Nehemiah Rebuilds the Wall

Bible Stories Anthology — Nehemiah 1–6

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

Fifty-Two Days

The man who carried the wine for the king of Persia sat down one day and wept.

He had everything a captive Jew could hope for. He served in the royal palace at Shushan. He stood daily in the presence of the most powerful man in the world. He tasted the king's wine before the king drank it, and the king trusted him with his life.

But news had come from a city he had probably never seen: *Jerusalem's wall is broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.* The people of God were living in the ruins, in danger and disgrace.

So the cupbearer prayed for four months. Then, one spring day, with the wine cup in his hand and fear in his heart, he let the king see his sorrow.

What followed was one of the great building projects of history: a broken wall rebuilt in fifty-two days, by priests and goldsmiths and perfume-makers and daughters, working with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other — while their enemies mocked, threatened, plotted, lied and hired false prophets to stop them.

This is the story of Nehemiah, and of a man who would not come down.

The Setting

When. "In the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year" (1:1) of **Artaxerxes I**, king of Persia (465–424 B.C.). Chisleu is November–December of **446 B.C.** Four months later, in **"the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king"** (2:1) — March–April of **445 B.C.** — Nehemiah stood before the king.

Artaxerxes was the son of **Xerxes**, the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther (story 35). Nehemiah served in the same palace at Shushan where Esther had been queen about thirty years earlier.

Where the Jews were. About ninety years had passed since Cyrus allowed the Jews to return (538 B.C.). The temple had been rebuilt by 516 B.C. (Ezra 6:15). In 458 B.C., in Artaxerxes' seventh year, the scribe **Ezra** had led another group home to teach the Law (Ezra 7). But Jerusalem was still a small, poor, largely empty city with broken walls.

Why the news hurt so much. In the ancient world a city without walls was not really a city. It was open to raiders, robbers and enemy armies; its people could not trade safely or live securely. Some years before Nehemiah, the Jews had tried to rebuild the wall. Their neighbours wrote to Artaxerxes accusing them of planning rebellion, and the king ordered the work stopped. The enemies **"made them to cease by force and power"** (Ezra 4:23). That may be the very damage Hanani was reporting — fresh ruin, not just the old ruin left by Nebuchadnezzar 140 years before. If so, Nehemiah was about to ask the king to reverse his own order. But notice what that same order said: the city must not be built **"until another commandment shall be given from me"** (Ezra 4:21). The king had left the door open.

Where. Shushan the palace (Susa), in Persia; then **Jerusalem**, about 900 miles away.

Who.

- **Nehemiah**, son of Hachaliah, the king's cupbearer, later governor of Judah.
- **Hanani**, his brother (7:2), who brought the news.
- **Artaxerxes I**, king of Persia, and the queen.
- **Sanballat the Horonite**, governor of Samaria.
- **Tobiah the Ammonite**, his ally.
- **Geshem (Gashmu) the Arabian**, an Arab chieftain.
- **Eliashib the high priest** and the builders of the wall.
- **Shemaiah** and **Noadiah**, hired prophets.

Outside witnesses. Two of Nehemiah's enemies appear in documents outside the Bible:

- **Sanballat**: Aramaic letters written in 407 B.C. by the Jewish community at Elephantine in Egypt mention **"Delaiah and Shelemiah the sons of Sanballat governor of Samaria."**
- **Geshem**: a silver bowl found at Tell el-Maskhuta in Egypt is inscribed **"Qaynu son of Gashmu, king of Qedar"** — Qedar being a powerful Arab kingdom.

The men who tried to stop Nehemiah were real, powerful officials, not villains invented for a story.

The administration. The **Mosaic Law**, after the return from exile, in **"the times of the Gentiles"** (Luke 21:24). Judah was a small province of the Persian empire.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Bad News from Jerusalem

> **Nehemiah 1:1** *The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace,*

> **Nehemiah 1:2** *That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.*
>
> **Nehemiah 1:3** *And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.*

"The words of Nehemiah." The book is largely Nehemiah's own memoir, written in the first person: *I*, *me*, *my God*. *Nehemiah* means **"Yah comforts"** or *the LORD has comforted*, from the Hebrew *nacham*. He would become God's comfort to a broken city.

