

THE RESTORING BUILDER

Devotional Reading: [Daniel 9:4-6, 15-19](#)

Background Scripture: [Nehemiah 2:11-20](#); [13:1-22](#)

NEHEMIAH 2:11-20



Photo: Getty Images

11 So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

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.

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.

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.

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.

¹⁶ And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

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.

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.

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?

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.

KEY VERSE

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 2:17](#)

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the results of Nehemiah's nighttime excursion around Jerusalem.
2. Explain why faith in the Lord and careful planning are not necessarily contradictory.
3. Prepare a testimony of how God's hand has been at work in his or her life.

LESSON OUTLINE

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A. Upgrading the Ugly

B. Lesson Context

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A. Arriving and Waiting ([v. 11](#))

B. Diagnosing the Damage ([v. 12-16](#))

Assessing the Situation

II. Summoning the Leaders ([Nehemiah 2:17-18](#))

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B. Words of Conviction ([v. 20](#))

Conclusion

A. Good Hands

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Introduction

A. Upgrading the Ugly

In my city, I occasionally see signs that read, "We Buy Ugly Houses." Apparently the persons or companies who post these signs are interested in renovating "ugly houses" in order to sell them for a profit. The original home was undervalued because of its various flaws; the refinished product is intended to have good return on investment. The proliferation of television shows, magazine articles, and websites devoted to "flipping" houses demonstrates the wide appeal of this business.

Long ago, Nehemiah was interested in renovating an "ugly city," the once great city of Jerusalem. He wanted to address a condition of disrepair and confusion in Jerusalem, but his deeper motives and his leadership skill in so doing still have much to teach us today.

B. Lesson Context

Jerusalem had been a distinguished city, the political and spiritual capital of the nation of Israel under David's leadership ([1 Chronicles 11:4-9; 15](#)). Solomon added to its greatness by the magnificent temple that he built there ([2 Chronicles 3](#)). But following the division of the nation and the rise of ungodly kings who allowed idolatry and accompanying abhorrent practices to flourish in the land, Jerusalem became filled with

such wickedness and evil that the judgment of God fell on it. In 586 BC the Babylonians finally breached the city walls, following a siege of 18 months (see [lesson 8](#)). The city's state of massive disrepair still existed in the time of Nehemiah, some 140 years later.

Nehemiah was cupbearer to Artaxerxes ([Nehemiah 1:11](#)), king of the Persians, who ruled from 465 to 425 BC. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians in 539 BC. Cyrus, ruler of the Persians at the time, had permitted any of the Jews who desired to do so to return to their home. Approximately 50,000 did ([Ezra 2:64-65](#)), but there were those, such as members of Nehemiah's family, who chose to remain in Persia.

[Nehemiah 1](#) describes what happened in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, which would have been 445 BC. Nehemiah received news from his brother, Hanani, of the sad state of affairs back home in Jerusalem:

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 ([Nehemiah 1:3](#)).

Deeply troubled over such disheartening conditions, Nehemiah responded with tears, fasting, and fervent prayer ([1:4](#)). He confessed his own sins and the sins of his fellow Jews and begged the Lord to honor His promise to bless His people if they turned from their sinful ways ([1:5-10](#)).

Nehemiah then asked the Lord that he might receive mercy from the king ([Nehemiah 1:11](#)). That involved Artaxerxes's granting permission to Nehemiah to travel to his homeland of Judah and lead an effort to repair the wall and the gates of his beloved city of Jerusalem ([2:1-9](#)).

Nehemiah's request included protection for the journey (contrast [Ezra 8:22](#)) and also provision of supplies needed for the projects that were planned. While the king did indeed grant Nehemiah's request, Nehemiah knew that any favor he had been shown had come from the Lord to whom he had prayed ([2:4](#)) and whose "good hand" ([2:8](#)) would be seen time and again in the upcoming endeavors.

When Nehemiah arrived, he gave the territory administrators the letters provided by King Artaxerxes that verified the king's support for Nehemiah's undertaking. The letters also confirmed the king's allocation of the resources needed for the rebuilding efforts ([Nehemiah 2:7-9](#)).

I. Surveying the City

([Nehemiah 2:11-16](#))

A. Arriving and Waiting ([v. 11](#))

11. So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

The journey from Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire, to *Jerusalem* was nearly 1,100 miles. A daylight walking pace of two miles per hour for six days per week (resting on the Sabbath) means a trip of about three months' duration. The *three days* therefore provided some needed rest for Nehemiah after such a long journey. The break also gave him the opportunity to plan his strategy, an approach he would use again before confronting another problem ([Nehemiah 5:6-7](#)).

