

DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE PROBLEM

Nehemiah 2:11–20

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Nehemiah 2:11–20 (NIV)

“I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work. Then I said to them ‘You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.’ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work. But when Sanballat the Hononite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. ‘What is this you’re doing?’ they asked. ‘Are you rebelling against the king?’ I answered them by saying, ‘The God of heaven will give us success. We His servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.’”

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The more I get into Nehemiah the more I begin realizing I have before me a paradigm of how to successfully deal with a problem. If you haven't worked a great deal in language, the word "paradigm" may be very unfamiliar. I hesitate to use it for that reason. But it is the best word I know how to use to describe what is going on in Nehemiah. Paradigm comes from the root Greek word simply meaning, "to show side by side." It's the kind of thing you do if you think back to school days when you conjugated a verb or declined a noun. You show that word—especially if it's a verb—in all its moods, tenses, and numbers.

When you learn a foreign language, it's important to know what the paradigm is or you will start making simple mistakes. It's a classic orderly progression of thought in approaching a word. But I use this of Nehemiah. I think Nehemiah lays out for us a paradigm of how to successfully resolve problems. So if you follow the schemata, the orderly progression of solving a problem that is in Nehemiah, I believe that's why the Holy Spirit has this book here. Not just that we'll learn an historical lesson of how walls are rebuilt. But learn spiritually to repair the walls that may be broken down in our own life. The gates that may be broken down in our experience. Also I've begun to find this book extremely meaningful as we as a church approach relocation effort. I would ask as we continue to look at Nehemiah today and succeeding times that you identify some spiritual problem you are struggling with or some problem or need in the body. Take a moment to ponder that. Is there a spiritual problem you're struggling with now? Or is there a need or problem in the body that you see needs to be addressed? Focus on that and use the principles which we are trying to indicate.

So far in the Book of Nehemiah in chapter 1:1 through 2:10 we have focused on Nehemiah as the cupbearer to the king. Up until this time he has been 900 miles away from Jerusalem. He's been back at the capital of Persia. Now from 2:11 through chapter 6 he is acting as a builder.

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The first chapter and a half have presented six steps in the paradigm of successfully solving problems, beginning with being aware of the problem, and beginning to pray scripturally about the problem (and I think it's important to underline "praying scripturally about the problem," because often we may pray about a problem and focus upon it in terms of what we see the problem to be instead of how God may see the problem. Nehemiah focuses scripturally upon the problem). Then he positions himself before God in a place to act. Then he looks around and realizes he needs someone else's approval if he is going to be able to initiate an approach to solving the problem. And he is prepared to act when approval is given. Then he is prepared as well to face obstacles. That takes us through 2:10.

It's at this point, these six steps, many people including myself are able to work through the first six steps and see the problem, identify it, offer themselves as candidates willing to act, but then nothing ever happens. Because up until now Nehemiah has been looking at the problem from a telescopic range. He has been eight or nine hundred miles away. Now he's going to come to Jerusalem and he's going to have to look at the problem from a microscopic range.

I think we often walk around saying, "Yes, that's the problem," but when it comes to facing it closely we don't know how to go about addressing it.

I. Nehemiah shows us in this continuing paradigm that as we come near to the problem we're going to microscope it.

It's one thing to walk around realizing there are problems we're having in a relationship or problems maybe we're having with our emotions or maybe here's a need to be addressed in the body. But another thing to really come in and detail it.

In microscoping the problem, Nehemiah shows some fascinating steps. The first thing he does when he gets to Jerusalem is he does nothing. He simply listens and looks. "I went to Jerusalem,

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and after staying there three days I set out at night with a few men” (Nehemiah 2:11–12). Here is an approach that should really grab us. Nehemiah is coming to a people that for a hundred years has done nothing about their problem. The walls had been down for over a hundred years. They had lived with that condition. Nehemiah does not arrive on the scene as a Johnny-come-lately with a messiah complex who immediately goes to work, gives everybody a trial, organizes people in companies, and gets them going. He doesn’t hire subcontractors or put plumb lines out on the wall the first day he gets there. He simply takes three days.

I think in taking three days what he is doing is simply sizing up the situation. Observing. Often a hasty remedy to a problem is a very poor remedy. I have impulses to solve problems. I have impulses that will solve every one of your problems if you’d share them with me. But impulses often are not the positive solution. And he spent lots of time praying up until the time he gets there. Even when he gets there, there is an additional delay of listening and looking. He resists the temptation to talk before he is ready to act. Overpromising.

Nehemiah does not mention his purpose or his authority. He is quiet.

There is a sense in which our premature talk creates a climate of resistance or overexpectation that is impossible to deal with later. Nehemiah is very careful with his words. Then he goes out and he sizes up personally what must be done. He doesn’t delegate the responsibility to someone else. If God has called him to that problem then he must deal with it and have that personal knowledge of it. So in verses 12–15 by night he goes out and surveys the walls.

I’d like to note, the very thing that Nehemiah is doing the Lord Himself does if we think of the Lord being in the “far city.” From His vantage point of heaven, comparing that to Nehemiah’s being in Persia, when the Lord draws near to us, He comes as the builder. Yet for thirty years He’s on earth, what’s He doing? Is He talking, doing any action, overpromising in those thirty

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years? No. He's simply sizing up the problem. And He is one among us. He knows what all our weaknesses are and all our needs are before He ever begins to act. That's precisely what Nehemiah is doing here, in surveying the city walls.

