehemiah has come to do just that. He has all the supply he's going to need, but he's then faced with the opposition. Who, then, is going to conquer? Who's going to win this battle? Well, we'll see. In very short order, God and His man overcome.

So that's just a thought: the contrast between all of God's goodness—as he says, "according to the good hand of my God upon me." It wasn't the king's resources; it was the hand of God upon him that he was trusting. He was a man of prayer, he was a man of faith, and he was a man of action. And so those three together move the work of God along: a man of prayer, a man of faith, and then action. Once the plan is laid out, as we'll see in this next section, he begins to act.

Secret Survey of the Broken Walls

Very good. Well, verse 11 says:

[Nehemiah 2:11 NKJV]

So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

Interesting that before he takes action, he's there for three days. We've made comment in other contexts about these three days. Very often in Scripture, days of preparation for something important are three days. And you may even decide to do that in your own life: "What on earth are you going to do about this situation?" You might say, "Well, I'm going to spend three days preparing, and then we're going to deal with it." And so you say, "Lord, I've got three days. Please help me."

Very often in Scripture, you'll find three days. The Lord told Moses that He was going to come down and meet the children of Israel on Mount Sinai. They were to get ready for the meeting, and they had three days to get ready. So, just an aside: three days is not a bad time to spend in preparation for something very important.

So he spends his three days. Verse 12:

[Nehemiah 2:12 NKJV]

Then I arose in the night, I 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.

Neither told I any man—not even the few—what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem; neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode on.

So Nehemiah is going to Jerusalem, and he's got instructions from the king. He knows that his objective is initially to rebuild the walls and the gates. And his problem is, what's he going to do? So he says, "Well, I'll go out on a surveillance. I'll go around the city to learn what I can." And instead of going during the day, which would draw considerable attention from the populace, he says, "I'll just go quietly, secretly. I'll just go around the city. And even the few men who are with me, they won't really know what I'm doing. I'm just going for a late-night ride." And so he decides he's going to go out to go around the city.

And then we have—well, we better go to verse number 13:

[Nehemiah 2:13-15 NKJV]

¹³ And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.

So he does his surveillance. And there's a fair amount of this surveillance in the Bible; in the book, there are a fair amount of details. In chapter 3, we're going to get the building of the wall and great detail there as to who builds what and where. This is going around the city. Normally, I guess we would simply say he went around the city to see the state of the walls and the gates. But here, he's given us considerable detail, which I think, from the perspective of the Jewish people who got this report first, would have been very interesting.

From our point, it simply says that he went probably from the north to the south, and maybe all the way around, or maybe he couldn't get around and he had to go back. It's hard to know precisely what he did. But he says he surveys the situation before taking any action. And a man of God often does this: he tries to determine what the problem is before he comes up with a solution.

It's interesting, the patient, methodical planning of this good administrator, Nehemiah. He just quietly goes about his work in a logical, premeditated, and wise way.

Verse 16:

[Nehemiah 2:16 NKJV]

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.

So five groups he had to respond to here: there were the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the rulers, and the people who did the work. You recognize the responsibility to all.

Sometimes we could possibly go about the work of God in a premature, unpremeditated way. We can fail to realize that there are several interest groups involved. The man of God does not go about the work of God independently; he is working with his brethren.

We were told this morning that the assembly does not have a boss, where all we have to do is get the boss to say this is right and everything is fine. The assembly is much more complicated than that. It's like a family, though a family often has a boss. But the family, in order to work effectively, you've got to get the children and the parents and everybody on the same page.

In our family, an issue arose once about certain family behavior. I was amazed that our parents consulted my sister and I before they came up with a conclusion as to how to handle this particular situation. And my sister and I suggested a particular course of action, and they agreed. And the family ended up following that particular course of action. Well, after a while, I ended up thinking about it, and I thought, "Why on earth would my father have expected a response from me? And when I agreed with a particular response, why would he have agreed with it? He makes the decision, not me."

But I think Nehemiah recognizes that there are many individuals involved in the work of God, and all of them had to come on board. And so he told none of them until he had it all

figured out, and then he said, "Now we're going to speak to them all. All of these five groups are going to have to be with us if this particular project is going to be successful."

