

SO THE WALL WAS COMPLETED
ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH OF
THE MONTH ELUL, IN FIFTY-
TWO DAYS. WHEN ALL OUR
ENEMIES HEARD OF IT, AND ALL
THE NATIONS SURROUNDING
US SAW IT, THEY LOST THEIR
CONFIDENCE; FOR THEY
RECOGNIZED THAT THIS WORK
HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED
WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD.

NEHEMIAH 6:15-16

RENEWAL

THROUGH LEADERSHIP

DATE
May 16 & 17

WEEK
3 of 5

OVERVIEW
Nehemiah 5-6

KEY VERSES
Nehemiah 6:15-16

SETTING THE STAGE

The book of Nehemiah is often viewed as a manual on biblical leadership. Essential elements of biblical leadership like prayer, faith, vision, planning, organization, team building, and perseverance are vividly displayed in Nehemiah's life. He was a man of God who could weep over the condition of God's people and city yet be proactive and decisive in responsive action. Nehemiah provides a model for God's servants of every age.

The central message of the book of Nehemiah is the restoration of Jerusalem as the city of God and the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God. From both the divine and the human viewpoints, the wall around Jerusalem was essential to the restoration and establishment of Judah in the land.

Jerusalem would always remain vulnerable to attack and Yahweh's name seemingly discredited until the wall was restored (1:1-3). Prayer was Nehemiah's first approach to solving the problem (1:4-11), but prayer and action go hand in hand, so Nehemiah approached the Persian king with a plan and secured the support needed to do God's work (2:1-9). Opposition is immediate and plays a major role in what follows (2:10).¹

No test of leadership is more revealing than the test of opposition. Christian leaders can go to pieces under such pressure. Some grow too discouraged to continue. Others build walls around themselves, shoot from behind, and become embattled, *Continued on page 50 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Leading Through Internal Opposition
2. Leading Through Internal Disobedience
3. Leading Through Subtle Opposition

THINGS TO KNOW

- The book of Ezra details how the House of God was rebuilt in the City of Jerusalem but the temple was without protection for 90 years until God commissioned Nehemiah to lead a team to build the wall.
- The wall was built in 52 days.

RENEWAL

THROUGH LEADERSHIP

Setting the Stage, continued >

embittered and vindictive. Not so with Nehemiah. Nowhere does his leadership shine more brilliantly than in his handling of opposition.²

The circumstances Nehemiah faced in chapter 4 were common forms of opposition: ridicule and the threat of violence. Suddenly in chapter 5, a new form of opposition erupts from an unexpected source. The first had been from without, from Israel's enemies. This new form was from within. This opposition arose because of wrong conduct by some of the Jewish people themselves.

Just when the work on the wall was coming to completion, another phase of opposition against Nehemiah appeared from his enemies: intrigue, innuendo, and intimidation. Nehemiah's challenge was to see the situation clearly and to discern how to face the changing circumstances presented by the opposition.

1. LEADING THROUGH INTERNAL OPPOSITION

In chapter 4 Nehemiah faced two common forms of opposition: ridicule and the threat of violence. Violence is the path often taken by the enemy when ridicule fails. Nehemiah overcame the ridicule by recognizing what it was, a weak attempt to get him to stop the building. He followed up in two ways. First, he took the matter to God in prayer, looking to Him for vindication, and he kept building. Nehemiah overcame the second attack by such practical means as arming his workers, posting guards, keeping the people in the city at night where they would be safe, and establishing procedures for unexpected attacks. These devices were successful. His enemies were frustrated, and the work advanced relentlessly. (Nehemiah 4:15-23).

Suddenly, to judge from the tone of chapter 5, a new form of opposition erupted and from an unexpected source. The first two forms of opposition had been from without, from Israel's enemies. The oppression of the poor was from within. It arose because of wrong conduct by some of the Jewish people themselves.

