

NEHEMIAH 2 : 11 – 20

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Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction. We have seen how Nehemiah secured the official support of king Artaxerxes of Persia to go and rebuild the city (the wall) of Jerusalem. There he rides off into the sunset as the imperial ambassador to Judah, cavalry and all, a man with a mission! Nehemiah is going to undertake what others before him – people of the calibre of a Zerubabel, a Jeshua, even an Ezra – were not able to do. What will come of Nehemiah's attempt to succeed where others have failed?

As you see him ride from Susa to Judah, you cannot help but admire the man's courage and determination, but at the same time you just know that he is in for a rough ride! Word spreads fast, also in the ancient East, and we read last week in chapter 2:10 that Sanballat the Horonite, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah the Ammonite official - also men with imperial backing – were greatly disturbed at the news of someone coming to help the Jewish remnant. Later (verse 19) we read of another prominent fellow, Geshem the Arab. So the Samaritans, the Ammonites, and the Arabs, the entire non-Jewish population, will be mobilized against Nehemiah. You know that they will oppose Nehemiah at every step of the way. And you also know that the Jews themselves

were a demoralized and indecisive people, easily discouraged. From a human angle, then, also this mission is doomed to fail. Nehemiah has many enemies and few allies.

The work of church building never progresses via “easy street.” We often have to cope with external opposition and internal fear or even complacency. Not only is it very difficult to deal with outside animosity, but it is perhaps even harder to motivate your own people. Nehemiah has his work cut out for him, and the question is: will he rise to the occasion?

The passage which we read this morning tells us about Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem. Undoubtedly, during the journey Nehemiah has been pondering and praying (for he is – as we have seen – a man of prayer) about the correct manner of approach. How do I tackle this immense task? And then we do not read how good a diplomat or how good a strategist Nehemiah is. The Bible is not a book about human abilities, but it tells us about God's work through the service of weak and humble people. The Bible doesn't tell you how good you are, but how wonderful God is in Christ Jesus! We read how the Lord uses and involves His children, and from that we can learn for our own life and work!

I summarize the text, then, as follows:

The Lord blesses Nehemiah in his proper preparation for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem:

- 1. the situation carefully surveyed.**
- 2. the solution clearly stated.**
- 3. the sarcasm calmly silenced.**

1. Okay, the first question is: how will Nehemiah tackle this task of rebuilding Jerusalem and succeed where others have failed? Surely his arrival in Jerusalem will not have gone unnoticed – cavalry and all, that is, if they stayed with him all the way – and everyone is probably waiting with great anticipation to see how this new man will go about things. That is how it goes when there is a “new kid on the block,” so

to speak. The idealists will have said: this is the man we need! The cynics will have replied: agh, we've seen it, been there, tried it, it's not going to work. People have different expectations, depending on character, insight, and, more importantly, faith.

How do you approach such a challenge? There seem to be two main ways to approach a delicate situation such as this one. First, seize the opportunity at once, step right in with both feet, all guns blazing. Kind of like "the-bull-in-the-china-shop" approach. That will catch the attention, and convince everyone that Nehemiah means business! But such an approach usually has as side-effect that much unnecessary damage is done, people are immediately alienated, and the resistance rises from the beginning. The bull in the china shop usually destroys more than that it really achieves anything.

Second, one can be too careful, let the time of initial anticipation pass by doing very little. Nehemiah could take a very laid-back, a rather hesitant approach by first seeking to win the favour of all the people in the area. But that approach hardly seems adequate. It is always important to seize the moment, to get on with God's business. You cannot vacillate and delay when such an important task must be undertaken!

It is remarkable that Nehemiah, guided by the Spirit of the Lord, really does neither of the two. He writes simply in verses 11 and 12, "I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there for three days, I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me, except the one I was riding on." This, again, shows us something about the man Nehemiah and about the work of church building.

Nehemiah does not tell us anything about the journey to Jerusalem. It apparently went as planned. And when he arrives there, he quietly and unassumingly stays in Jerusalem for three days. Most likely this time is used to rest from the arduous journey. But even more important: during this time Nehemiah quietly takes stock of the situation in Jerusalem. There is no parade, no reception, no fuss, just low-key gathering of information.