"I asked them." Nehemiah did not wait for news; he went looking for it. He had a comfortable life in a palace, but his heart was with his people.

"In great affliction and reproach." *Reproach* (*cherpah*) means disgrace, shame. The city of the great King was a laughing-stock among the nations. That shame touched God's name.

> **Nehemiah 1:4** *And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,*

"I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed." Four responses, piled up with *and*. Nehemiah did not shrug. He did not say, *That's far away*. He felt it. And then he did the first and most important thing: he took it to God.

"Before the God of heaven." This title, *the God of heaven*, appears often in Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel. In a world full of local gods and national gods, it declared that Israel's God rules over all.

A Prayer Built on Scripture

> **Nehemiah 1:5** *And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments:*
>
> **Nehemiah 1:6** *Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.*

Nehemiah's prayer is a model. Look at its parts.

First, who God is. "The great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy." *Terrible* means *awesome*, to be feared and reverenced. *Mercy* is *chesed*, God's loyal, covenant love. He begins not with his problem, but with his God.

Second, confession. "Both I and my father's house have sinned." He did not say *they* sinned; he said *we*. He did not stand outside his people's failures pointing the finger. **"We have dealt very corruptly against thee"** (1:7).

> **Nehemiah 1:8** *Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:*
>
> **Nehemiah 1:9** *But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.*

Third, God's own word. "Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses." Nehemiah does not quote one verse word for word; he gathers what God said through Moses in passages such as Leviticus 26:33 and Deuteronomy 30:1-4 — *if you sin, I will scatter you; if you return, I will gather you* — and also Deuteronomy 12:5, *the place which the LORD your God shall choose … to put his name there.* He held God to His own promise. That is not presumption; it is faith. God wants to be taken at His word.

> **Nehemiah 1:10** *Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand.*
> **Nehemiah 1:11** *O LORD, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.*

Fourth, a specific request. "Prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." *This man* was the king. To God, the emperor of Persia was just *this man*.

"For I was the king's cupbearer." Only now, at the end of the prayer, does Nehemiah tell us his job — and why it mattered. A **cupbearer** served the king his wine and, in many courts, tasted it first to guard against poison. He had to be absolutely trustworthy, and he was often one of the king's closest advisers. The Greek historian Herodotus mentions that the office of cupbearer to the Persian king was **"no small honour"** (*Histories* 3.34). Nehemiah was not a servant in the kitchen; he was a man with the king's ear.

The King's Question

Four months passed, from Chisleu to Nisan. Nehemiah kept praying (**"day and night,"** 1:6) and waiting for the right moment.

> **Nehemiah 2:1** *And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence.*
> **Nehemiah 2:2** *Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid,*

"I had not been beforetime sad in his presence." In Persian court life, showing sadness before the king was dangerous: it could be taken as disrespect or as a sign of disloyalty. Servants were expected to be cheerful in the royal presence (compare Esther 4:2, where no one in sackcloth could even enter the king's gate).

"Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart." The king noticed. That he cared enough to ask says something about the trust between them.

"Then I was very sore afraid." Nehemiah's moment had come, and he was terrified. Courage does not mean feeling no fear.

> **Nehemiah 2:3** *And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?*

"The place of my fathers' sepulchres." Wisely, Nehemiah did not say *Jerusalem* — a name the king knew from the accusations of rebellion (Ezra 4:12-16). He spoke of the tombs of his ancestors, which every Persian would understand and respect.

> **Nehemiah 2:4** *Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven.*

"So I prayed to the God of heaven." Between the king's question and his own answer, there was no time to kneel or fast or go away. Nehemiah prayed in an instant, silently, standing before the king. This has been called an *arrow prayer* — short, swift, aimed straight at heaven. It came out of four months of long prayer. A man who has been talking with God for months can speak to Him in a second.

> **Nehemiah 2:5** *And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it.*
>
> **Nehemiah 2:6** *And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.*

"(The queen also sitting by him.)" A small detail that tells us this was a private occasion, not a public audience. Scripture does not say who the queen was or whether her presence helped.

"I set him a time." Nehemiah had planned it all during the four months: how long, what he needed, whom he needed letters for. Prayer and planning go together.