"Come and Let Us Build"

So where are we now? Verse 17.

Then said I to them—this is his approach.

Number one:

[Nehemiah 2:17 NKJV]

¹⁷ 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 wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach."

That's position number two.

Then, number three and number four:

[Nehemiah 2:18 NKJV]

¹⁸ 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.

Four things he told them, and the order and the facts are interesting. He said, "We've got great distress." They all knew that. They knew the gates were down; they knew the problems. And number two: "We should build." And they said, "Well, okay." And then he says, "Now the third thing that you should know is the hand of my God is upon me."

How much of his story did he tell? Did he go back all the way to Nehemiah chapter 1? Talk about Hanani and others coming to him and telling him of the problem? About the months that he spent in prayer? Frankly, I think he probably did spend considerable time outlining what he did before the Lord and outlining the response of God—the miraculous response of God to his prayer. And he probably told them a lot about that day when he stood before the king with the queen beside him and told the king that the reason he was upset was that his

city was in ruins. I think he spent a lot of time saying, "This is a good project, and I want you to know already the hand of God has been with us."

And then he goes on to point number four, which is: the king's hand is with us. What is the proof that the hand of God was with him? Well, as a consequence of the hand of God being with him, the hand of the king was with him.

Periodically we've got to say, "Listen, the Lord really is with me. And if you want to know the truth, here's the answer to prayer that is behind the logic that we're using." And so I just think that there was a time of great rejoicing in all those who listened to him as he told them the good hand of his God upon him, and then the good hand of the king upon him—the fact that the king was not only willing to let him do what he did, but to finance it and to encourage others to cooperate with it as well. It was a great miracle.

And the result was, at the end of verse 18: "They said, 'Let us rise up and build.' Then they set their hands to this good work."

So I just say, if the Lord has been good to you, and He's helped you and you're looking forward to do something, don't just go out and do it. Get your brethren behind you. Let them rejoice with you. Let them pray with you, and get them happily involved in the work of God rather than reluctantly involved in the work of God because you might have suggested something.

So again, those are just some introductory thoughts on those good verses.

I'll make a few remarks on the portion that Harold has already commented on. Some of them, I guess, will be a repetition, but the three days, of course, as days of preparation, is very true. Also, they've just had an exhausting journey, and now he's going to have an entirely new set of challenges. It wasn't just to get there to Jerusalem; now, what is he going to do?

Three days he waits. Now, I don't think that those three days were wasted in the rest of recuperation entirely; it was waiting upon the Lord. Because it says then he arose after those three days in the night, and he says, "I and a few men with me. I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem." I don't think he told even those who had accompanied him and actually guided him through the ruins of the streets and walls of Jerusalem, because the streets had not been rebuilt. There would be pathways through the rubble and so on, and at nighttime it would be very difficult to navigate. And so he took some guides, and possibly they'd have to have a full moon at this time, because otherwise you wouldn't be able to see for himself what he wanted to see. His purpose there was to get an understanding of the scale of the problem that they were going to face.

He'd never visited Jerusalem before, and so he needed to have an understanding of the challenges that they were going to face and how then to formulate a plan. God had already placed in his heart the desire: "I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem." And no doubt the plan began to form in his mind as he saw the extent of the walls that needed to be built and the gates that needed to be erected. And so he goes out in that night, and he makes that survey of the challenges that they're going to meet.

So then he says he returned. In verse 16, it says:

[Nehemiah 2:16 NKJV]

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.

No one knew exactly what he was doing. Looking at verses 11 down to the end of the chapter, Nehemiah has just returned to Jerusalem. He waits three days. He goes out and does a survey of the fallen walls that have concerned him so greatly.

And again, the importance of those walls and the importance of the gates: there was the temple, there was the altar, there were the sacrifices. The ministry of the temple was going fine. For over a hundred years, this had been the case. All through those years, those Jews that lived in Jerusalem had been offering sacrifices to the Lord, the priests had been ministering, and so on. And the people were used to the fact that the walls were broken down.