What Do You Think?

What factors should cause you to determine that a strategic, multi-day delay on a project is not merely procrastination?

Digging Deeper

Was Paul admitting to procrastination in [Acts 22:16](#)? Why, or why not?

B. Diagnosing the Damage ([vv. 12-16](#))

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.

Nehemiah was aware of the fact that not everyone in the territory was on board with what he was planning to do ([Nehemiah 2:10](#)). Thus an excursion by *night* under cover of darkness was most likely the best way to examine the city and assess what needed to be done. Only a *few men* needed to accompany Nehemiah on such a mission; perhaps they were residents of Jerusalem who knew the layout of the city and could serve as guides. Or they might have been trusted advisers who had also traveled from Persia and could offer wise counsel. There was also no need for a large number of animals, whose sound might attract attention to the group (see [2:14](#), below).

Nehemiah was secretive about his intention to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and gates. Disclosing his plans too early could put the entire enterprise in jeopardy, so Nehemiah bided his time to gather information. His sense of appropriate timing was a quality that made Nehemiah a capable leader.

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.

It appears that Nehemiah did not make a complete circuit of Jerusalem but only of the southern area (see [Nehemiah 2:14-15](#), below). At the same time, locating precisely some of the places cited is difficult. *The gate of the valley* appears to have been at the southwestern side of Jerusalem. [Second Chronicles 26:9](#) records that King Uzziah of Judah built a tower there. [Nehemiah 3:13](#) notes the repairs done to the gate itself and this section of the wall and includes the detail that it covered “a thousand cubits” (or 1,500 feet).



The location of *the dragon well* is disputed, though it is often identified with the pool of Siloam on Jerusalem’s southern side. *The dungport* may describe the gate leading to the trash dump in the Hinnom Valley, to the south of Jerusalem. This also required repair ([Nehemiah 3:14](#)).

The scene before Nehemiah was very much in keeping with what his brother Hanani had described to him ([Nehemiah 1:3](#)). Nehemiah’s survey of the walls and gates must have

disturbed him. It's one thing to hear a report of destruction (see Lesson Context) and quite another to see it firsthand.

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.

The gate of the fountain was possibly situated in the southeastern wall of Jerusalem. *The king's pool* may have been a part of King Hezekiah's project to bring water into the city to improve its odds of survival in a prolonged siege ([2 Kings 20:20](#)). The rubble at the pool was so excessive that *the beast* Nehemiah was riding could not get through. This detail emphasizes the enormity of the devastation he found in Jerusalem.

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 brook mentioned here is probably the Kidron, a name also attached to the accompanying valley east of Jerusalem. Nehemiah thus retraced his path, going *back to the gate of the valley* where he started ([Nehemiah 2:13](#)).

16. And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

This verse again highlights the secrecy of Nehemiah's journey by night (compare [Nehemiah 2:12](#)). In these initial planning stages, there was wisdom in gathering information and considering his plans carefully without questioning a large group of people about the strategy needed to address the required repairs. To have done the latter may have resulted in immediate negativity—a "we can't do that" attitude. See the better approach, next.

What Do You Think?

What kinds of ministries may need to be conducted with a level of secrecy at first?

Digging Deeper

How do texts such as [Matthew 6:3-6](#); [Mark 7:24](#); and [John 7:10; 18:20](#) inform your answer? Are you comfortable working in secret when that mode is called for? Why, or why not?

ASSESSING THE SITUATION

I served for many years as an administrator and professor in Christian colleges. In each one, we assessed our work. Peer review of teachers' classroom work was done regularly. At the end of the semester, students were asked for input about their classes. Financial

operations were scrutinized by both internal and external auditors. Since these were Christian colleges, we also sought to determine if the totality of institutional programs encouraged the spiritual growth of our students. We asked individual and church supporters whether we were fulfilling our mission. All of these assessment tools helped us to carry out our mission of providing excellence in education.

Nehemiah's first step toward rebuilding Jerusalem's wall was assessing the damage caused by the Babylonian siege many decades earlier. The Bible encourages us—by example and command—to regularly assess our personal spiritual condition ([Psalm 119:33-36](#); [Romans 12:1-3](#)). How does doing so prepare you to serve Christ? —C. R. B.

II. Summoning the Leaders

([Nehemiah 2:17-18](#))

A. Encouragement to Build ([v. 17](#))

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.

