

Stone Walls

By Al Felder

“²Hanani, 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. ³And 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. ⁴And 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.” (Nehemiah 1:2-4)

Nehemiah took on an ambitious project to rebuild the walls to the city of Jerusalem. He completed the project in just 52 days. That alone is an amazing accomplishment, but when you take into consideration the adversity that he faced it becomes even more impressive. For just a little while we would like to consider the opposition that Nehemiah faced in building the walls to the city of Jerusalem and how he overcame that opposition.

At the time that Nehemiah received the news concerning the sad state of Jerusalem, he was serving as cupbearer to Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. It was around 445 B.C., and by this time two groups of exiles had already returned to the land. One group was led by Zerubbabel who rebuilt the temple, and the other group was led by Ezra who once again established the law in the land. Nehemiah had hoped to hear better news concerning his people. The sad state of the Jews greatly saddened him, and left him with a longing to help.

One day when Nehemiah was in the king's presence he could not hide the sorrow that he felt. Artaxerxes asked his faithful servant what was bothering him. Nehemiah told the king that the plight of his people had saddened him. The king asked what he wanted, and Nehemiah requested leave so that he could go build the walls of Jerusalem. The king granted this request, and Nehemiah proceeded to Jerusalem with a royal escort.

When Nehemiah arrived to the land he rallied the people, and they began working to build the walls of Jerusalem. There were many who were not pleased to see this happening, and they began to try and intimidate the Jews. *“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 2:19) These men did not want to see the Jews become prosperous, and they began to try to keep them from their task. They charged Nehemiah with trying to Rebel against the king.

We read Nehemiah's response in the next verse. *“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 not portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.”* (Nehemiah 2:20) These men did not know that Nehemiah actually had the king's permission for the work he was undertaking. Nehemiah did not use this information in order to defend himself at this time. He simply stated

that God would take care of His people, and that the false accusers had no right to interfere with what was happening in Jerusalem.

There are times in our life when we face similar opposition in our service to God. People may try to intimidate us in order to keep us from doing the Lord's work. We, like Nehemiah, must realize that we are not going to win over everyone who opposes us. Our focus must be upon obeying God. As we abide in His word we can have confidence in knowing that we are doing right, and that God supports our effort. This assurance was sufficient for Nehemiah, and it can be sufficient for us as well.

When intimidation had no effect upon Nehemiah, his enemies turned to ridicule. *"¹But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. ²And 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? ³Now 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."* (Nehemiah 4:1-3) Basically, Sanballat accused the Jews of wanting a wall because they were too weak to protect themselves. He then wondered how they could work and manage to worship God in a day's time. Finally, their material and craftsmanship was criticized, and it was said that the wall would easily fall.

Notice a couple of things about this ridicule. The motivation for these taunts was jealousy. They were angry that the work was going on. Also, these statements were not made directly to the Jews. These wicked men said these things to their supporters who, naturally, would agree with them. They also spread it around so that it would eventually get back to the Jews.

Nehemiah did not stoop to their level by responding to the mocking. *"Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him."* (Proverbs 26:4) He brought his frustrations to God, who could and would handle the problem better than he could. *"¹⁷Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. ¹⁹Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."* (Romans 12:17-19) By responding in this way Nehemiah and the Jews were able to focus on their work, and they began to make tremendous progress.

Too often we feel the need to defend ourselves and prove that we are right. In reality, the work that we accomplish by serving God will speak for itself. *"³⁸And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: ³⁹But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found event to fight against God."* (Acts 5:38, 39) Our accomplishments will speak louder than any words we might say. Instead of wasting time arguing, use your time being profitable for the Lord.

After the first two attempts failed, the opposition began to make threats. *“⁷But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, ⁸And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it.”* (Nehemiah 4:7, 8) When the wicked cannot get their way they often rely on some type of physical threat.

Once again, Nehemiah’s first response was to go to God in prayer. *“Nevertheless we made our prayer unto God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.”* (Nehemiah 4:9) After their prayer, they established a watch which made it more difficult for their enemies to carry out their threats.

