

**Let Us Arise and Build
Lessons from the Book of Nehemiah
(Hard choices—committing to do the work)**

Intro: In our study of the first chapter of Nehemiah, we saw two important principles essential to building for the Lord—carrying a burden for God’s work and relying upon the Lord through prayer. Nehemiah’s care for His people and His trust in God made him the ideal prospect for leading the people of Jerusalem in that task of rebuilding their broken-down walls and gates. However, he was hundreds of miles away and engaged in the service of king Artaxerxes.

Nehemiah had to make a personal commitment to do the work. This commitment brought him face to face with some hard personal choices. Let’s consider today another essential to spiritual building, making the hard choices to commit to the work (2:1-10).

Let’s hear Nehemiah’s account of how the Lord answered his heart-broken prayers and gave him a favorable hearing before King Artaxerxes:

“AND it came about in the month Nisan (early spring), in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes (444 BC), that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. So the king said to me, “Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.” Then I was very much afraid. And I said to the king, “Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?” Then the king said to me, “What would you request?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, “If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.” Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, “How long will your journey be, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time. And I said to the king, “If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city, and for the house to which I will go.” And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me. Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. And when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.” (Nehemiah 2:1–10, NASB)

In this remarkable account we see how the Lord answered Nehemiah’s prayers for His help. But accompanying those prayers was Nehemiah’s commitment to leave the comforts of his job in Susa and return to Jerusalem to help his

brethren. Nehemiah was confronted with some hard choices in committing to do this great work. Let's think about them together.

The choice to accept responsibility

Why should a cup-bearer for the king feel responsible to rebuild a city hundreds of miles away?

Nehemiah could have said, "It's someone else's problem".

Some people would rather not know what's going on because knowledge will lead to obligation. So they say, "Don't tell me. I don't want to know!" But Nehemiah cared enough to ask, and then he cared enough to cry over the answer!

Someone has said, "his tears watered the seeds of God's providence."

In addition, Nehemiah had been praying about this for over 4 months! What a tribute to the inner power that prayer can give us! What kind of transformation was prayer making in the heart of Nehemiah during these four long months!? What Nehemiah learned was that he was the man he had been praying for!

Nehemiah's great disappointments became the occasion for one of God's greatest appointments!

So instead of saying, "It's someone else's problem; he now said, "It's my problem; because these are my people!" And in chapter 1:11 we see that Nehemiah had a plan to do something about the sad situation in Jerusalem. He planned to go to the king and ask for permission to go to Jerusalem. He accepted responsibility!

Most people would rather enjoy the fruit of someone else's work. And it is very tempting to go to a church someone else built with great crowds, enthusiasm and momentum, where you do not have to do anything but just show up and enjoy what others have done! But how have we grown by such experiences?

Nehemiah challenges us to take a different view—one that says, "How can I be used to build what needs building? How can the Lord use me to serve where servants are needed?"

The choice to take risks

One of the things a leader has to do is to use the leverage he has to get something done. God had given Nehemiah a place of influence. He could either use it, or neglect or abuse it. A shovel is a great lever. It can move the earth, dig up a rock if we use it! And it is possible to abuse it and you end up with a broken handle. So when you use leverage there is always risk!

There was risk in his request.

There was a chance the king would take his request personally.

Remember Kidner's suggestion that the king at the instigation of Israel's enemies had already given an order to halt the action

of rebuilding the walls in Jerusalem (if we presume that it is this Artaxerxes that is mentioned in Ezra 4:6-23). How would the king respond to a request to reverse a previous decision? Would this change of face not make him appear weak or easily manipulated?

There was a chance the king would say no! Maybe he would think that Nehemiah was too valuable to give him a leave of absence.

Nehemiah was fearful; but he handled his fears by praying one more time before opening his mouth!

Courage is not the absence of fear; but the marshalling of faith to overcome fear.

And this is what we sometimes need to do—ask God to give us the courage to do what needs to be done without fear of the consequences.

And then Nehemiah responded with great skill.

He broached the issue, like Esther had before him, as a personal one rather than a political one.

His words were brief and respectful of the king, showing consideration for the well-being of his kingship.

And then we all wait to hear how the king would respond.

Ever have one of those moments when you've asked a question of someone; and you know the answer is of great significance; and it seems like an eternity goes by as you wait for an answer?

The king shows his interest by asking, "How long will you be gone?"

What Nehemiah teaches us is that great leaders have to take risks, they have to venture to go where others would not go. And sometimes they may fail; but they keep trying.

Today we need Christians who will not assess every prospect of doing the Lord's work with fear and resignation to the status quo; but Christians who will take risks, invest themselves even with the possibility that failure may occur.

The choice to sacrifice

The sacrifice of a comfortable lifestyle

We all might wish we knew more about Nehemiah's background. It is very unlikely that he had ever even seen the city of Jerusalem. He had what appears to be an important and influential job. He had been entrusted with a job close to the king indicating a great deal of respect and confidence.

Here's what we know about cupbearers. They were close servants of the king. It was their job to supply the king's drink and to prove that it had not been poisoned by drinking some of it in his presence.

It may have involved supervision of other servants.

This trusted job also gave the servant special access to the king and some influence as a trusted servant. One would assume

that Nehemiah lived comfortably, the reward of his faithful service.

But now all that is to change! He is to leave his home and the familiar surroundings to experience uncertainty. We only have to look within ourselves to see how discomforted we are when someone asks us to sacrifice for the Lord and his work. We like our routines, the sense of security we have when life is predictable and usual. But God's work often calls upon us to make uncomfortable and even drastic changes. I remember a brother in AL who one night confessed to the church. I knew that if I was ever to grow I would have to get out of my "comfort zone."

Imagine the challenge that Jesus' command gave the disciples: Follow me and I will make you fishers of men. Can you hear it? "Give up our jobs? But what about our families? We're not educated properly? What will we do with all this equipment we've invested in? etc."

The sacrifice of time

The journey itself was to take several months.

God's work often calls upon us to be working when other people are playing. It calls upon us to give up time off or substitute good works for recreation. We do that because we appreciate the limited time we have in the evil world in which we live.

Cf. Eph. 5: 15-16

The sacrifice of effort

Today people live by the philosophy—I want to the greatest return for the least amount of effort.

How much are we willing to invest in other people who are untaught or weak in their commitment? If you can't change them in one phone call or one two minutes conversation, are you ready to give up on them?

Let's put this all into perspective. How much did Jesus Christ invest in you and me?

Knowing this is the answer to all the hard choices we have to make to do God's work!

The choice to seek the welfare of others rather than oneself

And when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel." (Nehemiah 2:10)

It would be an interesting discussion I think to ponder why these two men were displeased with Nehemiah's coming.

They harbored past resentments against God's people who rejected them because of unfaithfulness.

They saw an end to power they held over others for selfish purposes.

But Nehemiah came with a totally different mindset.

It was not "Here I come to save the day!"

It was, "I want what's best for God's people!"

Even as Nehemiah writes his own story, it is not for his glory! The final sentence of the book says everything;

“Remember me, Oh my God, for good!”

It was not power, personal praise, prestige or any other self-serving purpose that brought Nehemiah to Jerusalem. Only this, that he might by doing good please God and receive His reward!

What do we seek from our service to God? Whose welfare do we seek? Is it important that we be acknowledged, that our contributions be noticed?

Conclusion: Like Nehemiah we must make the same hard choices. Let’s choose to take responsibility, to get out of our comfort zone and take risks, to sacrifice convenience, time and effort to do something for the Lord.

Speaking of hard choices. Consider the choice that Jesus made to save you and me:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5–8)