Does it not always seem to be that way? You are engaged in some important work. You have been opposed by people who are not Christians and do not share the vision. You have overcome that form of opposition and are pressing on, when suddenly there is a problem within the church or Christian community itself. During the days of the monarchy, the Jewish states had been opposed by their pagan neighbors, and Israel had fought many wars. When God sent prophets to recall the

¹ Kenneth G. Hanna. *From Moses to Malachi : Surveying the Old Testament* (Kindle Locations 5124-5127). CrossBooks. Kindle Edition.

² John White. *Excellence in Leadership: Reaching Goals with Prayer, Courage and Determination*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, p. 66.



people to righteousness, it was not the pagans who killed God's messengers but the Jews themselves. In the same way, an examination of church history will show that the most successful attacks upon the church have come not from unbelievers but from those within, from people who have professed to know God and Jesus Christ. Often, the greatest opposition to Christian work today is from those within the church who want a form of godliness but who reject genuine Christianity.³

Look at the first verses of Nehemiah chapter 5:

NEHEMIAH 5:1-6 *Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.² For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live."*

³ There were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine."⁴ Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.⁵ Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."⁶ Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.

These verses describe a classic example of the gap between rich and poor. It was a case of pure exploitation, and what made it worse was that it occurred within the Jewish community among those who should have been helping one another.

Originally the Jews who returned to Israel from Babylon were well off. Ezra 1:9-11 lets us know that those who had come back from the exile returned with significant resources. Additionally, King Cyrus opened his treasury and contributed. The people were well enough off to contribute to the temple when it was built, and they also paneled their homes. Before Nehemiah's time in Babylon exiles had returned and brought freewill offerings from those still in Babylon, (Ezra 7:16).

So, what happened? Why were some people so poor in Nehemiah 5? Famine is mentioned in verse 3 and the king's tax on their fields and vineyards are mentioned in verse 4. The result of the burden was leaving the poor open to the exploitation of the wealthy and in some cases even to the point of slavery.

Look at verse 7:

⁷ I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.

Nehemiah was angry when he heard of this injustice with his own people. The reaction was different than the reaction he had against Sanballat and Tobiah in chapter 4. He expected wrong behavior from outsiders, so he was not angry with them. Righteous anger should be felt for those who profess to walk by God's standard and yet compromise those high standards by their actions. The exploitation of Jews by Jews was not right, and he was angry enough to confront it. However, Nehemiah did not let the circumstances control him. As a leader, he considered the situation before he contended with the nobles and rulers.

The central message of the book of Nehemiah is the restoration of Jerusalem as the city of God and the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God.

³ J. M. Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expositional Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2005, p. 59-60.

2. LEADING THROUGH INTERNAL DISOBEDIENCE

Nehemiah could have backed up his charge by showing them what they were doing was wrong according to God's Word. Let's take a look:

EXODUS 22:25 *If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest.*

LEVITICUS 25:35-37, 39-41 *Now in case a countryman of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you.³⁶ Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God, that your countryman may live with you.³⁷ You shall not give him your silver at interest, nor your food for gain...³⁹ If a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a slave's service.⁴⁰ He shall be with you as a hired man, as if he were a sojourner; he shall serve with you until the year of jubilee.⁴¹ He shall then go out from you, he and his sons with him, and shall go back to his family, that he may return to the property of his forefathers.*

Nehemiah was close to God, had his priorities right and was faithful. He was a leader who served as an example in any circumstance.

Nehemiah addressed the sin and the issue of not walking in the fear of God. Oppressing their own people provided a wrong view of God and His Word not only to their brethren but also to their enemies. He continues in Nehemiah 5:9:

Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"

The nobles of Nehemiah's day were disobeying the teachings of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Why is it that so many within the church take the revealed Law of God so casually? It is no surprise that the world does this. The world does not receive the Bible as God's Book. But we do. We even maintain that it is inerrant "in the whole and in its parts." How then can we take it so lightly? We play loose with the Scriptures, and we need to repent of it. We need to become people of the Book—in fact, and not just in our profession.⁴

Nehemiah was close to God, had his priorities right and was faithful. He was a leader who served as an example in any circumstance. You see a contrast in verses 15 and 16 between former governors who had come before and Nehemiah.

