

III. Nehemiah in Biblical Perspective
The Memoirs of Nehemiah—Arise and Build
“For Coming Generations We Will Arise and Build”
Nehemiah 2
Dr. Harry Reeder
August 28, 2011 – Morning Sermon

We are in our third study of Nehemiah covering Nehemiah 2. Nehemiah 2:1-4 says *1 In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. 2 And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. 3 I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” 4 Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

We will go through the entire chapter of Nehemiah 2 that we just introduced in these first few verses. The year is 445 BC and before I go back to 445 BC I'd like to go forward to 2011 in the context of where we are. We are doing the study of Nehemiah for two reasons. An immediate reason is because of the season of our church where God has providentially brought before us an opportunity to fulfill our vision which is for coming generations Briarwood desires to be an equipping church that is Christ centered, Gospel driven and Spirit filled where every member is a member and a missionary. As God has answered prayer we have the opportunity and blessing as to how to go about facilities that He has given to us for coming generations of believers, pastors, missionaries, Christians, disciplers, as Christian men and women to serve the Lord, with the focus upon our children's, youth and student ministries. So we are using this text to follow the Nehemiah model of how we go about renovating, rebuilding, and using facilities Biblically. So we are trying to follow the Biblical paradigm.

There is a bigger issue is that the book of Nehemiah points us to Christ and on that bigger issue are the walls of the city of God. The New Testament is not over in Jerusalem. The New Testament is the church of Jesus Christ, the temple of God, the city of God, the citadel of God. Its walls are down. Its gates our burned and that's why we are so ineffectual. We are not ineffectual because we're irrelevant. There is nothing more relevant than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are ineffectual for a number of reasons and we want to use this text to find out also what it means to rebuild the walls of the church so that again the church might worship the Lord, centered on the Triune God and His praise, and then reach from the citadel of God into this world to win men and women to Christ. So this is kind of a dual road map for us as we are going through the book of Nehemiah in 2011.

Now go back with me to 445 BC. It's March for that's the month of Nisan. It is the end of March and it spills over into April. I want to set it up for you here. It's currently one thousand years since Moses had led his people out of Egypt and led Israel into the Promised Land. It's almost six hundred years since King David ruled and then when the kingdom was divided and the people sinned against God, God in fulfillment of

His Word brought judgment upon them, the loving hand of discipline. He raised up the Babylonians and took them into exile and He prophesied in Jeremiah that it would be for 70 years. They go into exile beginning in 605 BC, some more are taken into exile in 597 BC and more in 586 BC. Then in fulfillment directly to the year in 538 BC God raised up another nation after dealing with the Babylonians, a king named Cyrus wrote a decree that sent the people of God out of exile back home under Zerubbabel and Joshua, the High Priest.

They were to rebuild the temple and they laid the foundations of the temple and then they stumbled as the people lost their way. Twenty years later God raised up the preaching of prophets and brought them back and finished the temple. Then they stumbled again and amazingly began to commit the same sins that sent them into exile. They no longer worshipped the Lord or engaged in faithfulness to God. They even began to worship pagan gods and engage in pagan practices of sexual immorality, perversion, and inter marrying with those who didn't know the Lord. God brought a second wave of exiles back, this time under Ezra. Ezra began to study the Word of God, to know it and then to teach it and then to practice it. In the midst of Ezra's ministry God raised up a third man named Nehemiah and the memoir of Nehemiah is what we are studying.

Nehemiah in the space of one year goes back to minister as the appointed governor and he brings others with him, a third return. It is interesting to note there were three deportations and three returns that took place over a period of time. In Nehemiah 1 he is in Susa and he is the son of Hacaliah. Nehemiah's heart is for the citadel of God because God's Name is attached to the temple of God, the city of God, Jerusalem and the people of God and he asks two questions to his brother about this. He asks Hanani "How are the people of God and the city of God?" He answers, "The people of God are in distress and reproach. They have entered back into the shame of their sin and are under the ridicule of those who surround them." The walls are still down. Ever since King Nebuchadnezzar tore them down and burned the gates, now for almost 200 years they are still down and they haven't been rebuilt. We have rebuilt the temple and have the altar back in place but the walls are down and people won't even live there. They are in distress and the shame of their sin is covering them.

Nehemiah's response is weeping and mourning, prolonged for months he wept and mourned and prayed and fasted. We have an excerpt of his prayer where he confessed his sins to God saying "God, this isn't a statement that You're unfaithful to Your people but this is a statement that You are faithful to Your people and to Your Word. The same God who redeemed us out of Israel said 'if you ever depart from Me by not loving Me and keeping My commandments, as any father would do, I will bring judgment for you have gone whoring after other gods. I will discipline you and cause you to repent.'" So He did.