Then follows (verse 13-16) a nightly inspection of the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah takes great pain to tell us that this is a very secret and unobtrusive reconnaissance. He takes only a few men and only one horse or mule. If a large group of cavalry left the city by day to examine the walls, everyone would have known about it. But nobody may know what he is doing! We read even in verse 16, "The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or the nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work."

Why this extreme caution and secrecy? Is this, as one commentator suggests, evidence of the careful strategist that Nehemiah was? No, this is in that situation simply a display of great wisdom. Nehemiah knows that every action he undertakes will be carefully scrutinized by everyone, and that immediate counter-actions will be taken, no matter what he does. Every act solicits a reaction; every reformation, so to speak, unleashes a counter-reformation. Not that Nehemiah is afraid of any measures against him and his plans, but he does not want to stir up anything unnecessarily. Not at this point, anyway. A church leader must be careful not to aggravate anyone without there being a real need for this.

Besides, Nehemiah can now without any outside influence or unwanted advice gather his own information and make up his own mind regarding the real situation. He needs to see for himself and by himself what the real state of Jerusalem is! The situation must indeed be carefully surveyed without any interference from anyone. He needs to make his own assessment of the situation in and around Jerusalem.

Nehemiah also takes great pain to inform us how thorough the investigation is. He doesn't take a quick, superficial look. No, he gets very close to the wall, and he traces the wall in its entirety! That is to say, he starts at the "Valley Gate", goes around the city and re-enters via the Valley Gate. Now I am not going to bother you with all kinds of descriptions here of the various places which Nehemiah visits. But please note two elements. Nehemiah does not examine the wall in the north of the city, because that part was totally broken down and never repaired. Attacks always came from the north, and therefore that part of

the city wall no longer existed. No sense in looking at a wall that isn't there. Secondly, at one point there is so much debris and rubble that Nehemiah has to dismount (verse 14) and walk his animal carefully through the entire mess. This indeed shows you how bad the situation really was! The overall, clear conclusion is: whatever is left of the wall is in shambles and all the (wooden) gates are burned. It truly is a terrible and sad situation!

What a contrast with what we sang from Psalm 48. There Jerusalem is portrayed as a fortress, a city with gates, towers, and crenels; a veritable citadel of which every Israelite would be proud; a place where God dwelt and refuge was always to be found! Nothing is left of this former glory, and the aura of peace and hope which surrounded Zion is totally gone. Nehemiah could not sing that psalm after this nightly inspection. Imagine him coming back to his place of lodging, just before the break of dawn, tired and weary, and now even more discouraged and disgusted at the state of Jerusalem: one hundred years after the exile, and the place still is a mess. The Israelites have done little or nothing to rebuild the walls of the great city of God!

Getting back to the secret and extensive nature of this nightly survey, we can say that Nehemiah in one night gained first-hand knowledge of the real and true situation. He certainly has a hands-on approach. Effective leadership depends on accurate, up-to-date information! I once heard it said: the only *reformed* decision is an *informed* decision. To take proper measures, you have to have exact data. Leadership must be in touch with reality, or it becomes a farce. You cannot offer any possible solution to a problem if you do not know the extent and nature of the problem!

Nehemiah went out to see for himself. He did not ask the Jews. Neither did he first consult the officials. They could have told him many things, but would they have told the truth? Everyone has his own view on the matter. The one may make things look worse than they are; the other may downplay the real extent of the damage. You cannot get a proper picture by relying on the observations of others only. Perhaps many people were so used to the mess that they did not even see anymore how bad it really was. Others perhaps knew it was bad, but

may have felt powerless to change anything. And how would all these people react when an uninformed stranger comes to tell them what to do?

We see here indeed the Lord's guidance in Nehemiah's approach. The Lord knows our human nature so well – how we react, how difficult it is to convince us. Later it was said of the Lord Jesus that He knew what was in man, and therefore did not entrust Himself to them. Christ came to see for Himself! He made His own conclusions from what He observed. And then things are often not what they are believed to be! Nehemiah is led to follow a similar course: get the facts, true and clear, and *then* approach the people!

Again we can learn something from this. How often do we make decisions or suggest solutions without having properly researched the matter? Whenever there is a discussion or controversy, we immediately tend to choose a side without having accurate knowledge of the underlying issues. Often we hardly bother to consider the other side's reasoning, let alone to make an attempt to gather personal information about the real facts. Our minds are made up even before the discussion starts. Little do we understand that every situation needs to be carefully surveyed as to the exact cause and extent before we can suggest and discuss workable solutions.

