

A Good Start

Nehemiah 2:11 – 3:32

Arrival and Inspection in Jerusalem

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and after three days, makes a secret investigation of the task confronting him (2:11–15). He is accompanied by only a few men, whom he has not informed of his mission, but who presumably can provide information about Jerusalem and its defenses. Nehemiah takes seriously the threat from those that would want to derail this project. He knows that the wall was destroyed by opponents of the Jews and that Sanballat and Tobiah likely had allies in the city that would quickly report on Nehemiah's activities. Nehemiah alone rides on an unidentified animal, probably not a horse or a mule, to not appear as a king or other ruler and thereby raise the suspicion that he was politically ambitious, as his opponents later charge (6:6-7; 1 Kgs 1:38-40). He takes a hard look at the difficulties ahead, no doubt prayerfully counting the cost of proceeding (Luke 9:57–62; 14:28–32.) Realize the value Nehemiah put on getting firsthand information, with the help of trusted associates, prior to announcing his plans.

An Invitation to Rebuild

Nehemiah's invitation to participate in this project (2:17) is a masterful example of excellent leadership firmly rooted in his own deep convictions (1:3).

- Describe the situation
 - You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.
- Propose a response
 - Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem,
- Emphasize its importance
 - so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.
- Describe the plan (2:18)
- Elicit commitment (2:19)
- Address opposition while keeping focus on the goal (2:20)

Nehemiah used his firsthand information to clearly describe the problem. Furthermore, he enlisted help to address the bigger issue – this situation was a disgraceful way to live and was a disgrace to Jerusalem, the City of David, the most important city for God's Chosen People. How often have you heard someone propose a project (or a change) and fail to describe the problem or opportunity that is to be addressed and fail to explain why this issue is even an important one to address? On the other hand, how quickly were you willing to provide support when the issue and its importance were made clear?

Nehemiah makes no assumptions and takes no chances on poor communication. He engages their hearts and their minds, pointing first to the hand of God in this God-sized project, then the support offered by King Artaxerxes I. The people respond enthusiastically, " 'Let us start building!' So they committed themselves to the common good." (2:18)

Immediately, Nehemiah faces opposition. Sanballat and Tobiah have now recruited a third detractor, Geshem. They attack the project and attempt to plant seeds of anxiety in the people. They infer that this will be another failed attempt to rebuild the wall (Ezra 4).

Nehemiah's response is clear: 1) This project belongs to God, 2) we, God's servants, are starting **now** and 3) you have no say (and will have no say). Often opposition to God's work can succeed in derailing us just by getting us to take our eye off the goal and putting our focus on the opposition. Nehemiah demonstrates a healthy awareness of the opposition and maintains his focus and the people's focus on successfully rebuilding the wall. He lets God handle the negative opposition (see Rom 12:19; 1 Pet 2:21–23; 4:19).