At the conclusion of his prayer he makes a statement. Nehemiah 1:11 says ***II O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him (Nehemiah) mercy in the sight of this man (Artaxerxes).*** Now I was *cupbearer to the king.* I want to explain what a cupbearer does. It doesn't mean he walked around with a cup or a waiter where he poured wine into cups but in our language today he would be considered the head of homeland security. He is in charge of security and particularly to the security of the king. He was a counselor and part of the inner

circle. Some people would say the cupbearer was the third or fourth man in power. So Nehemiah is a powerful man. He is a Jewish man, who loved the Lord, born in exile and had risen up to such a place of influence, just like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Joseph. So there is Nehemiah under this tremendous time of influence where he has access to the very king and prays for months “Now Lord when you get me to that king give me success.”

Nehemiah 2 contains answers to two prevailing prayers. First of all we have the answer to that prayer. I read it at the beginning where he comes before the king bringing the wine, it's all set and he has a sad countenance. It says the king looked at him and said “Why are sad? You're not normally sad and you're not sick.” It's interesting how an unbelieving pagan can kind of get to the heart of the matter. The king said “What's wrong with your heart, son?” Is there a lesson here? Was Nehemiah an authentic man, honest with his emotions? Remember how he was weeping and mourning but notice how we get a little glimpse here that the overall conduct of his life here of one who knew the Lord was one of joy not sadness. I meet a lot of Christians who sing the joy of the Lord but they forgot to tell their face. The kings look at Nehemiah's face and says something is wrong with his heart.

Nehemiah 2:2 says **2** *And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.”* **Then I was very much afraid.** Until then Nehemiah is a little bit afraid of the king. I'm going to the king to ask him something and he can take my head off if he wants to. I have prayed for God to give me success went I meet with the king and success may mean I lose my head. He doesn't know how God is going to answer this so he a little bit fearful. He is in charge of the king's life and when the king sees him sad bringing him some wine the king maybe thinking “I wonder if I should drink this wine if he looks that sad.” When Nehemiah becomes very afraid I think he is thinking what the king is thinking, perhaps there's a conspiracy about his killing.

The next words out of his mouth are “Live forever king, I'm not here to kill you for you're right. It's a matter of my heart.” So Nehemiah's countenance is normally one of joy. He has sadness and it's continuing for months. It even carries him into the presence of the king. The king notices it and he says “King I don't have any conspiracy against you. My sadness is because the city of my God is in ruins. The place of my fathers and the generations before me is in distress and shame. The walls are down and the gates are burned. The glory of my God is no longer of the place where He has fastened it.” The king looked at him and God answered prayer. Nehemiah was given success. What does the king say to him afterwards?

Nehemiah 2:4-8 says **4** *Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?”* **So I prayed to the God of heaven.** (I'm sure he had asked God at that moment to give him wisdom to say it right and in the right way. The Bible says He will give to His servants in the moment of trial what to say and how to say it. Nehemiah then gives three requests.) **5** *And I said to the king (his first request), “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.”* **6** *And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?”* *So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.* **7** *And I said to the king (his second request), “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River*

(the places he'll have to go through to get to Jerusalem), *that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, 8 and a letter to Asaph (his third request), the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.*" *And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.*

So after Nehemiah prayed he went to the king and asked three requests. The first request was, would you send me by imperial authority back to Judah to rebuild the gates for I need you to give me your authority on this? Then the king said, "When are you going to go and for how long?" Nehemiah answered but he wasn't through asking his requests. The second request was for imperial protection. In a few minutes I'll read where the king doesn't just give him letters but he gives him a military escort. So first Nehemiah asks for imperial authority to be sent and then he asks for imperial protection for safety. I was reading some commentators that try to explain this but thankfully I live in 2011 so I can give you another one. His third request was for the king to do a stimulus plan. Could you give me an imperial grant? I need some timber, some resources and this stimulus plan. I can just see going to the government saying "We trying to do this youth ministry down here and can you give a grant for this? Not only do I need some timber for the gates and the walls but I need some timber for my house too and the king said 'yes' to all three requests.