2. When Nehemiah has thus carefully surveyed the situation, he also dares to take action. It says in verse 17: "Then I said to them (the Jews with their leaders and officials), 'You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire.'" I imagine that Nehemiah calls a meeting of the leaders and people of Israel, perhaps that same day already. Perhaps he told them of his nocturnal inspection tour. But he also appeals to their own knowledge: *you* see the trouble we are in! It's not that they don't know. Everyone can see the sad state of Jerusalem. Not everyone looks at it with the same vision perhaps, but all can verify what Nehemiah reports: Jerusalem in ruins, the gates burned. The walls obviously need

rebuilding and proper gates need to be installed. That's the first requirement to bring Jerusalem back to its proper state!

I find it important to note that Nehemiah immediately involves, shall we say, the whole congregation. He may have taken the nightly tour alone, but the rebuilding of Jerusalem is the task of all the people – clergy and laity included, if I may use those terms. This is important: church-building is not a one-man show. It requires firm and clear leadership, yes, but it is the duty of everyone! Everyone here has the task to participate fully in the building of Christ's church, in whatever way possible, with whatever gifts and means God provides!

I said: leadership is important. We must have office bearers who can take charge, motivate and stimulate, but they cannot do it alone! That was never God's intent. We are all to be living (= functioning) members of the church of Christ, and each one has a task and place in this respect. We will see further in this book how Nehemiah arranges things so that every family is involved in the work of rebuilding Jerusalem. Church building is a congregational effort!

Therefore, Nehemiah makes a simple, yet stirring appeal (verse 17b): "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." What is a city without walls? Is it not a matter of disgrace, deep shame, that we are currently in such a position? Come, let us rebuild! Nehemiah makes it very clear that he is not going to do the work by himself. He can not and will not. They all have to do it, together.

Yes, the solution is clearly stated. If everyone closes ranks and joins hands, the city can be rebuilt, but then there must be unity of endeavour, and total participation. And no one can say to Nehemiah: "Excuse me, you just got here; you do not know how bad it is. How dare you tell us what to do?" Nehemiah has all the facts. He knows the situation and they know the situation, and in that understanding a solution can be sought.

Now Nehemiah does not leave it at that. It is precisely at this point that he tells everyone of his *special mission*. Verse 18: "I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said

to me." Yes, Nehemiah has saved the best for last: the grace of God and the promise of the king!

For at this point there may have been some objections. Come, let us rebuild? Wait a minute, sir Nehemiah, we have tried this before, you know. Been there, tried it, failed miserably. We tried it under Zerubbabel when we first came. Later we tried it again when Ezra came. It was not a success at all. Why run into another brick wall? You can say: come let us build, but that's easy talking. We have tried all this before and failed. It simply cannot be done! You don't know what you are up against. Get real!

Then Nehemiah raises the matter to where it really belongs: a spiritual level of faith! Church building is not a human effort, dependent on the good favour of people around us, or of secular governments. Church building is done in faith, and stands under the sovereign grace of God! If you do not believe this and are not prepared to work under these terms, then, indeed, forget about it. But does this not change the whole picture? Nehemiah tells the leaders and the people what happened in Susa, how the Lord gave him an opportunity to seek the king's favour and how the king responded. So this time it will be different. Now success is assured. The Lord has set out to rebuild His city, and who can stop this divine effort?

The real solution does not lie in human good-will, or the efforts of the Jews. It all depends on the grace and blessing of God! That grace is promised, that blessing is guaranteed. Nehemiah appeals to the faith of the remnant of Israel. Let them believe God's promises. Let them look forward to the restoration of the city of David in the expectation of the Messiah, the great Son of David. If church building were only a human effort, indeed, forget it. But we confess that the Son of God gathers, defends and preserves a church chosen to everlasting life, and we are nothing more than co-workers with Christ!

Do we today realize that this is all the more true? In all our activities as church, as office bearers and as other members, we are not doing our thing; we are involved in God's work! Do you see yourself as a co-worker with Christ? When you involve yourself in all the activities of the church today, in maintaining the ministry and the schools, in

participating in the communion of saints, in evangelism and mission work – in all these things that demand so much time, energy, and much money, do you involve yourselves in your own pet project, the building of your own little monument, or do you busy yourselves with the work of the Lord Jesus Christ to which we all are called? Do you rejoice in this that you are a co-worker of Christ, directly involved in the furthering of the kingdom of God, in your work, in our family, in all that you do?