Nehemiah led differently because of his fear of the Lord.

NEHEMIAH 5:15-16 *But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.¹⁶ I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.*

Nehemiah led differently because of his fear of the Lord. He applied himself to the work on the wall, he did not try to increase his possessions and all his servants were gathered there for work. The internal opposition did not deter Nehemiah from moving forward with the task at hand. Warren Wiersbe writes,

"The fear of our God" is not the servile dread of a slave toward a master but the loving respect of a child toward a parent. To fear the Lord means to seek to glorify God in everything we do. It means listening to His Word, honoring it, and obeying it. "The remarkable thing about fearing God," wrote Oswald Chambers, "is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas

⁴ Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expository Commentary*, p. 64-65.

if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.” Because Nehemiah’s life was motivated by the fear of the Lord (*Nehemiah 5:15*), he did not fear what the enemy might do (vv. 14, 19). The fear of the Lord moved Nehemiah to be a faithful servant of the Lord. ⁵

If you are in a position of spiritual leadership, Nehemiah chapter 5 has some important lessons for you:

- **Expect problems to arise among your people.** Wherever you have people, you have the potential for problems. Whenever God’s work is prospering, the enemy sees to it that trouble begins. Do not be surprised when your people cannot always get along with each other.
- **Confront the problems courageously.** “There is no problem so great that you cannot ignore it” might be a good philosophy for a character in a comic strip, but it will not work in the Lord’s service. Every problem that you ignore will only go underground, grow deeper roots, and bear bitter fruits. Pray for God’s help and tackle the problem as soon as possible.
- **Be sure that your own integrity is intact.** A guilty conscience will rob you of the spiritual authority you need to give proper leadership, but every sacrifice you have made will give you the extra strength you need to defeat the enemy.
- **See in every problem an opportunity for the Lord to work.** Solving problems in ministry is not an intellectual exercise but a spiritual experience. If we depend on the wisdom of the world, we will get what the world can do; but if we depend on the wisdom of God, we will get what God can do. All that we say and do must be motivated by love, controlled by truth, and done to the glory of God. ⁶

3. LEADING THROUGH SUBTLE OPPOSITION

Nehemiah once again returned the workers to the wall and made such progress that within a short time the entire wall was finished. Only the gates needed to be completed. Just when the work seemed to be done, more opposition appeared from his enemies. This time, the attacks from the enemy were aimed at Nehemiah personally. Cyril Barber says, “When Sanballat had his co-conspirators realize that they have been outmaneuvered, outgeneraled, and outwitted by Nehemiah, they decided to attack him personally.... Their wounded pride will not be appeased until Nehemiah has been humiliated.” ⁷

Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to Nehemiah asking for a meeting but Nehemiah knew they were planning to harm him. Being a discerning leader, he knew when to say no. They continued to send messages four times and he continued to tell them he could not meet with them because of the work he was doing. The reason this communication was subtle and therefore dangerous was that on the surface it sounded quite plausible. What is more, it was attractive. If the invitation had come earlier, it obviously would have been a scheme to keep Nehemiah from working. But, now that the wall was completed and only the gates needed to be secured, this could appear to be a reasonable request.

The problem was that the wall was not completely finished. It was almost finished. The walls were at their full height but until the gates were completed the entire project was in jeopardy.

⁵ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined* Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996, p. 64.

⁶ Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, p. 68–69.

⁷ Cyril J. Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership* Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976, p. 50.

Not only did Nehemiah say no but he knew these governors were scheming to harm him. He was determined to finish the job.

