

NEHEMIAH'S COMMITMENT (Neh. 2:9-20)

Nehemiah left the court of King Artaxerxes and travelled nearly nine hundred miles to Jerusalem ... a journey that thirteen years earlier had taken Ezra four months to travel with his entourage which included children and the elderly. ... It is also interesting how the Lord used the army of Babylon, - the same mighty 'military machine' which 140 years earlier had ransacked Jerusalem. In the will of God, it accompanied Nehemiah and had now become the defenders of Israel ... defending them as they travelled the long distance to their destination, defending them from enemies who sought to destroy them, and accompanying them into the city of Jerusalem and settling them there. ... God turned the circumstances around, - as only He can, - so that the once-feared army of Babylon (cf. Hab. 1) re-established the people of Israel in their own city.

Let's consider this miracle even more ... One hundred and sixty years earlier, God spoke to the people through Jeremiah, **Jer. 25:8** Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Because ye have not heard my words, **9** Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the LORD, and Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations. **10** Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle. **11** And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ... A devastating message but one they totally deserved for they had provoked God to anger (v.7), and yet He had a plan for their recovery, **Jer. 30:3** For, lo, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah, saith the LORD: and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it. **4** And these are the words that the LORD spake concerning Israel and concerning Judah. ... And those were also the words Daniel kept trusting in (**Dan. 9:2** In the first year of his [*Darius the Mede*] reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem). ... And when Nehemiah travelled to Jerusalem with the army of Babylon doing the work of God, he was invincible! ... Nehemiah prayed to God for four months to return to Jerusalem, but never would he have *dreamt* it would have been like this! ... God's ways are not our ways (Is. 55:8,9) ... and for sure, when God answers our prayers, He exceeds our expectations!

“My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing that He cannot do”. ... And He *delights* in doing the impossible! ... Even before Nehemiah left Babylon, the Lord’s plans were already in operation! When He has something for us to do, He takes care of the arrangements. ... And every step on that long dusty road from Babylon to Jerusalem, Nehemiah was trusting in the Lord for what He would do. ... And that reminds us how God will achieve all His purposes, and not one of them will be left undone. He was sending Nehemiah back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city the army of Babylon had once destroyed ... and what great reports those Babylonian soldiers would have returned home with ... of how the God of Israel was rebuilding Zion!

As Paul wrote elsewhere, God is able to do ‘exceeding abundantly’ more than we can ask or think (Eph. 3:20) ... This was a miracle in progress ... Nehemiah was protected and escorted by a former enemy army, possessing ‘the king’s letter’, - written in Babylon and stamped with the king’s official seal (2:9). ... How good God is to His people who place their trust in Him! ... Ah Lord GOD! behold, ... *there is nothing too hard for thee* (Jer. 12:17) ...

However, when the Lord is working, the enemy is also busy ... and two evil individuals now enter the scene. They were Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah. Sanballat came from a town to the north of Jerusalem, from the region of Samaria which had been overrun by King Sennacherib of Assyria in 721 BC. Sanballat was a ‘Jew’, but of the compromising kind and, therefore, antagonistic to the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. He held some kind of official role and he reckoned the Jews should have stayed in Babylon and never come back!

His co-conspirator was Tobiah the Ammonite who similarly despised the Jews ... even though he had a Hebrew-Jewish name meaning “God is good”! Like Sanballat, he had marriage connections with influential people living and working in Jerusalem and these relationships were used to infiltrate and to learn precisely what was happening in the city, - these were ‘spies on the inside’.

... While it makes the work more difficult, it is encouraging when the enemy takes an interest in you for it means he recognises you as a threat. ... And Nehemiah *was* a *real* threat to the opposition. Nevertheless, he would not allow them to dictate the agenda. He knew they were out to stop him, but he also knew *he* was there to do the work of the Lord ... He was focussed and he believed God would sustain him *in* that work. So, very wisely, for the first three days he rested (v.11). He had travelled hundreds of miles, and he did nothing for those three days ... except, perhaps, he ‘kept his eyes and ears open’ to what was

going on around him ... but he said nothing, and basically didn't do anything either ... There is a time and a place for such 'quiet activity'!