Now, what was the problem with the walls being broken down? It was the fact that it was Jerusalem; there was no peace in the streets of Jerusalem. What made him come back to Jerusalem at a great cost to him—it cost him twelve years of his life, and hard years of his life—was the fact that the people of God, as his brother Hanani had told him when he came from Jerusalem to Shushan the palace where Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king, were in great distress. The walls were broken down, the gates were burned with fire, and there was a reproach upon the people of God.

They had no protection. The walls were to enclose the place where the people of God could gather in peace, separately from the world, to minister and to worship the Lord. The gates were there to prevent any of the enemies from infiltrating and coming in, discouraging the people. There was also a great commerce in the streets, even on the Sabbath day—fish sellers from Tyre, merchants from every corner of the earth marching through that city. There was no control. And so their people were in reproach; Jerusalem was trodden down.

And when Nehemiah found out that the people were in great distress and reproach, he wept and he mourned for four months until the answer came from the king to go back and to rebuild the walls. And once he gets there, that's our subject for this evening: he does a survey of the walls, of the needs. He looks at the rubble there that has to be removed. He looks at the gates, the timbers that are going to be needed. He thinks of the workmen, the masons and carpenters that would have to be employed and maybe brought from other places to assist those who are going to build up the walls, and so on.

But a plan came into his mind, and he kept it secret. He kept it all secret; he didn't want it to leak out. You can dilute your plans if you blab over what you think you're going to do. If the Lord has spoken to you to do something, don't tell people what you're going to do—do it. Otherwise, you'll find out that you've already ruined the plan itself. It's between you and God Himself; God has put something in your heart.

Now, Nehemiah wasn't going to do it alone. He needed the help of the entire population of Jerusalem and others in the nation of Judah to help him. It wasn't a work for one man. And so we see the wisdom of Nehemiah: keeping it close to his chest, and then being able to present the problem to the people in such a way that he brings them along with him. He doesn't command; he's not a commander. He's a leader.

And as a leader, in order to lead, you have to have followers. In order to have followers, you need to be a sensitive and wise leader—a leader that people want to follow, not because he's some kind of Hitler, Mussolini, or Pol Pot. He's not a driver; he's an encourager. He's one who explains the problem.

And so, in verse 16, we read that the officials didn't know where he had gone or what he had done. He wanted to get the leaders, the sub-leaders, on board. So he said to them: "You see the distress that we are in." He didn't say, "Look at the distress you people are in." He didn't blame: "Look, for a hundred years the gates have been broken down. What have you guys been doing?" No, he's not a football coach; he's not a commander in the army. He's a real leader, a wise, good leader.

He says, "You see the distress that we are in?" He identifies himself with the nation and with their problem. And we see that in his prayer earlier, where, when he learned about the distress and the reproach that the nation was in from his brother Hanani, he wept and mourned and fasted over a period of four months. And he confessed his sin as part of the nation. He was part of the nation.

The people of God are united. If one is affected, all are affected. We can't sit back and blame others for the problem. If there's coldness in the assembly, it's coldness in my heart. If

there's a weakness somewhere, it's a weakness with me, too. And so we need to learn the lesson of this great man, Nehemiah, because in his empathy and identifying himself with the people and their problem, he then invites them to come along for the solution.

He says, "You see the distress we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?" Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.

Nehemiah, in identifying himself with their distress, their affliction, and their reproach, is much like our own Lord Jesus Christ. He took upon Himself our afflictions:

[Isaiah 53:4 NKJV]

Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.

Nehemiah is a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We see it, too, illustrated very much in the fact that when Saul of Tarsus was persecuting the early church with letters in his pocket to go and persecute the Christians of Damascus, he was arrested on the road there before the gates of Damascus. A great light came from heaven, and a voice:

[Acts 9:4 NKJV]

Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

In all their affliction, Isaiah writes in chapter 63:

[Isaiah 63:9 NKJV]

In all their affliction He was afflicted, And the Angel of His Presence saved them;
In His love and in His pity He redeemed them; And He bore them and carried them
All the days of old.

This is Jehovah talking about the afflictions of the children of Israel: that when they were afflicted, He was afflicted. God was not some far away, distant God who inflicts punishment on His people. It's like the father that says to the son when he's going to discipline, "This is

going to hurt me more than it hurts you." Our Lord Jesus Christ, when the Christians were afflicted, He was afflicted: "Why are you persecuting Me?" He felt it.

