

NEHEMIAH'S PERSISTENCE (Neh. 4:7-22)

One of the most trying times when you're doing a job is when you take a tea break. You have been working hard, tidying and taking everything from where it had been piling up and you can see all that space you now have ... and you take a break, and relax.

The people of Jerusalem had been labouring really hard for fifty-two days. They worked together so closely it almost seemed claustrophobic at times ... there were people repairing every inch of that wall. And all kinds of people were involved, - some experienced in building, and some who never held a trowel before! ... What a joy though, when you sit down, and take a hard-earned rest, feeling satisfied.

It's good when it works like that ... but it doesn't always, and it definitely did not work like that for Nehemiah for no sooner had he and his people finished the first phase, but the enemy began with their snide remarks, What do these feeble Jews? ... will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? ... Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall. ... And yes, the Jews *would* have been 'feeble' (the Hebrew word means 'to droop') for they had been working for fifty-two days so they had a *right* to be exhausted and 'drooping'! But instead of leaving them alone, the enemy assaulted them verbally and psychologically. These people of Jerusalem were tired, and it's easy to become deflated when you are tired, and the last thing they needed were the jibes from Sanballat & Co!

How do you deal with them, and with difficulties like that? Nehemiah could have climbed onto the wall and *blasted* them for their malicious spitefulness. He could have made a hero of himself before his people and called the opposition 'every name under the sun' but he didn't. Instead, he did what he did previously (1:4, 2:4), he prayed (4:4,5). He knew the job was too great for him, but not for God! ... And he concentrated on what had already been achieved, - the wall had been joined right around the city, with no gaps, and every gate had been restored and secured. The work was not finished, by any means, but there had been a fantastic improvement over those fifty-two days. ... And Nehemiah knew as much work again was required for the wall was only half-built (v.6).

And when Sanballat and Tobiah arrived, they pointed out all the flaws that had not been fixed yet. The Jews *knew* the wall was not finished ... and they would get back to it when they had finished their break. However, when Sanballat and Tobiah 'showed up' again the people of Jerusalem realised afresh the enormity

of the task ... and they *did* start questioning their ability. After all, when you are continually told the job cannot be done, it *does* weaken your confidence! ... *Are* we up to the task? ... *Can* we complete what we have started? Is it all an elusive dream and we don't have the stamina to finish the work we started? ... And the more they listened to the comments emanating from the enemy, the more they wondered if they could ever do it. ... And as far as Sanballat and Tobiah were concerned ... do these discouragers never go away and bother other people?! Can they not leave us alone? No, people like these two rascals take a great satisfaction in disheartening God's servants. ... To make matters worse, the enemy was coming from every direction ... Sanballat had come to Jerusalem from a few miles to the north, and Tobiah had come from a few miles to the east, and they joined with Geshem and his Arabian army, and the Ammonites who had come up from the south ... and the men of Ashdod had come from the west.

The people of Jerusalem were surrounded! Their wall was only half-built. The nobles of Tekoa would not do any work. ... How can we keep going? ... We might as well lie down, roll over, and die for the inevitable is upon us! They 'heard on the news', all of them [*conspired*] together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it (v.8). ... We're finished! We might as well 'throw in the towel'!

Nehemiah interjects though, ⁹ *Nevertheless* we made our prayer unto our God, and *set a watch* against them day and night, because of them. ... They didn't hide. They didn't concoct some silly half-baked plan. They didn't look for somewhere to hide. Instead, Nehemiah and his people prayed because this was too big a problem for them to sort out, so they took it to the Lord.

Is that all they did? ... "What, is that not enough?! ... They did more ... Not only did they bring it to the Lord, they resolved within themselves to keep on working, as they had promised they would at the beginning of the project. They had, - as it were, - 'put their hands to the plough', and they were not for turning back, - they prayed *and* they set the watch. ... However, there were some among them, of whom one was a man called Judah. He had prayed but was not convinced his prayer would be answered. He went to Nehemiah and told him, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall (v.10). ... We are fooling ourselves we can keep going on. The wall is only half it was 140 years ago when Nebuchadnezzar pulled it down ... so our enemies would have *no* problem tearing it down again! ... And look at all the *rubbish* still lying around!

And the people heard Judah's pessimism, and they were petrified for what he was saying was very much what many of them were thinking, **11** And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease. ... The enemy is coming to destroy us! ... It's all as good as over! And the Jews who lived outside Jerusalem were even more frightened because they had no defences whatsoever (v.12)!

So, Nehemiah was facing it on all fronts, surrounded by an enemy intent on annihilating him and his people ... and his own people trembling with fear. They had only half-finished the wall, - that's how far they had proceeded when they had taken their break ... Would they start the second phase, or was it time to 'call it a day'? ... Forget how good God had been to them in the past ... Forget how God had brought them back from seventy years of captivity in Babylon ... Forget how He had installed Zerubbabel and the 42,360 returning with him, and how they built the temple ... Forget how He had brought back the 5,000 who returned with Ezra ... Forget what God had already done for them, and *give up!* ... Not a bit of it for Nehemiah knew we are more than conquerors through him that loved us (Rom. 8:37) In a previous generation, - also surrounded by enemies, - David had confidently declared, **Ps. 60:12** Through God we shall do valiantly: for he it is that shall tread down our enemies.

And Nehemiah was inspired to motivate his people to continue. He got them on the wall again ... to where they had been before and he put them to work on that familiar part of the wall they had previously restored. This time though, there were additional measures for not only had they their trowels, but they also had their swords, their spears, and their bows to stop the enemy by force, if necessary. ... And he assured them, - for he had proved in the past, - *God* was with them, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord [*Adonai, the Lord God of Israel*], which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses (v.14) ... "Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe, But the King's own army, none can overthrow". ... And when the enemy heard it, - Sanballat from the north, Tobiah from the east, Geshem from the south, and the Ammonites, and the men of Ashdod from the west, - they 'ran scared' and retreated while the people of Jerusalem again strengthened their defences, every one unto his work (v.15).

The enemy *is* a force to be reckoned with, and not to be underestimated. At the same time though, God will not allow His purposes to be hindered ...

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word
What more can He say than to you He hath
said
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled

Fear not, I am with thee; oh be not dismayed
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause
thee to stand
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand

When through the deep waters I call thee to
go
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow

For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress

When through fiery trials thy pathways shall
lie

My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose
I will not, I will not desert to its foes
That soul, though all hell should endeavour
to shake
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.

And the Jews resumed building the wall, confident God was with them. In one hand they held their spears, and shields, and bows, and they wore their ‘habergeons’ (armoured vest) ... and in their other hand they had their trowels. ... Yes, their extra weight was burdensome, but they persevered so their work would be completed and Jerusalem would be restored, as in former days, Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. (Ps. 48:1).

It was hard work, but the people had the burden and the vision, ²¹ So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared. ... God rewarded them for being steadfast. He had heard their prayers and He answered them ... and they returned to the walls. ... Indeed, it is the practical application, as James explained, faith, if it hath not works, is dead ... faith without works is dead (v.17,20)

Jerusalem was in danger, but the faith of Nehemiah and his people was in God throughout this predicament. ... It is a lesson to us in these times, how our faith, - weak as it sometimes is, - must believe God is able to achieve His purposes through us, even in perilous times like these. ... The people were not believing in Nehemiah, but they were trusting and believing in Nehemiah’s God ... May that be how it is in our fellowship too, as we seek God’s will with the ‘sword’ in one hand and the ‘trowel’ in the other! Amen.