

# Route 66

## *Nehemiah: Rebuilding the Walls*

Part 16 – August 30, 2009

With the book of Nehemiah, we reach the end of the Old Testament historical timeline. (The next 23 O.T. books are “flash-backs”.) The book of *Nehemiah* is a sequel to the book of *Ezra* wherein the Persians, having conquered Babylon, release the Jews and allow the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

So, who was Nehemiah? He answers that himself:



Golden Rhyton

I was cupbearer to the king. - *Nehemiah 1:11 NIV*

This golden cup (400-500 BC) was unearthed at the ancient Persian capitol of Hamadan, and dates to the exact time of Nehemiah (445 BC). Cup-bearer was a high-ranking, highly trusted position.



He served King Artaxerxes [ahr-tuh-ZUHRK-seez], the same king who'd given Ezra permission and provisions (13 years earlier) to return to Jerusalem (with 7,000 Jews) and instruct the people about God. How many of you saw the movie, “300”? This is how Artaxerxes was portrayed (or rather *mis-portrayed*), in that movie. Apparently he enjoyed wearing the royal Speedo!



Ancient Susa, Iran

This is what's left of Artaxerxes' winter palace in Susa [SUE-suh], Iran. (*The ruins were badly damaged during the first gulf war.*) And this is where Nehemiah is when his story begins:

In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. - *Nehemiah 1:1b NLT*



Nehemiah regularly walked under this Bull-topped column that held up the roof of the palace (*excavated at Susa*). And he often gazed upon this very wall relief depicting the king's bodyguards. While in this palace, one of his brothers and some friends come to visit, and bring him sad news from the people in Jerusalem.



They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” - *Nehemiah 1:3 NIV*

From either a recent attack or the original Babylonian invasion. The Jews have been back in the land of Judah for about 100 years now, and the rebuilt temple is unprotected, and the City of David will not be re-inhabited unless and until it's refortified.

Nehemiah is so disturbed by this news that he sits down and cries. And then for several days he fasts and mourns and prays. And for six months he ponders the situation, and his heart grows heavier and heavier until one day ...

... I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." - *Nehemiah 2:1b-2a NIV*

Kings often developed close friendships with their cup-bearers, who guarded their lives and even tasted their wine to ensure that it wasn't spiked with poison. And so, he tells the Artaxerxes about the problem, and asks permission to leave the palace to help refortify Jerusalem. And Artaxerxes not only gives permission, he gives letters of passage, timber from his forest, and even sends his cavalry!

Why do you suppose it took Nehemiah six months to ask? It's very difficult to leave the comforts of a palace! It's relatively easy to cry and fast and pray, but to actually give God permission to use *you* and *your resources* to accomplish His will is another thing entirely! (This was 1000 miles away!)

At times we must choose between luxury and purpose. It's not uncommon to feel bad for, and even pray for something that God has given us the resources to relieve or achieve. I too easily dismiss myself as God's instrument.

There's an old saying: With the vision comes the anointing!

Nehemiah arrives safely in Jerusalem (445<sup>BC</sup>), having been given the position of provincial governor of all Judah. But they have no idea why he's there. Three days later he climbs on his donkey and takes a secret evening ride to survey the damage. There's so much debris in some places that his donkey can't get past the rubble.

Then, he calls together the Jewish leaders of the surrounding cities and tells them about his mission and the king's support. His passion so ignited their enthusiasm that they *immediately* mobilized into competing construction crews and went to work rebuilding the gates and the towers and the walls.

And just as immediately their enemies came to stop them.

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall?" - *Nehemiah 4:1-2a NIV*

In the video, Sanballat was the large man in the back seat. His snide sidekick is Tobiah, and his last line is from Nehemiah 4:3.

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at [Sanballat's] side, said, "What they are building – if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" - *Nehemiah 4:3 NIV*

"Good one Tobiah. I'll have to write that down!" Nehemiah's faith and confidence in his God-ordained mission is so strong that he doesn't mind immortalizing their mockery! But it's getting to the people, and they're getting discouraged.

The people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." - *Nehemiah 4:10-11 NIV*

You see, if the enemy can't keep you from going after God's will, he'll find people who'll happily insult you and oppose you every step of the way. That's just how *that* works! The enemy is threatened by that which strengthens our position. So, when you decide to go after God's will and live by His Word expect a fight, and prepare yourself for a battle. That was Nehemiah's solution! Half the workers get guard duty.

Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. - *Nehemiah 4:17b-18a NIV*

Our "sword" is the Word of God. And if you don't keep it close, don't expect success ... especially if you're attempting to rebuild and restore that which past sin has destroyed.

Nehemiah's immediate goal was to see the city fortified, but his ultimate goal was to see his people honoring God. So, he called the nobles and officials together and rebuked them for taking advantage of the poor (by confiscating their land and selling their children into slavery to satisfy their debts). And they repented for violating a clear Biblical command, and took an oath to give everything back and demand nothing more.



And this act of righteousness rallied the workers! And what had been neglected for 70 years was rebuilt in 52 days!

This fortification was built by David. But, see that lighter portion in the upper right? During a recent excavation, 5th century Persian pottery revealed Nehemiah's wall and two towers!

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it – though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates – Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." ... - *Nehemiah 6:1-2 NIV*

And Nehemiah's response was a plain, "Oh, no!" What will the enemy do when he can't *discourage* you? He'll *encourage* you ... to have a little get-together! He'll try to persuade you to make a side trip into *His* territory. But Nehemiah sees right through their scheme to harm him, and ignores the four separate invitations that they send.

And once the job is done, and the doors are set in place he says ...

... [our enemies] were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God. - *Nehemiah 6:16 NIV*

All the people assembled in the square at the Water Gate and asked Ezra to bring out the Books of Moses and read to them. And Ezra stood on a wooden platform and read for six hours straight! And the people listened attentively and wept with shame. But Nehemiah told them to stop crying, because God had intended them to celebrate *His* goodness, not to wallow in *their* guilt.

This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. - *Nehemiah 8:10b NIV*

And so they ate and drank and celebrated with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. For seven days Ezra read and they celebrated! And then they confessed their sins and entered into a solemn covenant to observe the commands of God.

And they held a lottery, and one out of every ten Jewish families was chosen to repopulate Jerusalem, in order to bring the shattered City of David back to life. And two huge choirs stood on top of the wall and they dedicated the fortification to the Lord. And Nehemiah continued to govern for twelve years before he returned to the palace of Artaxerxes, and brought him his wine. But after a couple years he asked if he could go back.

And when he went back he found that Tobiah (the snide little sidekick) had been given his own apartment *in* the temple! And so, Nehemiah threw out his belongings and had the room purified.

And he saw men doing business on the Sabbath, so he ordered the gates to be shut on the Sabbath to put an end to the practice.

And he saw men who'd married foreigners; so he rebuked them and made them promise not to allow their children to intermarry.

And he kept a careful eye on all that God had called him to.

I think the message of Nehemiah is quite simple: You can stay in the "palace" or get in the game!