Just so, we have this beautiful picture of this man. No wonder people were attracted to his plan, the plan that God had developed in his heart. Because he was a man that drew people to him because of his empathy, because of his sympathy, because of his love for his people.

You know, the picture of the Eastern shepherd, where the sheep follow the shepherd, is a beautiful picture. Why do the sheep follow the shepherd? In the West, in most of the world, you have sheepdogs that drive the sheep—very intelligent dogs that have been developed over years. And these dogs round up the sheep and bring them; the shepherd gives a signal and the dog rounds them up, and then the shepherd looks after the sheep. But he doesn't know them intimately. An Eastern shepherd knows every one. Every lamb that was born was handled by the shepherd himself, given a name even. He knew all his sheep; the sheep knew that he knew them, and they loved him and they followed him. They knew his voice.

And so this is a picture, really, of Nehemiah. He was not only a great leader in that sense; he was a shepherd. He gathered the people to himself. And look what he says: he says, "Come, let us build."

And what's their response? Their immediate response is, at the end of verse 18: "So they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' Then they set their hands to this good work."

Wonderful—really a wonderful picture of our Lord Jesus. Is it not how we serve Him? How is our service measured? Is it because of compulsion, or is it out of love? Anything that's done by compulsion, I don't know how much reward we're going to get. But if it's for love for the Lord, there's great reward. That should be our motivation: love for our Lord Jesus Christ. That should be the motivation that motivates us to serve Him, because He has already served us, hasn't He? Given Himself for us.

And so those are a few thoughts down to the end of verse 18. The decision is made. All the people rise up. They become enthusiastic. They now see it as their work, not Nehemiah's: "Let us build." It's the work of the Lord.

And will it be successful? Beyond the wildest imagination. Let me give you a spoiler alert: it took him fifty-two days to raise those walls and to place the gates in position—fifty-two days, less than two months! It was a successful effort. Well, we're getting ahead of it there. All is well.

Laughter, Contempt, and the God of Heaven

So what comes next? Verse 19:

[Nehemiah 2:19-20 NKJV]

¹⁹ 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?" 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, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem."

So when did Sanballat and his compatriots first object to this project? Answer: as soon as they realized that the king had sent them. And the second phase of their objection arises when? When they heard that these men might go to work. They hadn't lifted a trowel yet. They hadn't removed a stone of rubble. They hadn't placed a stone in foundation. They hadn't done anything, and the enemies had come on them again.

It's interesting: they did really four things. We get this in verse 19.

When they heard it, number one, they laughed us to scorn. The Christian is often the subject of laughter, and he doesn't always hear the jokes that they make against him. But a vocal Christian is going to find a lot of people laughing at him. They'll be laughing at him behind his back; they will often say things much more serious than laughter behind his back, but often they like to make jokes. It's a great way to start persecution: just laugh at the other guy. And so, number one, they laughed at us; they laughed us to scorn. It wasn't a superficial laughter; it was a determined, repeated laughter. It became, if you like, an inside joke. And the people that really knew what was going on, they would laugh at the Christian, and they'd look at one another and say, "I know what that means. I know." And there was a joke between them. And jokes between people—sometimes there's a wink, sometimes there's a nod, but it basically says, "We're on the inside club, and the other guy is the subject of our laughter." When that happens to you, you don't really feel very good. You say, "That wasn't kind."

Then, they despised us. It isn't just that they were laughing at us; they despised them. And they laughed because they were despised.

Then number three: "What is this thing that you will do?" So they laughed, they despised, and then they questioned. And they questioned not because they wanted to know what they

were doing; they questioned because they implied that what they were doing was far worse than what they said they were doing.

To impute a motive to someone is pretty bad, isn't it? "I know why you're doing this." Good for you, you're so smart—how did you know why I'm doing this? But this is the devil's plan: he imputes motives to people. And the imputation was: "Will you rebel against the king?" The accusation is rebellion. They're saying, "You're pretending to come here to build some walls and to remove the reproach. I know what you're planning. You're really not planning that at all; your motive is you plan to rebel against the king. We know that; we joke at that."