Nothing is said about the span of time between Nehemiah's excursion and his meeting with the groups named in the previous verse. Most likely he convened them as soon as he could, given that the condition of *the wall* left *Jerusalem* vulnerable to attack.

There was an important emotional reason to have strong walls in a city, too. The city was an object of derision and mockery (*a reproach*) in its current state (compare [2 Chronicles 7:19-22](#); [Psalm 44:13-14](#)). Jerusalem was the holy city, the site of God's temple. It needed to be maintained in a way appropriate to this distinction. Thus Nehemiah described the decrepit state of Jerusalem as something that was not only troubling to the residents of the city but also disdainful to outsiders.

Nehemiah used the first-person plural pronouns *we* and *us*. He identified with those who were concerned about the dismal condition of Jerusalem. The solution as he saw it was of practical value. Rebuilding *the wall* offered protection as well as going a long way toward rehabilitating the feeling that Jerusalem itself was in ruins. Three considerations determined where ancient cities were built: (1) access to water, (2) access to trade routes, and (3) defensibility. A great city needed all three! A city without walls was vulnerable to enemy armies. [Nehemiah 13:15-22](#) reveals a way that the completed walls would help the residents of the city obey God.

What Do You Think?

Do you respond more readily to an appeal to help fix an obvious deficiency, or to an appeal to improve an existing “good enough” situation? Why is that?

Digging Deeper

Considering [Luke 12:16-21](#), what helps you keep pure motives in the second situation?

B. Evidence of God’s Hand (v. 18)

18a. 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.

Nehemiah was speaking to people who perhaps had become rather skeptical concerning God’s plan and purpose for them and for the city of Jerusalem. Over the years since the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon, various attempts to rebuild Jerusalem had been thwarted (see [Ezra 4](#)).

At first Nehemiah’s proposal may have sounded like just another plan that would meet with failure and simply add to the people’s disillusionment. But when he spoke of *the hand of my God which was good upon me*, he offered reason for new hope of success. Throughout the Old Testament, the mention of God’s hand represents the work that God does in the world (examples: [Exodus 6:1](#); [Joshua 4:24](#); [Isaiah 41:17-20](#)).

When Nehemiah came to the Lord in prayer after hearing of the sad condition of Jerusalem, he noted how the Lord had redeemed the covenant people, of whom Nehemiah was a part, with a “strong hand” ([Nehemiah 1:10](#)). Nehemiah was able to provide evidence that God’s hand was at work on His people’s behalf. Previous rebuilding had been stymied by opposition ([Ezra 4](#)). But at this time Artaxerxes had given his approval and full support to the work in Jerusalem. Even so, the true king, the King of kings, was the one in ultimate control of His people’s welfare.

18b. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.

The people’s response must have emboldened Nehemiah and lifted his spirits. The fact that the people then *strengthened their hands* fits nicely with the image of God’s hand on the project. The fact of God’s powerful hand leading and blessing does not eliminate the need for human hands to do their part. He prefers to work through people instead of just accomplishing His purposes all on His own (compare and contrast [Isaiah 6:8](#); [Ezekiel 22:30](#)).

What Do You Think?

At what stage of a ministry project should you, as a leader or follower, pause for a private evaluation of motives for participating?

Digging Deeper

How can the record of the differing motives behind the “let us build” lines of [Genesis 11:4](#); [Nehemiah 2:18](#); [2 Chronicles 14:7](#); and [Ezra 4:1-5](#) help frame your conclusion?

THE IMPORTANCE OF BUY-IN

On the television show *Shark Tank*, entrepreneurs demonstrate their products to a group of wealthy investors—the “sharks”—who then question the entrepreneurs before they decide whether to “buy in.” They ask about the entrepreneurs’ personal investment in the company, how long their product has been on the market, how much profit has been made, and any personal information that might bear on the sharks’ interest in financing the project. Buy-in offers involve money on loan, a percentage of ownership in the company, and/or control over running the company in exchange for the investment, manufacturing, or marketing expertise the shark can offer.

Nehemiah realized he needed buy-in from Jerusalem’s leadership to have success rebuilding the city’s walls. Church leaders who ignore this principle do so at their own risk. A program will succeed only with the congregation’s support. What does the health of your church’s ministries say about the congregation’s record on buy-ins? And what does that reveal, in turn, about prayer practices to get God’s buy-in? —C. R. B.

III. Scorning the Critics

([Nehemiah 2:19-20](#))

A. Words of Contempt ([v. 19](#))

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?

Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite have already been introduced as villains (see [Nehemiah 2:10](#)). Any worthwhile undertaking for the Lord is bound to encounter opposition of some kind; consensus is desirable but is not always achieved (compare [Ezra 10:15](#)).