Now this is important, how does Nehemiah see this? He is certainly grateful and humble to the king but he goes beyond the king to the One who has the heart of the king in His hand. This is what he says, *And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.* It wasn't because the king was a good guy because I know he wasn't converted here. It was because the hand of God's providence was upon him. Now let's shift from Nehemiah in Susa, the citadel of Persia to Nehemiah in Jerusalem, the citadel of God.

Nehemiah 2:9-10 says **9** *Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. 10* *But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.* There was rising opposition in the surrounding areas to this but they weren't going to do much about it because Nehemiah has letters and a military escort with him but they let him know they didn't like what he was doing. In other words, they are not cheering on the rebuilding of God's people or the rebuilding of the city. Please remember that. Nehemiah is rebuilding the walls which we see in Nehemiah 1 through 7 and his whole purpose is to rebuild the people in the city which we see in Nehemiah 8 through 13. The building project is designed to rebuild the people, the worship praise and witness of God. It is a means to an end. It's not an end to itself. So he is on the mission and he has already found out he'll have some opposition.

He dismisses the military escort. How do I know that? Let's look further. Nehemiah 2:11-16 says **11** *So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. 12* *Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. 13* *I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. 14* *Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but*

there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. 15 Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. 16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

Here he has a few men left with him. He's been there for three days not telling anyone what he is going to do yet and then he says he has heard from Hanani the condition and from others but if he's going to lead God's people he needed to see it for himself. He goes out at night with a few others to go around the city. There are ten gates. The Scriptures identify some of the gates on the southern side and the eastern side of the city. He sees that it is just as they said, the walls are down and the gates are burned. He comes back. He didn't tell the people or the leaders anything yet. Then he brings them together. Now what happens?

Nehemiah 2:17 says **17** *Then I said to them (the Jews, the nobles, the priests, those who were going to do the work), "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision."* Nehemiah doesn't point the finger by saying 'you' but he says 'we' saying 'come let **us** build...' So he gives them the mission which is to build the wall. He gives them the vision where instead of God's people being a derision, they will now be a place where God is exalted. God's name will be lifted up. Worship comes from the temple. The people of God are secure in the city of God and the testimony of God rises up from the city. After he gave them the mission and the vision Nehemiah then said in Nehemiah 2:18, **18** *And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.* So here's the mission, the vision, God's Word and His glory is the purpose of the mission and the vision, then the account of the hand of God bringing him there and being placed upon this so the people respond by saying "Let us rise up and build the walls."

Now they said "let's bring in the resources." You can't get in to much more trouble than Jerusalem was at this time. The walls had been down for almost 200 years. The place is in economic ruin but they didn't hesitate. They said "Let's rise up and build. Let's strengthen our hands." They brought sacrificially the resources and committed to following Nehemiah in the mission and the vision. The story is generally over here, right? Let's see what happens now.

Nehemiah 2:19-20 says **19** *But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" 20 Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."* They face the opposition and the answer is this "Your opposition will not stop us and it's not because we're greater than you. It will not stop us because your hand is not sufficient and is incapable of stopping the hand of God." This is the hand of God that gave me favor with the king that has gotten me here that has brought us to this place and the Hand that will give us success. The Hand of God will give us success and He is the One upon whom we trust. As for you, your opposition, your criticism, your skepticism, where they tried to intimidate them, mock them and terrorize them but Nehemiah says "Not only will

you not stop us but you will not be able to enjoy the blessing of what the Hand of God does through the hands of His people that are strengthened by Him.”

I want to give you three crucial truths from what I think is this Nehemiah model that are applied right across the board to the challenges before us. The first one is the Providential Hand of God and the Word of God affirms God’s mission and leaders. How do you know when a leader is from God and how do you know the mission is of God? There are two things. First it will be faithful to God’s Word and it will be attendant by the hand of God. It’s interesting to note that when they heard what he said it’s faithful to God’s Word, it’s the honor of God, it’s the city of God, it’s the temple of God. What he is doing is faithful to the precepts of God’s Word. Nehemiah’s mission is a Biblical mission and then he is able to give the account of the hand of God and when they heard that the hand of God was with me then they said ‘Let us arise and build.’

Very seldom in life do the resources - that is people, finances, facilities, etc, - precede fulfilling the mission of God. Most of the time, they follow the mission of God. Most of the time, they come along behind it and beside it. They didn’t say “Look, there’s Nehemiah, let’s arise and build” or “That’s a great idea, so let’s arise and build.” They heard that which was faithful to God’s Word that the hand of God was with him and then they said “Let us arise and build.” It wasn’t just words or that they had to. They strengthened their hands.