And you end up saying, "Sanballat, you're not really a very nice guy." He's supposed to be a governor of the neighboring country. Israel was supposed to be the brother of the Jews, and it's the brother of the Jews that's leading the rebellion against the Jews. Families are not terribly friendly things.

On Tuesdays, we've been going through the book of Daniel. And it's interesting: Nebuchadnezzar's family—Nebuchadnezzar is king, he dies. What happens next? Well, his son takes over, and then within two years, his son-in-law kills his son. And then after four years, he dies, and his son comes along and another member of the family kills his grandson. And you say to yourself, wouldn't it be nice to be part of Nebuchadnezzar's family? You don't know which of your brothers is going to kill you next. Sanballat, you're supposed to be a brother, and you're leading the opposition.

What is the opposition? They basically spoke: they despised us and said. Have you noticed that opposition is very often words? Opposition is very often big, bad words. As you go through Scripture, you will find the devil loves to talk. He talks a lot, and he wins all kinds of arguments. You remember the first story, don't you? There's a conversation between God and Adam and Eve and the talking snake. And the talking snake talks and talks and talks and talks, and persuades Adam and Eve against the Lord.

I've been reading in Revelation recently. In chapter 13 of Revelation, we're introduced to the beast and the false prophet. And what do we know about the beast? Answer: he's full of blasphemies. Verse 4 says:

[Revelation 13:4-6 NKJV]

⁴ So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?" ⁵ And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. ⁶ Then he opened his mouth

in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven.

What was the great thing we know about the first beast? He was a big talker, and he talked and talked and talked and talked.

What's going on in the world today? People are saying, "We don't want to hear the Bible anymore." So they shut the Bible off, and what do they talk about instead? Everything against the Bible. If you go onto Google and see what's going on out there, there's a lot of words out there, aren't there? Who's doing all the talking? Well, the people of God—do they stand up and do all the talking? No, they're not. People of God usually are pretty quiet. Shame on us! But the people who are doing all the talking are the devil's people.

And here, there hasn't been a trowel lifted yet; there hasn't been a ditch dug or a foundation laid, and the enemies of God are already talking. Don't be alarmed. Don't be stopped because somebody starts talking. They'll talk; they'll say all kinds of things. They don't always follow through, but they will talk.

So I better stop there. That's pretty much the end of the chapter.

Sure. Anything else before we get into chapter 3?

The open scorn now that comes from the mouth of Sanballat and Tobiah—I guess that's what's inferred by the people in reproach. They were in distress and in reproach. That was Hanani's report, and that was what Nehemiah had expressed to the leaders as well: "You can see that we are in distress and we are in reproach."

Now we have open scorn, and the despising that was in their hearts is now out in the open. Earlier on, the people were in distress, the walls were broken down, and there wasn't so much vocal opposition. The surrounding peoples around Jerusalem that were not Jews didn't persecute them in the sense of physical persecution, but they treated them as though they were lesser residents. They were the lowest of the low. There was a caste system, and the Jews were the lowest on the scale. They were despised.

Now we see open scorn. They laughed: "You are going to build?" And then what do they say? "What is this thing you're doing? Are you going to rebel against the king?" It's interesting that, in ignorance, they didn't realize that Nehemiah had in his pocket a letter from the king to do just that. They were ignorant. And so much of the opposition to Christianity comes through ignorance—absolute ignorance about what the Scriptures actually say, ignorant about the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. They look at Him as just a good man, a prophet,

and so on, rather than to see Him as the living God incarnate laying down His life for them. The devil would like to keep the populace free from looking at the Lord Jesus, keeping them in ignorance. The world is in darkness and in ignorance.

But notice how Nehemiah responds to their scorn, their open scorn, and their laughing at him. He doesn't pull the king's letter out of his pocket and say, "Here, read that." He doesn't do that. Instead, he says to them: "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us." He gives them a challenge. He lays down the gauntlet. He challenges the enemy. The opposition is now out in the open, and the lines are clearly defined.

He is not one that's going to hesitate in the face of the enemy. He sets down the rules now: the God of heaven. "The king of Persia has given me a letter, but I recognize the authority of the God of heaven. And He has told us to build this wall, He has given us the plan, and He has given us the willingness to build it."