> **Nehemiah 2:7** *Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah;*
>
> **Nehemiah 2:8** *And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.*

"Asaph the keeper of the king's forest." The word for *forest* is *pardes*, a Persian word for a walled park or royal garden. It is the word that came into Greek as *paradeisos* — our *paradise*. Nehemiah asked for timber from the king's own park for the gates of the city and the fortress by the temple.

"According to the good hand of my God upon me." This is the heart of Nehemiah's faith. He did not credit his own cleverness, or the king's kindness. It was *the good hand of my God*. Ezra uses the same phrase (Ezra 7:6, 9; 8:18). This is a figure of speech: God, who is spirit, is spoken of as having a hand, to make His power and care easy to picture.

The king gave him more than he asked: **"captains of the army and horsemen"** for the journey (2:9). The same king who had stopped the wall years before now sent his own cupbearer to build it.

> **Nehemiah 2:10** *When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.*

"It grieved them exceedingly." The literal Hebrew is *it was evil to them, a great evil.* Someone had come **"to seek the welfare of the children of Israel,"** and that alone was enough to make them enemies. Sanballat was governor of Samaria to the north. *Horonite* probably means he was from Beth-horon,

northwest of Jerusalem. Tobiah, *the servant*, was probably an official, perhaps of the Persian administration, and *the Ammonite* by origin. Ammonites were barred from the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:3; compare Nehemiah 13:1-3). Together they controlled the region around Judah, and a strong Jerusalem threatened their power.

The Night Ride

> **Nehemiah 2:11** *So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.*
>
> **Nehemiah 2:12** *And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man 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 upon.*

"Was there three days." He rested, observed and listened before doing anything.

"Neither told I any man." He kept his plans to himself until he knew exactly what had to be done. Enemies were watching, and even some of the Jews' own nobles had ties to Tobiah (6:17-18).

"What my God had put in my heart to do." The plan to rebuild was not Nehemiah's idea alone. God had put it in his heart.

> **Nehemiah 2:13** *And I went out by night 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.*
>
> **Nehemiah 2:14** *Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass.*
>
> **Nehemiah 2:15** *Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned.*

The valley gate, the dragon well, the dung port, the fountain gate, the king's pool. Nehemiah rode around the southern part of the city by moonlight. The *dung port* was the gate through which rubbish was carried out to the valley of Hinnom. The *fountain gate* was near the spring of Gihon and the pool of Siloam. In places, the rubble was so heavy that **"there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass,"** and he had to go on foot along the brook Kidron.

Archaeologists in the City of David — the oldest part of Jerusalem, on the ridge south of the temple mount — have found sections of wall that the excavator Eilat Mazar dated to Nehemiah's time. Other archaeologists date them differently, and the question is still debated.

Let Us Rise Up and Build

> **Nehemiah 2:17** *Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.*
>
> **Nehemiah 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.*

"Ye see the distress that we are in." *We* — Nehemiah, who had lived in a palace, now spoke as one of them.

“That we be no more a reproach.” The goal was not only safety; it was honour. God’s city should not be a disgrace.

“Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me.” He gave his testimony: what God had done in Persia. And he told them the king’s words. God’s hand and the king’s authority were both behind the work.

“Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.” *Strengthened their hands* is an idiom meaning *they took courage, they committed themselves.*

> **Nehemiah 2:19** *But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?*
>
> **Nehemiah 2:20** *Then answered I them, and said unto them, 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.*

The enemies’ first weapon: **mockery**, and a threatening question: **“will ye rebel against the king?”**

“The God of heaven, he will prosper us.” Nehemiah did not answer by waving the king’s letters. He answered with God.

“Ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.” Three words, three things they lacked: no share in the land, no legal claim, no place in its history or worship.

Everyone on the Wall

Nehemiah 3 is a long list of names, and many readers skip it. Do not. It is one of the most encouraging chapters in the Bible.

> **Nehemiah 3:1** *Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they builded the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel.*

“Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests.” The high priest himself led the way, with his own hands, at the **sheep gate**, where animals for sacrifice were brought into the city near the temple. And they **“sanctified it”** — dedicated the work to God.