Secondly, the people of God delight to respond to the hand of God joyfully and sacrificially. Here they are in a place of depravation and distress but when they hear of the mission, vision, the hand of God, and that it’s faithful to the Word of God then they say ‘Let’s arise and build.’ They have been downcast for centuries now. The downtrodden say “It’s the Word of God, the hand of God, the mission of God so let’s rise up” and joyfully and sacrificially they embrace the opportunity to move forward. Their confidence is not in Nehemiah nor in Artaxerxes, which by the way is the key why Sanballat and Tobiah can’t stop them. Their confidence never was in a man to begin with. Their confidence was in God so when men oppose them that wouldn’t stop them. They were ready to rise up and build because their confidence was in God.

I want to stop right here. Whether it is the season of tackling a facility opportunity to enhance ministry following this model or the bigger issue of asking God to rebuild the walls of His church that the church would again bring a Gospel awakening to a nation, or asking God to hang the gates that have been burned, it is the hand of God that gives us confidence. How do you know when the hand of God has shown up? I believe there are two things to look for. One is a transparent brokenness in God’s people where they put no confidence in themselves, confess their sins and repent. When God’s hand shows up then we humble ourselves. That’s why as the hand of God was upon Nehemiah, the first thing he did was confess his sins. He realized the people are sinners and that our reproach was our sin. They don’t put their confidence in their human leaders, their strategies, or their resources because first of all they have been broken. There is a transparent brokenness that is seen with repentance and confession.

The second thing is there is an unbounding confidence. Our God is able. When they heard that the hand of God had shown Himself then they said, “Let’s arise and build.” O that God would grant us the majesty of the saving work of Jesus Christ, the brokenness of realizing I’m a sinner, I’m undone and have no ability apart from God’s grace. Without Him I can do nothing but that unbounding confidence that when Christ is

in our heart and life that sure hope and the power of God, then the strengthening of our hands is actually the strengthening of the Lord in our hands. So no matter what the opposition may be, God's people will rise up and move forward. Why do they rise up instead of fall back? It is because they have an unbounding confidence in the sovereign hand of the almighty God who has won the victory at the cross for now and all eternity.

The third crucial truth is God's people and leaders if faithful to God's mission will inevitably encounter opposition. There will be opposition inside as we'll see in further chapters and there will be opposition from the outside. Whenever God's people embrace God's mission, whenever God's leaders step forward to lead God's people in the mission and the vision, you can rest assured there will be opposition. As soon as Sanballat and Tobiah heard about it they immediately came in opposition with two kinds of opposition – intimidation and ridicule.

I want to share with you two thoughts just to kind of help here in life. I believe these are two thoughts that have come from two individuals but I believe they are faithful to God's Word. They have been helpful for me and I wish I could tell you I've been consistent with them but I am not. One was an orphan that grew up and went to West Point. He became world wide famous in terms of his military ability and his name was Thomas Jackson. He became known as Stonewall Jackson with half a year of formal education. While at West Point he went from last in his class to seventeenth. He began to compile some maxims in life. One of his maxims that has helped me greatly is this; never take counsel from your fears.

Now let me go from the 19th century to the 20th century but you may say "It's the 21st century" but one century at a time is fast enough for me. Never make plans in life motivated by fear. The Bible says to be anxious for nothing. Perfect love casts out all fear except that glorious fear of the Lord that brings wisdom. The hope that is found in Christ and the perfect love of Christ casts out all fears. In fact the book of Proverbs warns you if you plan your life according to your fears, what you fear will come upon you. In fact, you'll be in ensnared in the fear of the fear itself. Never take counsel from your fears. Put your hope in the Lord, the truth of His Word, the power of His Spirit and His hand upon you.

The second thought I want to share with you is Billy Graham had a marvelous ministry that was constantly under attack. I had the opportunity to do the last radio interview with his executive director who had been with him all of his years right before he died. His name was George Wilson. R. C. Sproul mentions an event one time when he was with George Wilson that really resonates of what little I know about him. This is what he mentions. As R. C. Sproul's ministry was going forward getting criticism and all he asked George Wilson, "I know you all have had criticism, what do you do?" George Wilson said, "R. C. never let critics establish the agenda of your life" and that's exactly what Nehemiah does.

Nehemiah says to the critic and the terrorist "God's hand is upon us. We are faithful to His Word and we'll trust in Him. You will not control us. You have no part, no claim, no portion." That does not mean don't listen to valid criticism nor does no fear mean you don't have a place for concern. The Apostle Paul said "I have concerns for all the churches." There is a place for sanctified concern and there's a place for discerning, listening to criticism but do not let fear direct your life as God's people and do not let the critics set the agenda for life.