Then, after his three days of rest, - while the city was sleeping, during the hours of darkness, - he arose and took a few trusted men with him and went out to examine for himself 'the lie of the land'. And he saw the stones belonging to the wall lying in heaps, as they had been for over 140 years. ... He saw parts of the shell of the once-great temple built by Solomon lying in utter ruins ... The report he had heard from Hanani (1:3) was true ... and the full-scale of the destruction was now being brought home to him. What a job! What a task!

This is the task the Lord had laid on his heart, - to rebuild Jerusalem ... This was why the Lord had brought him back all those hundreds of miles from Babylon. ... As yet though, he hadn't mentioned his burden to anyone else.

The small group of trusted men he took with him, he then left and went on by himself ... walking through the rubble, 'picking his way through the stones, surveying the scene. ... That first large group of Jews who had returned from exile with Zerubbabel with all their great plans had virtually done nothing to repair the city. The second group with Ezra, hadn't done much either ... Up until that time, the people simply would not commit themselves to the back-breaking work. And they had left it so long that by now they were *so* disheartened and deflated, "we'll *never* get this city back to where it was!" ... Do you sometimes feel like that *here* ... despondent? Let's be careful, though, for that is how the devil would want us to feel so we would give up and quit!

We could look at this story and say "it's all about Sanballat and Tobiah and their opposition ... but it's not ... Instead, this story is all about God, and how he used Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem to restore His Name in that city!

Nehemiah was under no illusion when he walked through the rubble and saw what it was like by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire (2:13). ... And it was no better when he went on round to the gate of the fountain and the king's pool (v.14, pool of Siloam) ... It was all a total disaster zone that hitherto nobody had done anything about! They had simply accepted it! ... And Nehemiah was all on his own as he surveyed this scene (v.16), - up until then he had told nobody nothing!

The story changes though in v.17 for having inspected the work, he spoke to the leaders, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire ... He didn't 'dress it up' but he told it as it was. He 'faced' the problem 'head-on' with them. For too long they had 'dodged' it. For too long they had allowed it to decline until they were virtually at the stage it could not get much worse. ... Are there comparisons we could make with our own fellowship? Are we in such a downward spiral, we have given up trying to do anything about it? ... God save us from such despair! ... Nehemiah was not for giving up for he shared with those men, come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. ... I'm not doing it on my own, he told them, for we need to do it together.

Was it impossible! No, for *with God all things are possible* (Mt. 19:26) ... and that is what Nehemiah believed. When in the foreign country, God had informed him of the dire state of Jerusalem, and then God had miraculously answered his four months of prayer in providing the means for him to return 'home' ... God was far from 'being out of the picture' for He had a plan to rebuild Jerusalem using Nehemiah and the people ... **Neh. 2:18** Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let *us* rise up and build. So *they* strengthened *their* hands for this good work. ... They were for working with Nehemiah!

God's work is not for a pastor only, or for one or two ... but it is for each person who has committed themselves to God. When you look at the next chapter, - and all those names, - it is full of people you have never heard of before, and you won't hear of again ... but that is how God's plans succeed ... when His people take to His work together ... and that is the only way we shall succeed in this place too ... when we work together. Being a Christian, and being a church member, is not a 'spectator sport'!

Sanballat and Tobiah appear again, along with another rascal, Geshem the Arabian (v.19). When they heard of the plans of the Israelites, wrote Nehemiah, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? ... The enemy notices when God's people are working ... and it upsets them, but Nehemiah answered them and they had no reply, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem (v.20). ... May God inspire us with that same spirit of Nehemiah to rebuild our witness for Him in this place! Amen.