The chapter then goes around the whole city, gate by gate, about forty sections in all, naming who built each one:

- **Priests** and **Levites** (3:1, 17, 22, 28).
- **Men of Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah** and other towns (3:2, 5, 7).
- **Goldsmiths** and **apothecaries** (perfume-makers) and **merchants** (3:8, 32) — men who worked with fine things now hauling stone.
- **Rulers** of districts of Jerusalem (3:9, 12, 14-19).
- **“Shallum … the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, he and his daughters”** (3:12). Women built the wall too.
- **Baruch the son of Zabbai,** who **“earnestly repaired”** his section (3:20) — the only builder singled out for his zeal.

- Many who built **"over against his house"** (3:10, 23, 28-30) — each man repairing the part of the wall nearest his own home.

"Next unto him … after him … next unto them." These phrases repeat over and over through the chapter. No one built the whole wall. Everyone built a part, joined to the part next to it. The wall went up because each person did his share.

And one sour note:

> **Nehemiah 3:5** *And next unto them the Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their LORD.*

"Their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord." An idiom from farming: to *put one's neck* under the yoke is to take up the load like an ox. The common people of Tekoa worked — in fact, they built a second section too (3:27) — but their nobles were too proud to bend their necks. God had their names written down: not by name, but by their absence.

Mockery

> **Nehemiah 4:1** *But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews.*
>
> **Nehemiah 4:2** *And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?*
>
> **Nehemiah 4:3** *Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.*

"What do these feeble Jews?" Five questions in a row — *Will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?* These are **rhetorical questions** (erotesis), asked not for answers but to sneer. And Sanballat said them **"before his brethren and the army of Samaria"** — a public show, with soldiers listening.

"Will they revive the stones … which are burned?" Limestone that has been through a great fire becomes cracked and crumbly. Sanballat meant: *you are building with garbage.*

"If a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall." Tobiah's joke: the wall is so flimsy that a fox — or a jackal — walking along the top would knock it over. This is **sarcasm**, mockery that says the opposite of what a thing is meant to be. (The word *shu'al* can mean either fox or jackal.)

> **Nehemiah 4:4** *Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity:*
>
> **Nehemiah 4:5** *And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders.*

"Hear, O our God; for we are despised." Nehemiah did not answer the mockers. He talked to God about them. This prayer asks God to turn their reproach back on them — an **imprecatory** prayer, like many in the Psalms, asking God to bring justice on those who oppose His work. Nehemiah did not take revenge; he asked God to judge. Under grace, believers are told: **"Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not"** (Romans 12:14), and **"Avenge not yourselves … for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord"** (Romans 12:19). Nehemiah left it in God's hands; believers today leave it there and pray for their enemies.

> **Nehemiah 4:6** *So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.*

"For the people had a mind to work." Literally, *the people had a heart to work*. The best answer to mockery was more work. In a short time the wall was joined all the way around to half its height.

Prayer and a Watch

When mockery failed, the enemies turned to force. Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabians, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod — enemies on every side, north, east, south and west — **"conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it"** (4:7-8).

> **Nehemiah 4:9** *Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.*

"Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch." One of the great verses of practical faith. They prayed — and they posted guards. They did not choose between trusting God and taking sensible action. They did both. Prayer is not an excuse for doing nothing, and action is not a replacement for prayer.

Then trouble came from within:

> **Nehemiah 4:10** *And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall.*

"The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish." The workers were exhausted. The halfway point is often the hardest place in any task: the excitement of beginning has worn off, and the end is not yet in sight. And the rubbish — the ruins of the old wall — had to be cleared before new stones could go up.

The Jews living near the enemy came again and again — **"ten times"** (4:12), a Hebrew way of saying *over and over* — with rumours: *they will attack from every side*. Fear spread.

> **Nehemiah 4:13** *Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows.*
>
> **Nehemiah 4:14** *And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the LORD, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.*

"After their families." Nehemiah stationed whole families together. Each man would be defending his own wife and children.

"Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible." The cure for fear is remembering how great God is. The enemies were large; God was larger.

"And fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses." Faith in God and courage to defend one's family belong together.

When the enemies learned their plot was known, they backed off: **"God had brought their counsel to nought"** (4:15).

The Trowel and the Sword

> **Nehemiah 4:17** *They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon.*
>
> **Nehemiah 4:18** *For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me.*

"With one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon." The burden-bearers carried loads with one hand and a weapon with the other. The builders, who needed both hands, wore their swords at their sides. This is an **antithesis**: *one hand … the other hand*. It has become a picture for every age of God's people — building and guarding at the same time.