And so he says: "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build. But you—you have no heritage, you have no right, and you have no memorial in Jerusalem." This has nothing to do with you! This is the city of the great God. We're going to build the walls, and you are to remain outside, having no part with us.

There can be no compromise if there's going to be separation in the Christian life, in the Christian church. If there's going to be true separation, there can be no compromise whatsoever. He cuts them off right at the very beginning and sets the markers for the battle. It's the beginning of separation and identifying the false from the truth. These were false men; they laughed them to scorn.

We'll find that their opposition takes different forms as they continue to build the wall. They'll see that their scorn and their laughter hasn't weakened their hands, and so they'll try different tactics, these enemies of the Lord. And we'll see them.

There's a scripture that says:

[Matthew 10:32-33 NKJV]

³² "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. ³³ But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.

If you deny Me before men—Nehemiah does not deny the Lord here. He confesses: "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us." He steps out on a limb here now, and he says that the

God of heaven is going to prosper us in this work, and we will complete it without any of your help. "You stay out of this; you have no part in this work. It has nothing to do with you."

And so those two, Tobiah and Sanballat—and later we'll learn they have another friend named Geshem—they really picture for us professing Christians who really have no part. They profess to be Christians, but they do not have the Spirit within them. They are not born of God's Spirit; they are not truly part of God's family. Nehemiah denies them a place in the house of God. We need to remember that, brothers and sisters.

So verse 20: no compromise. It's the beginning of the separation that will be completed when the walls go up. He clears Jerusalem, as it were, in this statement of any that would oppose the work from within. All the opposition now will come from without; they can't get in. He's excluded them, and no doubt any of the followers of Tobiah and Sanballat are thrust out. From here on, it's the people of God, and the people of God alone, who are going to do the work. He does not allow the enemy to come in.

So here we see the beginning of separation. At the very outset, before a block is laid, before any debris is moved, before a carpenter puts his saw to the beams of the gate, there is separation. All unbelievers are out—outside. Separation from the world. This is God's work; God is going to prosper us.

So again, I take the key logic here to be Nehemiah's answer when he says in verse 20: "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us." Basically, he's saying to them, "You think that the enemy here is Nehemiah and those working with him. That's not the case," says Nehemiah. "Your enemy is the God of heaven. He's the one who's going to prosper us."

And all down through Scripture, you will find that phrase: that the people of God, when they're against the enemy, turn the argument not against themselves, but against the God of heaven. David did it with Goliath:

[1 Samuel 17:45 NKJV]

Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

You've got a problem, Goliath: you're fighting against the God of heaven. And that's exactly what he's saying here: "You've got a problem, Sanballat. The God of heaven is the one you're fighting, and He's not on your side; He's against you. You've got a problem, go speak to Him!

He's going to ensure that we're successful and you're a failure, because you have chosen to fight the God of heaven."

And I marvel as I speak to people and think about the truth of God, how often people say, "When I get to heaven, I'm going to laugh at God. I'm going to tell Him..." And when people stand before God on judgment day, what are they going to say? And the answer is nothing:

[Romans 3:19 NKJV]

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

Imagine saying, "When I get to heaven, I'm going to tell God a few things He ought to know." And you stand before Jesus on judgment day, and Jesus looks you square in the eye and says, "Now, I understand you've got a problem. You just speak right up." And the man says, "What am I going to say?" You can't win a battle against the God of heaven.

And so that's the very wise response, in my opinion, that Nehemiah comes up with. He says, "He will prosper us; therefore we will arise and build." We're trusting Him; He's going to bless us. You're fighting Him. You've got rocks in your head, Sanballat! What's the matter with you and those with you? You're fighting the God of heaven, and sooner or later, the God of heaven is going to win. Absolutely marvelous.

The High Priest and the Sheep Gate

All right, any more thoughts on chapters 1 and 2 of Nehemiah before we get into the actual building? Well, we've got a few minutes; we maybe can start.

Let's see what chapter 3 says then:

[Nehemiah 3:1 NKJV]

Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They built as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and consecrated it, then as far as the Tower of Hananel.

And maybe that's as far as we should go. Where does this great work begin? The answer: with the priests. It's marvelous! Eliashib, he's the high priest, and he says, "Listen, this isn't just a work of building a wall. This is the work of God, and we're building a city." That's what

the king told Nehemiah to do. The first thing is we're building the wall. And so the men of God are the ones who begin the work of God.