Sanballat's next tactic is to send an open letter throughout the entire territory for everyone to read, accusing Nehemiah and his fellow Judeans of plotting a revolt against the Persians (*Nehemiah* 6:5–9). The letter claims that the wall is being built to fortify the city of Jerusalem in defiance of King Artaxerxes. The letter even impugns Nehemiah's intentions, saying he wants to be a king. Obviously, the letter is not true, and Nehemiah replies by declaring their charge to be nothing more than lies.⁸

NEHEMIAH 6:5-9 *Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. ⁶ In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. ⁷ You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together." ⁸ Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." ⁹ For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands.*

The letter was an obvious lie and was spreading a rumor intended to hurt Nehemiah and keep the work from being completed. Once again, we see the source of Nehemiah's strength and discernment when he prays, "O God, strengthen my hands." He prayed because the true source of his strength was the Lord. His relationship with the Lord gave him strength. Cyril Barber cites Maurice E. Wagner as having said it this way:

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"Personal security ... comes from our relationship to the three Persons of the Godhead. Our relationship to God the Father gives us a sense of **belonging**. We are members of his family and are secure in our Father-child relationship. Our union with Christ the Son gives us a sense of **worth**. God loved us so much that he sent his son to die for our sins. With our redemption accomplished, God has made us joint-heirs with Christ. This shows our value. Finally, the Holy Spirit's indwelling empowers us. We are made equal to every task (i.e., we are **competent**)."⁹

Finally, Shemaiah tried to get Nehemiah to be disobedient and hide in the temple of God so he could, "save his life" (*Nehemiah* 6:10). Enemies were trying to intimidate Nehemiah saying they were coming to kill him. Once again Nehemiah demonstrated discernment when *he perceived that surely God had not sent him*. Exercising the strength, only the Lord could provide, Nehemiah refused to flee and go into the temple to save his life. He was obedient and said, "I will not go in." (*Nehemiah* 6:11-12)

NEHEMIAH 6:15-16 *So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶ When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.*

In spite of the opposition from without and within, subtle and not so subtle, the work that God had ordained was accomplished for His glory and purpose. The faithfulness of Nehemiah's leadership paved the way for the wall and gates to be complete and the name of the Lord to be praised.

⁸ L. Goldberg, *Nehemiah. Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995, Vol. 3, p. 317

⁹ Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, p. 50.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The Lord commissioned Nehemiah and gave him one task – lead the people to build a wall around the city of Jerusalem. As the leader, opposition was inevitable. We all lead in some way and are called to be men and women of God who, like Nehemiah, can lead through the circumstances of life. Consider these character traits of Nehemiah:

1. **Nehemiah’s closeness to God and his prayerfulness.** Nothing is more characteristic of Nehemiah than his closeness to God, expressed most often by his praying to God on all occasions. Nehemiah saw everything that happened to him within a spiritual framework.
2. **Nehemiah’s sense of calling to a task.** Nehemiah had a strong sense of his one great objective, which was to rebuild the wall, but it went beyond that. Above all, he knew himself to be God’s man and to have a call to God’s service.
3. **Nehemiah’s self-awareness and knowledge of his own worth.** This was not a vain self-assessment. The gifts Nehemiah had were from God; he would not have had them otherwise. He knew that he had these gifts and was not the least bit overwhelmed by the task he was given or intimidated by his adversaries. We should have an equally strong sense of personal value. We should know that we are equipped by God for whatever task He has for us.
4. **Nehemiah’s extraordinary discernment.** Nehemiah also showed great discernment. He was able to detect in every subterfuge of the enemy exactly what was going on. Where did he get such discernment? Some of it may have been a natural gift, of course, but a large part of it must have come from his spiritual experience and understanding. Nehemiah was not beguiled even by the most subtle devices of his enemies. He was able to focus on real issues and priorities.
5. **Nehemiah’s great courage.** We must not forget this element, for many people have had other important gifts and yet have failed in times of testing because of a lack of courage. “Should a man like me run away?” Who is not afraid at times? Who is not disturbed? Who is not hurt? We all are. Yet it is precisely when we yield those fears to God and press on that we show leadership.¹⁰

How has the Lord called you to lead? In your family? In your church? At your workplace? In your home? Inevitably, you will face opposition. Like Nehemiah, look to the Lord to strengthen and lead you through the opposition toward completion of the task.

¹⁰ Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expository Commentary*, p. 74–75.