"He that sounded the trumpet was by me." The wall was long and the workers spread out. The trumpeter stayed next to Nehemiah, ready to sound the alarm.

> **Nehemiah 4:20** *In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us.*

"Our God shall fight for us." The same promise Moses gave at the Red Sea (**"The LORD shall fight for you,"** Exodus 14:14; story 15). And still they held their spears.

"From the rising of the morning till the stars appeared" (4:21) they worked. At night, no one went home outside the city; everyone stayed inside as a guard. Nehemiah and his men **"put off"** their clothes only for washing (4:23). (The Hebrew of 4:23 is difficult; the KJV's rendering gives the general sense: they were always ready.)

Trouble from Within

Then came a crisis that had nothing to do with enemies outside.

> **Nehemiah 5:1** *And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews.*
>
> **Nehemiah 5:3** *Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth.*
>
> **Nehemiah 5:5** *Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards.*

Famine, high taxes and debt had crushed the poor. Some had mortgaged their fields; some had borrowed to pay **"the king's tribute"** (5:4). And some had been forced to sell their own children into slavery — **to their fellow Jews.** The rich were lending at interest to their poor brothers and taking their land and children when they could not pay.

God's Law forbade exactly this: **"If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury"** (Exodus 22:25; also Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 23:19-20).

> **Nehemiah 5:6** *And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words.*

> **Nehemiah 5:7** *Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them.*

"I was very angry." Righteous anger.

"Then I consulted with myself." But he did not act in the heat of anger. He thought first. **"Be ye angry, and sin not"** (Ephesians 4:26).

> **Nehemiah 5:8** *And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer.*
>
> **Nehemiah 5:9** *Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?*

"Will ye even sell your brethren?" Nehemiah and others had spent their own money buying Jews back from Gentile slavery, and the nobles were selling them right back into it.

"Because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies." The enemies outside were watching. Injustice inside the city would bring more shame on God's name than any broken wall.

The nobles agreed to give everything back. Nehemiah made them swear before the priests, and then **"shook my lap"** — he shook out the folds of his robe, where people carried things — and said, *So may God shake out every man who does not keep this promise* (5:12-13). A dramatic picture, a kind of acted-out curse. And **"all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the LORD."**

A Governor Who Would Not Take

> **Nehemiah 5:14** *Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor.*
>
> **Nehemiah 5:15** *But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God.*

"Have not eaten the bread of the governor." As governor, Nehemiah had the right to a food allowance paid by the people. For **twelve years** he refused it.

"Because of the fear of God." That was his reason. Former governors had squeezed the people; Nehemiah would not.

Instead, he fed **150** Jews and officials at his own table every day, plus visitors from other nations: **"one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls"** daily, and wine every ten days (5:17-18) — all from his own purse. He did not buy any land for himself (5:16). He was there to serve, not to profit.

> **Nehemiah 5:19** *Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.*

"Think upon me, my God, for good." Nehemiah's short prayers run all through the book (5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). He did not seek the people's reward. He looked to God's.

Come Down to Ono

With the wall almost finished, the enemies tried a new tactic: **trickery.**

> **Nehemiah 6:2** *That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief.*
>
> **Nehemiah 6:3** *And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?*

"The plain of Ono." Some twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem, near Lod — far from Nehemiah's men and the wall, toward Sanballat's territory. A friendly-sounding meeting. **"But they thought to do me mischief."**

"I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down." One of the great sentences of Scripture. Nehemiah did not argue about whether they meant him harm. He simply said: *my work is too important to leave.* Distraction is one of the enemy's best tools; Nehemiah would not be distracted.

"They sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner" (6:4). The same request four times; the same answer four times.

The Open Letter

> **Nehemiah 6:5** *Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand;*
>
> **Nehemiah 6:6** *Wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words.*
>
> **Nehemiah 6:7** *And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together.*

"An open letter." Official letters were rolled and sealed. An *open* letter could be read by anyone who carried it — the messenger, the gatekeepers, the people in the streets. Sanballat meant it to spread. It was public slander.

"It is reported … and Gashmu saith it." The oldest trick of gossip: *people are saying*. No proof, just rumour — and an important man's name attached to make it sound true.