In the business world, the logic is that the men at the top tell everybody else what to do, and they go out for coffee or something worse. That's not the work of God at all. Who's doing the work? The first workman is the spiritual leader in the nation, Eliashib. And so he's picked out; he's where it all begins. Good for you, Eliashib! And who worked with him? All the other priests. That's a good start.

What are we going to do for God? The priests are going to start working: we start praying, we start preaching, we start doing, and the others follow. That's the way it is in warfare, isn't it? The leader leads, and the others follow him.

I heard about this story of the fellow who was on the front line in the battle, and he decided that he couldn't take it anymore. So he turned around and he started running in the opposite direction. And he was running and running and running, and finally somebody said, "Stop, stop there!" And so anyway, he stopped. And the man said, "Do you know who I am?" And the guy who was running away said, "No." He said, "I am General So-and-so." And the soldier said, "Land sakes, I didn't realize I was that far back from the front line!" But the fact is that the leaders are supposed to be on the front line, not way back having another cup of coffee. Eliashib—good for you! Right there on the front line, and the others built with him.

They built the Sheep Gate. That's got two things, I guess, associated with it. One is that the Sheep Gate is where they brought the sheep for sacrifice. And the priest is saying, "My job is to make sure that there are sheep for sacrifice. And I'm going to make sure that the gate that the sheep are going to come in is working. How can you get the sheep in if there's a bunch of rubble there? The sheep would get lost; they might even get hurt climbing over the rubble. I've got a responsibility. My first responsibility is to have sheep for the sacrifice, and I'm going to rebuild this wall so that I can do my job for my God. I've got to fulfill my responsibility to the Lord, and it comes first." And you say, good for you!

And so they consecrated it and hung its doors, even as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and consecrated it, then as far as the Tower of Hananel. The word "Meah," actually, I understand it's the Hebrew word for a hundred.

How many were in the shepherd's flock in Luke 15?

[Luke 15:4 NKJV]

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave

the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?

A certain man had a hundred sheep; one of them was lost, and by the grace of God, he went and got the one back.

What is the figurative size of the work of God? You remember the day that they were out on the hillside? Evening was coming up, and the Lord said, "Give them something to eat." And so they decided that they were going to feed the five thousand. How did they organize that? They divided the group into fifties and hundreds: make them sit down by fifties and hundreds. And if you do that, that'll be an efficient way of feeding them.

So I've often asked myself the question, I've asked others the question: what is the optimal size of an assembly of God's people? What would you do if you had three thousand in the congregation? Well, you'd sit there most of the time; you might even learn to sleep most of the time! But if there's three thousand in the congregation, how hard to keep busy for God. What would you do if you only had five or ten? Well, frankly, it'd be pretty hard.

So I've often thought that the optimal size of a work for God is a hundred. There were 120 in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. A hundred is a pretty good size. Eliashib—how many? "Well, I'm going down to the Tower of Meah, down to the Tower of the Hundred there, and we'll build there." It's only an aside, but it's a worthwhile aside. If there are too many in a congregation, people can easily get lost. If there are too few in a congregation, it becomes just a little bit harder—maybe very profitable, but harder nevertheless.

So good for you, Eliashib! He starts it all off; others follow him.

Eric, I haven't left you any time on verse 1.

No, that's fine. We'll pick it up next week.

All right, going to ask somebody to close in prayer for us. Thank you for tonight. We'll carry on in chapter 3. I'm not quite sure how we're going to handle chapter 3; I don't think we can study every name. And Stella, I'm not even sure that you should count the number of names that there are going to be in chapter 3! So we'll just see. May the Lord bless us.

We thank You, Lord, for our lesson tonight. We thank You, Lord, for our study. Thank You, Lord, for Your Word. Thank You, Lord, for the things that we can learn from it, and thank You for encouraging us to apply those lessons. Thank You, Lord, for Nehemiah, who was a good leader; he's a good example to us. Thank You, Lord, for the points that he concentrated on,

and we see how wonderful his planning was. Thank You, Lord, for the success of it. Thank You, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.