So here's the takeaway. It is the hand of God that assures the victory for God. Praise God for leaders. Praise God for mission, the resources, and the pagan kings He uses for the resources. Praise God He uses His people and for all that He does but our confidence is in the Lord. It is the hand of God that assures the victory. As we move into this century for Jesus Christ we desperately need the hand of God. Right now the church thinks its problem is irrelevant. The church is not irrelevant. There is nothing more relevant than the Gospel. The only time the church becomes irrelevant is when it quits loving the Gospel, the lost and the praise of God. That's when it becomes irrelevant. We so desperately want to be accepted in the world that we have actually capitulated not connected to the world. We need the walls rebuilt and the gates hung with brokenness and confidence in the Lord.

The second thing as we move forward there has never been anything I've been more assured of than the hand of God upon us in this vision. We have our mission. The Nehemiah model is prayer. We have prayer. I plead with you that if you at all able to be here Saturday for the prayer conference and the next Lord's Day for our two leaders to lead us in intercessory/revival prayer, please be here. There is also a prayer walk on September 11, 2011 and it's not going to be stomping around claiming inches. The prayer walk is walking through what God is doing and while you're on sight ask God for insight when you walk through those places. You get insight while you're on sight.

When we are looking at the Nehemiah model, remember he engaged in the project in order for the people's lives to change so we are not looking just for the priority of prayer for the project but that God would build the priority of prevailing prayer in our lives. So we have our mission. For God's glory Briarwood is committed to equipping Christians to worship God and to reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ and this comes from four passages of Scripture. It's Biblical. We have our vision. God gave us that in 2008 as we moved into the next 50 years. For coming generations Briarwood desires to be an equipping church that is Christ centered, Gospel driven, and Spirit filled and that every member would be a minister and a missionary and we will do that for even the generations not yet born.

I saw the hand of God as you so graciously went through the last campaign and the extraordinary sacrificial commitments. Then I watched the hand of God where elders made prioritized decisions and said "As much as we need these facilities we need to wait." Facilities do not make ministry, they facilitate ministry. Praise God for our children's ministry, our youth ministry, our equipping ministry and the things it will facilitate. Secondly, the actual process of putting in place facilities can become a spiritual journey to put Biblical principles into our life as we walk through it. That's what Nehemiah is using the wall for.

The third thing is the anticipation of what God will do with it. I looked at that marvelous presentation during the convocation this morning and I could just see 50 years from now some pastor is going to have the opportunity to walk through that facility and watch the kids that are coming to Christ who are going to lead other people to Christ and generations not yet born. I have seen these kids and students. I had one come up to me the other week and said "Pastor, I want to do urban ministry the rest of my life." I've seen the high school kid in the small group Bible study in my home that says "Pastor can I borrow Calvin's Institutes?" What kid's ministry do you know where the kid's say they want to read Calvin's Institutes? I am so excited about the breadth and the depth of it and

what's going to happen in this generation and the coming generation that it's absolutely phenomenal. Praise the Lord! I'm looking forward to it.

The mission is there. The vision is there. The hand of God is showing up where people that are trying to take a resource and are interested in the money actually are moved to say to us "We believe that the church ought to have this instead of it being commercial. We can make more money over here but we just think you all ought to have it. We think that's the right thing to do." Then at a City Council meeting not only did they vote for it unanimously but they were excited about it and neighbors said "Praise the Lord." I have never been so convinced of the hand of God around something before. So let's rise up and build, strengthen our hands as to how God leads us.

Finally, I want to tell you where your strength comes from. Nehemiah is giving us a little snap shot. He is pointing to Jesus. Nehemiah is going to leave this position of privilege, go to the people in shame, deliver them, rebuild the walls and overcome the opposition. Does it sound familiar? There was a Savior in glory who left the riches of glory, sent not by king Artaxerxes but sent by the King Himself, the Father of glory. He came to the people in shame to remove it and He overcame all of our opposition. He defeated, not Sanballat and Tobiah, He defeated Satan, sin, death, hell and the grave. So we'll arise and build. That's the God whose hand is upon you for this and coming generations. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the privilege to not fall back, not fall away but to rise up as the church of God. Father, even now speak to the hearts of Your people, I pray. O Holy Spirit, move upon us. Your Word has been opened, our hearts are opened. Now open our lives, King of heaven, we hear the call, we will follow and give You all for Christ's sake, Amen.