"That thou mayest be their king." The most dangerous charge possible in the Persian empire: rebellion against the king. It was the same charge that had stopped the wall years before (Ezra 4:12-16), and the same charge that would one day be used against Jesus (John 19:12).

> **Nehemiah 6:8** *Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.*
>
> **Nehemiah 6:9** *For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.*

"Thou feignest them out of thine own heart." A flat denial. Nehemiah did not write a long defence; he named the lie a lie.

“Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” *Their hands shall be weakened*, said the enemies. *Strengthen my hands*, prayed Nehemiah. (The words *O God* are supplied by the translators; the Hebrew simply says *And now, strengthen my hands* — but the sense of prayer is clear.)

The Hired Prophet

> **Nehemiah 6:10** *Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee.*
>
> **Nehemiah 6:11** *And I said, Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.*

“Shemaiah … who was shut up.” We are not told why Shemaiah was *shut up* (confined to his house); perhaps he was pretending to be in danger himself, or acting out a prophetic sign. He spoke in the form of a prophecy: *They are coming to kill you tonight! Hide in the temple!*

“Should such a man as I flee?” First, it would be cowardice. The governor running to hide would have collapsed the people’s courage.

“Who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life?” Second, it would be sin. Nehemiah was not a priest. God’s Law said, **“the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death”** (Numbers 18:7) — only priests could enter the holy place. King Uzziah had been struck with leprosy for doing it (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Shemaiah’s “prophecy” contradicted God’s written Word, and that was how Nehemiah knew it was false.

> **Nehemiah 6:12** *And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.*
>
> **Nehemiah 6:13** *Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me.*

“I perceived that God had not sent him.” A message that leads you to disobey God’s Word does not come from God, no matter how spiritual it sounds. Shemaiah was hired by Tobiah and Sanballat. So was **“the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets”** (6:14). The goal was to make Nehemiah **“afraid, and do so, and sin”** — and then to destroy his reputation.

Finished

> **Nehemiah 6:15** *So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.*
>
> **Nehemiah 6:16** *And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.*

“In fifty and two days.” Elul is August–September. From early August to mid-September of 445 B.C., in fifty-two days, the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt. (The Jewish historian Josephus says it took two years and four months, *Antiquities* 11.5.8; this series follows Scripture.) Much of the old foundation was still there, many hands worked at once, and they worked from dawn to starlight. Even so, it was astonishing.

“They were much cast down in their own eyes.” The enemies lost heart.

“For they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.” That is the point of the whole story. The people who mocked, threatened, plotted and lied knew, when it was done, that God had done it. The last enemy tactic, though, was quieter: there were nobles in Judah still sending letters to Tobiah, singing his praises to Nehemiah, and reporting Nehemiah’s words back to him (6:17-19). The work was finished; the battle for the people’s hearts was not. That story continues in the rest of the book.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

Sent from the king’s presence. Nehemiah left the palace and the king’s presence to come to a broken city, sent with the king’s authority and the king’s letters. Jesus Christ was sent by God to a broken world: **“I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me”** (John 6:38). As this series understands it, “came down from heaven” speaks of being sent from God, not of existing before birth: Jesus was born in Bethlehem, sent by God as John the Baptist was **“a man sent from God”** (John 1:6).

The comforter of Zion. *Nehemiah* means *the LORD comforts*. Isaiah prophesied of the Messiah: **“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me … to comfort all that mourn … And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations”** (Isaiah 61:1-4). Jesus read the beginning of that passage in the synagogue at Nazareth and said, **“This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears”** (Luke 4:21).

He would not come down. Nehemiah’s enemies cried, *Come down!* and he answered, *I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down.* At the cross, the mockers cried to Jesus: **“If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross”** (Matthew 27:40), and **“let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him”** (Matthew 27:42). He did not come down. He was doing the greatest work ever done, and he finished it: **“It is finished”** (John 19:30). This parallel is this series’ observation; Scripture does not link the two passages.

Mocked as feeble. *“What do these feeble Jews?”* Jesus too was mocked as weak: **“He saved others; himself he cannot save”** (Matthew 27:42). **“For though he was crucified through weakness, yet he liveth by the power of God”** (2 Corinthians 13:4). God raised him from the dead and exalted him to His right hand in the ascension — and what looked like defeat was the work that **“was wrought of our God.”**

The commandment to build. Daniel had been told: **“from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times”** (Daniel 9:25). Many students of prophecy count those weeks of years from Artaxerxes’ decree to Nehemiah in 445 B.C., and the *troublous times* fit Nehemiah’s story well. Others count from Cyrus’s decree or from Artaxerxes’ decree to Ezra in 458 B.C. Scripture does not say which decree is meant, and this series notes the reading without settling it.