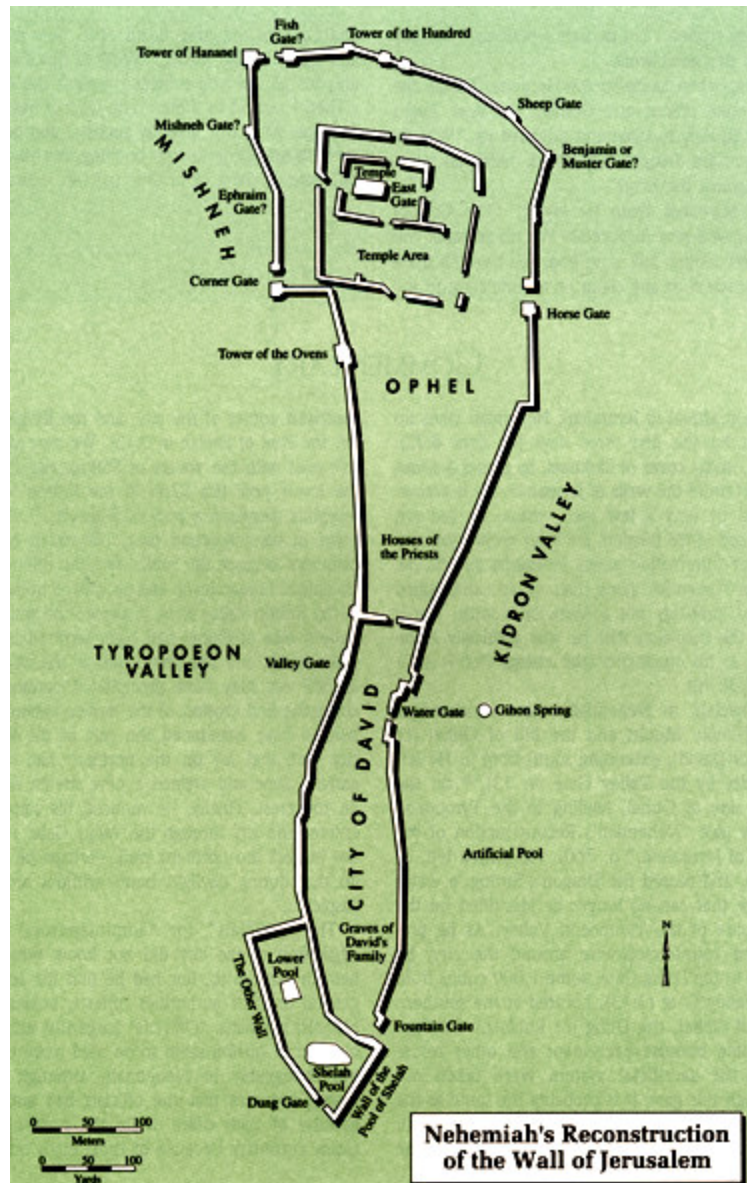
A lesson for leaders: expect opposition and even expect the opposition to band together and recruit more enemies to attack you and to attack those that follow you. Be prepared to respond in a way that encourages those you lead. (Think of a shepherd protecting sheep.)

Building the Wall

Chapter 3 describes the way the work teams were organized to rebuild the wall. The details of this project continue through chapter 6; this is one way to look at the whole project. Starting with the Sheep Gate, chapter three traces the work counter-clockwise around Jerusalem. Notice that some parts along the north side are “rebuilt” and some are “repaired.” Higher up the ridge along the eastern side, the terracing had been completely destroyed and a whole new wall had to be built, not just repairs made to the gates.

The outline of the work shows Nehemiah’s organizational skills and the widespread support for the wall-building project. Note the long list of participants: High priest, priests, men of surrounding areas, sons and daughters, goldsmiths, perfumers, rulers, kin, temple servants, gatekeeper, and merchants. There was a way to get everyone involved. Some made repairs by their homes, indicating that Nehemiah connected people to what they were passionate about. Some did double duty, indicating a commitment to see the entire project finished before anyone quit. Everyone must have had a sense that they all needed to succeed together.

Only one group of people is singled out as not participating, the nobles from Tekoa, about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. It could be that they had never been in exile; they are absent from the lists in Ezra 2:1 and Nehemiah 7:1. Also, Geshem (2:19) was active in the south and may have influenced them. We can only speculate about the reasons for their nonparticipation. However, those reasons were not even important enough to record; all we know is that they failed to take part in this project. How will we be remembered as disciples of Jesus – did we follow Him or not? This story seems to suggest that whatever reason we may have for not engaging isn’t worth noting.



A lesson for leaders: Nehemiah was able to work with all structures of society – from the rulers to the servants and everyone in between. How could we expand our comfort zone of leadership to involve more people? Are there certain people or groups of people that are harder for you to lead? How different would your confidence be if you constantly kept in mind that your leadership was a result of God’s hand in your life, leading you to lead others?