The word *Horonite* may indicate that Sanballat is from Bethhoron, a town about 12 miles from Jerusalem ([1 Chronicles 6:68](#)). Though likely part of a northern Israelite tribe, he always opposed Nehemiah’s work on behalf of Judah and Jerusalem (example: [Nehemiah 6](#)). *The Ammonite* people, located east of the Jordan River, had long been enemies of Israel (example: [Deuteronomy 23:3-4](#)), and *Tobiah* was not an exception. He

was related by marriage to some of Nehemiah's companions and had many supporters among the Jews ([Nehemiah 6:17-19](#); see [lesson 6](#)).

Arabians were also a Transjordan people. During the Persian period (539-331 BC), they engaged in much trade and commerce. *Geshem* may have been opposed to any program promoting the welfare of the Jews if he saw it as a threat to his business dealings (vested interests).

An accusation of rebelling *against the king* had succeeded in halting an earlier rebuilding effort ([Ezra 4](#)). But Nehemiah had the full backing of the king. He knew the claims of his critics were baseless.

B. Words of Conviction (v. 20)

20a. Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build.

There is no record of Nehemiah's mentioning King Artaxerxes in his reply to the scoffing of his enemies. Instead, he appealed to a higher court: *the God of heaven*. Since God had guided Nehemiah to this point, Nehemiah knew that God was not going to abandon him or the people who had committed themselves to *arise and build*.

20b. But ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.

The Hebrew word translated *portion* is used to refer to God's division of the promised land among the tribes of Israel (examples: [Joshua 14:4](#); [18:5](#); [19:9](#)). Any portion Sanballat had had as an Israelite was revoked when God sent the 10 northern tribes into exile for their faithlessness ([2 Kings 17:6-23](#); compare [Ezra 4:3](#); [Acts 8:21](#)).

Regarding the idea of *memorial*, see [Exodus 28:12](#). The opponents did not have the historical ties to the city that Nehemiah and his coworkers did. They had no legal *right* (compare [2 Samuel 19:28](#)) to interfere with what Nehemiah was doing. With the king's complete support, Nehemiah boldly drew a clear line that would remain intact despite any continued resistance that his enemies directed his way ([Nehemiah 4, 6](#), etc.).

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances would you refuse the help of someone else on a ministry project?

Digging Deeper

How do [Mark 9:38-40](#); [1 Corinthians 5:11](#); and [Ephesians 5:11](#) influence your answer, if at all?

Conclusion

A. Good Hands

Often when asking for help, we say, "Give me a hand with this." An often told tale illustrates the wisdom of asking for help when a task is too big for us.

As the story goes, a father watched through the kitchen window as his small son tried to move a large rock in the yard. The boy couldn't get quite enough leverage to tip the rock over.

At one point the father came outside and asked the boy, "Can't you lift the rock?"

"No, Dad, I just can't do it."

"Are you using all the strength you have?"

The boy responded, "Yes, but I just can't move it."

The father replied, "No, you're not using *all* the strength you have because you haven't asked me to help."

Nehemiah was going to have, not just one rock, but a whole pile of rocks and rubble to move in order to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. But heavenly and earthly hands would give him more than enough help.

Nehemiah could have sung, as a precursor to the old hymn, "He's got the whole wall in His hands." Like the little boy, our efforts matter, but they will not succeed all on their own. If we ask our Father for help, He has us and every task He gives us in His hands as well. Fervent prayer on the part of Nehemiah played a vital part ([Nehemiah 1:4-6, 11; 2:4; 4:9; 6:14](#)).

B. Prayer

God, give us Your powerful hand! Without it we are weak; with it we have strength to overcome any obstacle. Let us rise up and build Your church, confident in Your promise to be with us. May our hands be strengthened for the work to which You have called us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Pray for God's powerful hand to be at work in your life daily.

HOW TO SAY IT

Ammonite *Am-un-ite*.

Artaxerxes *Are-tuh-zerk-seez*.

Babylonian *Bab-ih-low-nee-un*.

Cyrus *Sigh-russ*.

Geshem *Gee-shem* (*G* as in *get*).

Hanani *Huh-nay-nye*.

Horonite *Hor-oh-night*.

Nehemiah *Nee-huh-my-uh*.

Persia *Per-zhuh*.

Sanballat *San-bal-ut*.

Susa *Soo-suh*.

Tobiah *Toe-bye-uh*.

Uzziah *Uh-zye-uh*.