To the Grace Administration

Building together. Nehemiah’s wall went up because everyone built his part, joined to the next. The church is built the same way: **“Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God … In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord”** (Ephesians 2:19, 21). **“For we are labourers**

together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9). Each believer is a member with a part to supply: **"the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth"** (Ephesians 4:16).

Prayer and action. "We made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch." Paul wrote: **"Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving"** (Colossians 4:2).

The trowel and the sword. The believer builds and guards at the same time. **"Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil"** (Ephesians 6:11), including **"the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"** (Ephesians 6:17). Our weapons are not swords of iron: **"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God"** (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Do not come down. The enemy's favourite weapon is distraction. **"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord"** (1 Corinthians 15:58). **"And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not"** (Galatians 6:9).

Test every message by the Word. Nehemiah knew Shemaiah was false because his message contradicted God's Law. **"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world"** (1 John 4:1).

Leaders who serve, not take. Nehemiah refused the governor's allowance. Paul did the same: **"For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God"** (1 Thessalonians 2:9).

Justice among believers. Nehemiah's harshest words were for those who oppressed their own brothers. **"As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith"** (Galatians 6:10).

To the Topic of Leadership

- **A leader cares** — he weeps over what others ignore.
- **A leader prays first** — and keeps praying.
- **A leader plans** — "I set him a time."
- **A leader looks before he speaks** — the night ride.
- **A leader says "we"** — in confession and in work.
- **A leader works alongside** — "neither I, nor my brethren."
- **A leader answers fear with God's greatness** — "remember the Lord."
- **A leader confronts injustice** — even among his own people.
- **A leader does not profit from his position.**
- **A leader is not distracted** — "I cannot come down."
- **A leader gives God the glory** — "the good hand of my God."

To the Topic of Opposition

- **Grief** — they were angry that anyone helped God's people (2:10).
- **Mockery** — "What do these feeble Jews?" (4:2).
- **Threats** — conspiracy to attack (4:8).

- **Discouragement** — "the strength of the bearers … is decayed" (4:10).
- **Fear by rumour** — "ten times" (4:12).
- **Trouble within** — injustice among the people (ch. 5).
- **Distraction** — "Come, let us meet together" (6:2).
- **Slander** — the open letter (6:5-7).
- **False religion** — the hired prophet (6:10-13).
- **Divided loyalty** — nobles in league with the enemy (6:17-19).

The Main Takeaway

When Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes king of Persia, heard in 446 B.C. that the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates burned, he wept, fasted and prayed for four months, confessing his people's sin and holding God to His promise to Moses; when the king asked why his face was sad, "I prayed to the God of heaven" and asked to be sent to rebuild the city, and the king granted it "according to the good hand of my God upon me"; in Jerusalem he surveyed the ruins by night and called the people to "rise up and build"; priests, goldsmiths, perfume-makers, rulers and daughters each repaired a section beside the next; when Sanballat and Tobiah mocked, "the people had a mind to work"; when they threatened, "we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch," working with one hand and holding a weapon in the other; when the poor were oppressed by their own brothers, Nehemiah made the nobles restore what they had taken and refused his own governor's allowance for twelve years; when his enemies tried to lure him away he answered, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down," and when they tried slander and a hired prophet he would neither fear nor sin; the wall was finished in fifty-two days, and even his enemies "perceived that this work was wrought of our God." God's work is done by people who pray and work together, who will not be stopped by mockery, fear or distraction — and when it is finished, the glory is His.

- **Care about what God cares about.**
- **Pray first, pray always** — and plan.
- **Pray and set a watch** — faith and action together.
- **Everyone has a part of the wall.**
- **Answer fear by remembering the Lord.**
- **Do not come down** — stay at the work.
- **Test every voice by God's Word.**
- **Give God the glory.**

For Our Learning — The People

- **Nehemiah.** "Yah comforts." Son of Hachaliah; cupbearer to Artaxerxes; governor of Judah; rebuilt the wall.
- **Hanani.** Nehemiah's brother, who brought the news (1:2; 7:2).
- **Artaxerxes I.** King of Persia (465–424 B.C.), son of Xerxes.
- **The queen.** Sitting by the king when Nehemiah made his request (2:6).
- **Asaph.** Keeper of the king's forest (2:8).