The Bible teaches that Christians are under constant attack today. *“⁸Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. ⁹Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.”* (1 Peter 5:8, 9) We are in a spiritual battle today and we need to be on constant guard against the enemy. We need to go to God in prayer, and we need to be alert so that we can avoid danger.

In dealing with opposition it is only a matter of time before exhaustion sets in. *“¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease. ¹²And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you.”* (Nehemiah 4:10-12) Fear and worry began to preoccupy the minds of the Jews. As they worked, they were afraid that they would be attacked.

The solution to this problem was to split duties between building and guarding. Out of every two people, one person would work building the wall while the other person stood guard. This allowed the workers to be more productive because they felt safe.

When we face opposition, we tend to take everything upon ourselves. The problem with that is that we can’t do everything. If you try to, you will wear yourself out. *“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give an account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”* (Hebrews 13:17) The leadership of a congregation can and should provide this type of help for its members. Leadership is more than just leading songs, wording prayers, waiting on the Lord’s Table, or teaching. The real leadership happens outside of the assembly as you get involved in people’s lives and help them with their needs.

There are times that the opposition we face may be internal. *“Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring unto bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage*

already: neither is it our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards.” (Nehemiah 5:5) At this time the rich were taking advantage of the poor. The poor were having a hard time feeding themselves, and paying their taxes while they worked on the wall. The rich took advantage of this by charging them interest, taking their land, and taking their children as slaves.

This infuriated Nehemiah. The people had just returned from captivity, and they were making captives of their own people. He ordered for the rich to restore the lands and children they had taken. Also, they were no longer allowed to charge interest. Finally, they were to share in the burden of feeding the poor.

Even in the Church today, brethren can turn against one another. *“¹⁴For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. ¹⁵But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.”* (Galatians 5:14, 15) Within a congregation, disputes between two people need to be dealt with according to scripture. There is no place found in the New Testament where it is acceptable for two members of a congregation to hold grudges against one another, or mistreat one another. Problems have to be worked out, and solved so that the Church may do her work.

As the work is starting to come to a close, Sanballat and Tobiah make other attempts. *“¹Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;) ²That 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 6:1, 2) Nehemiah’s enemies decided that they wanted to talk all of a sudden. Nehemiah knew that they were up to no good. They had nothing to offer, and meeting with them would take away from the work. Nehemiah refused their offer.

We need to recognize that dealing with people who have no interest in helping, learning, or aiding will do nothing but waste our time. *“Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.”* (Matthew 7:6) There are some people who cannot be reasoned with. Their only desire is to cause a problem, and we have to be able to recognize those individuals and not allow them to take away from the work.

After this meeting failed, Nehemiah’s enemies tried slander. *“⁵Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand; ⁶Wherein 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 6:5, 6) They threatened Nehemiah by saying, “You meet with us or we’ll tell everyone that you are rebelling against the king.” Nehemiah responded by saying that the accusations were not true, and he turned to God once again in prayer.

As you begin to make progress and accomplish great things in the Lord there are always those who become jealous. They begin to do things in order to try and destroy your reputation. We do not need to allow these lies to distract us from the work. *“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.”* (Ephesians 6:10) We must be strong in God, and not fear.

The final opposition that Nehemiah had to face was treachery. *“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 6:10) This was a man hired by Sanballat to trick Nehemiah. He was supposed to get Nehemiah to hide in the temple by making him think that someone was coming to kill him. The goal was to cause Nehemiah to look afraid in front of the people.

Nehemiah realized that the man had been hired to set him up. He answered by saying, *“Why should someone who trusts God hide?”* The same attitude is still expected by God of His people. *“But even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention.”* (1 Thessalonians 2:2) We must be bold in our stand for the truth, and not hide in fear.

Despite all of these oppositions, Nehemiah completed the wall in just two months' time. He undertook a huge task, and faced great adversity. How will you respond when opposition faces you? Will you stand strong like Nehemiah? Will you be a stone wall?