Never will the church say: forget it, been there, done it, it's all useless. Even under the greatest adversity and against the most severe opposition we shall continue to build, expecting the Son of God to appear on the clouds of heaven. We all need this perspective on the church gathering work of Christ. Office bearers cannot do it alone; they need the prayerful and active support of the entire congregation. They need to motivate the congregation with the Gospel: come, let us build together, for the gracious hand of the Lord is indeed upon us. No cynicism, no unfaithfulness, but working through grace with Christ.

And the wonder of the preaching of the gospel is that the people do commit themselves again. Verse 18b: "They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good work." Yes, they said: let's go to it! And they did not waste anymore time. They began. "This good work", it says. That means: this necessary, pleasing, and blessed work, commanded by God Himself. Their lives suddenly had a new purpose, their step was livelier, their strength was renewed, the atmosphere was positive and hopeful. That is what the Gospel does: it makes people alive and active; it puts them to work in faith under God's grace. You know, church builders are always a committed and happy people, for they are privileged to be co-workers of the Lord Himself, doing work that is never vain but that always has lasting, eternal significance.

3. And what shall I still say then about the reaction of men like Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab (Verses 19-20)? They watch this so-manieth attempt to rebuild Jerusalem and they mock and ridicule the work. Of course! They say: nothing will come of it; merely wasted time and energy.

The enemies always mock and ridicule, using the weapon of sarcasm, and making your effort seem senseless and futile. They still do so today. Sarcasm is always the first recourse of the enemy of God. For sarcasm is often so effective. If people laugh at you and tell you that what you are doing is stupid and dumb, you'll be inclined to stop!

They even add a little threat. "Are you rebelling against the king?" Little do they know. They must have been very surprised when Nehemiah showed them his official papers of appointment and his task description! Yet, they still mocked: it will not succeed, you'll see. We'll go and appeal the matter to the king, for this is another rebellion as you have done so many times before. We stopped it before, and we'll do it again, you may as well quit right now.

Then Nehemiah calmly replies: The God of heaven (remember that honourable title from the first chapter), the sovereign God Who rules all, will give us success! And notice: we, His servants, will start rebuilding. We are servants of God; it is not our project, but His work! We are only co-workers with Christ.

Nehemiah, I said, speaks calmly. He doesn't resort to violence. He does not send the imperial cavalry to hunt down these scoffers. He simply states the case as it is. Whoever stands under God's grace does not have to lose his cool, nor be alarmed and dismayed or become fearful and defensive. Just tell them what God said. His Word is clear and powerful. That is enough to silence the sarcasm.

Speaking calmly, yet strongly, Nehemiah makes clear to these men: as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem and neither do you have any historic right to it! This is not a political statement that the Israeli government can still use today against Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian people. This is a spiritual statement! God has given this land to Israel for a purpose! From of old He has chosen Zion as His dwelling place. It is the city of David and of the Son of David, the Saviour of the world. The people who inhabited it after the exile really have no right to it; they can lay no legal claim whatsoever. Nehemiah may have been a diplomat and a statesman, but he was above all a believer in the

covenant promises of God: this land, O Israel, is your land, this city is my city, says the LORD God.

God's enemies have no place there. Therefore Nehemiah can silence the sarcasm and dismiss these men: go! Do whatever you want, but the God of the history of redemption will grant us success. If we today – now under the glorious headship of Christ – have this faith, what can we not do under God's blessing?

So they started rebuilding. It will be an arduous and difficult task, a very demanding undertaking. They will have to face many obstacles. They can never be complacent about this renewed task. The enemies will resort to all kinds of tactics to stop them. More than once these builders will become alarmed. The devil never rests. Therefore God's servants must always be vigilant. But God gives the grace, the means, and the strength for it.

They began this good work. And God brought it to completion. For God always finishes what He starts!

Still today!

We confess: yea, thou wilt finish perfectly what thou for me hast undertaken! And so we pray: may not thy works, in mercy wrought, e'er come to nought, or be forsaken! (Psalm 138:4).

AMEN.