- **Sanballat the Horonite.** Governor of Samaria; chief enemy of the work.
- **Tobiah the Ammonite.** Official, ally of Sanballat; had marriage ties with nobles of Judah (6:18).
- **Geshem (Gashmu) the Arabian.** Arab chieftain, likely ruler of Qedar.
- **Eliashib.** High priest who began the building at the sheep gate.
- **Shallum and his daughters.** Repaired a section together (3:12).
- **Baruch the son of Zabbai.** "Earnestly repaired" his section (3:20).
- **The nobles of Tekoa.** Would not put their necks to the work (3:5).
- **Shemaiah the son of Delaiah.** Hired to prophesy falsely (6:10-13).
- **Noadiah.** A prophetess who tried to make Nehemiah afraid (6:14).

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **The cupbearer** — trusted royal official who served and tasted the king's wine.
- **No sadness in the king's presence.**
- **Royal letters** for safe passage and supplies.
- **The king's park (pardes)** — a royal forest, origin of the word "paradise."
- **City walls and gates** — necessary for safety, trade and honour.
- **Gates by function** — sheep gate, fish gate, dung gate, fountain gate.
- **Building "over against his house."**
- **Burned limestone** — cracked and weakened by fire.
- **Trumpet signals** in time of danger.
- **Mortgaging land and selling children** for debt.
- **Usury forbidden** between Israelites (Exodus 22:25).
- **The governor's food allowance.**
- **Shaking the lap** — an acted-out oath.
- **Sealed and open letters** — an open letter was meant to be read by all.
- **Only priests may enter the holy place** (Numbers 18:7).

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Polysyndeton (many ands)** — "I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed" (1:4).
- **Anthropomorphism (human terms for God)** — "the good hand of my God upon me" (2:8, 18); "let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open" (1:6).
- **Idiom** — "they strengthened their hands" (2:18), they took courage; "strengthen my hands" (6:9).
- **Idiom** — "their nobles put not their necks to the work" (3:5), would not take up the yoke.
- **Erotesis (rhetorical questions)** — "What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves?" (4:2).

- **Sarcasm** — “if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall” (4:3).
- **Idiom** — “the people had a mind to work” (4:6), literally “a heart.”
- **Idiom** — “ten times” (4:12), meaning again and again.
- **Antithesis (contrast)** — “with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon” (4:17).
- **Erotesis** — “Should such a man as I flee?” (6:11).
- **Repetition** — “next unto him … after him” throughout chapter 3.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Nehemiah was the king’s cupbearer** in Shushan.
- **He wept, fasted and prayed** when he heard of Jerusalem’s ruin.
- **His prayer confessed sin** and appealed to God’s word through Moses.
- **He prayed silently** before answering the king.
- **The king sent him** with letters, timber and an armed escort.
- **He inspected the walls by night** before telling anyone his plan.
- **Priests, craftsmen, rulers and daughters built** side by side.
- **The nobles of Tekoa would not work.**
- **The enemies mocked, threatened and conspired.**
- **The people prayed and set a watch,** working with weapons in hand.
- **Nehemiah ended the oppression of the poor** by their own brothers.
- **He did not take the governor’s allowance** for twelve years.
- **He refused to “come down”** to his enemies.
- **He refused to hide in the temple,** recognizing a hired prophet.
- **The wall was finished in fifty-two days.**
- **The enemies knew the work was of God.**

God’s Will and Intent

- **God cares about the reproach of His people and His name.**
- **God hears prayer** — long prayer and arrow prayer.
- **God turns the hearts of kings** to accomplish His purpose.
- **God uses every member** — no part of the wall is too small.
- **God fights for His people,** and calls them to watch.
- **God wants justice and mercy among His people.**
- **God’s Word is the test of every message.**
- **God finishes what He begins.**
- **God sent His Son, Jesus Christ,** who would not come down from the cross, who finished the work God gave him, and whom God raised from the dead and exalted to His right hand.