This is the point in the Book of Nehemiah where the temptation to allegorize is really strong. I don't necessarily think that all allegorization is wrong. As long as we understand that that most probably wasn't the original intention of the Holy Spirit in having that passage written. I'm sure Nehemiah intended it as an historical detail. But if we want to get carried away for moment in allegorization then I have a marvelous way of allegorizing this passage, spiritualizing it.

Nehemiah goes out the Valley Gate, which is probably the southwest gate of the city, which led to the valley of Hinnom, which later in the New Testament becomes known as the valley of Gehenna. It is known as the garbage dump of Jerusalem. Someone in allegorizing this passage has said this represents a Christian as he faces the past, the garbage heap of his life. Maybe the gates are broken down and he doesn't have a sense of authority about his salvation or about his security. He needs to go out and examine that gate and begin rebuilding it because the Lord does not want us to go without that security and confidence of our relationship with Him as we look out over the garbage heap of the past.

Then to the Jackal Well which is also called the Serpent's Well. Someone has said this ought to remind us that Satan's back is broken. Then on to the Dung Gate, which I think, may represent the taking out of the spiritual excrement in our life, which maybe has blocked up the flow of God's Spirit in our hearts. The Fountain Gate represents the authority of the Spirit in our life. Then the King's Pool which is probably the pool of Hezekiah with that stream of water coming in from the outside into the city. Water cannot stand still by the way, can it? Water must keep flowing if it's to retain its vibrancy and quality. That's the same way of God's Spirit in our life.

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If we allegorize this passage we might just go along with Nehemiah and inspect whether some walls and gates are down in our life, whether we have confidence that indeed we are God's people. Or whether that gate is in continual disrepair in our life and we're never certain whether we've been delivered from the past, whether we've been saved, whether we have eternal life or not. God doesn't want us in that kind of state indefinitely. And He certainly wants our life to be flowing free with His Spirit.

You say, that's not the kind of text you draw those truths from. I grant that. But I think it may be one additional way to help us remember the reconnoitering of Nehemiah as he goes along the walls to kind of look at little things like that.

When Nehemiah, though, is done with his nighttime tour, he knows exactly what is wrong and what must be done. He has examined. The word for "examined" means to look very carefully. It can even be used as a medical term to describe probing a womb to see the extent of its damage.

There are moments in our life when we may, from a long-distance point of view, have an awareness of a problem but the Lord through prayer will have us maybe inspect it and get closer to it. Often through some kind of personal examination we see exactly what has gone wrong and specifically what do we need to do, what steps do we need to take in order to address the problem.

II. When Nehemiah is done with his days of silence, with his personal reconnoitering of the city wall, he then takes another step in solving his problem. He is ready to enlist the support of those who are needed to conquer the problem.

There are some problems we have that may not require us to enlist someone's support, although I genuinely believe that even personal problems require the enlistment of someone else's support.

It may be just one other person to help solve it. I'm deeply committed to the fact that the New

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Testament teaches us that the Christian life is not designed to be lived alone. That it's bearing one another's burdens and confessing our sins to one another that gives real strength in the walking.

Nehemiah looks to the people. He's dealing with a whole group problem rebuilding a city wall. He looks to the people who are going to be needed if the problem is going to be dealt with and success is to come. He does not have an attitude that the problem is going to conquer him but rather with God's help he's going to conquer the problem.

Nehemiah in enlisting others' help identifies with the problem. I think this is so critical, verses 17–18. He doesn't use the singular personal pronouns—"I," "me," "my." He uses the plural personal pronouns—"Let *us* rebuild the wall of Jerusalem...*we* will no longer be in disgrace...you see the trouble *we* are in."

Approach to groups of people or to another person in working on a problem is so critical.

Nehemiah had every right to say, "You guys are in a mess. I have come to help you in the mess you have created. When I am done you will be in safety." You want to talk about alienating people right from the start! Just start with that kind of tact! Nehemiah identifies by using the pronouns "we" and "us." When you try to get someone else to help you in a situation and you begin by casting blame and criticism on them, you squelch motivation. When you identify with the problem you encourage motivation.

This is important working in the family context. It's always easy to lash out with blame and criticism when we want change. Yet change doesn't come through blame and criticism. It only intensifies the opposition to doing anything different.

Nehemiah identifies with the problem. Then when he is addressing the people about doing something about the problem he uses what I would call intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation.

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Extrinsic motivation is appealing to something on the outside—material reward. Intrinsic is appealing to things such as inner concepts such as honor and dignity and the like. We use extrinsic motivation for example with our children.

Nehemiah in appealing to people does not promise any material incentives. He does not promise prizes to the fastest-working families or a week the Dead Sea for the group doing the most work. He just intrinsically says, “Let us rebuild the walls so we will no longer be in disgrace.”

Nehemiah appeals to this to the people of Jerusalem. Their honor will no longer be in disgrace. Then Nehemiah, as he talks to these people, focuses faith on the Lord and not on the problem. He says “I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me” (verse 18). Nehemiah is confronted with an astounding situation. A situation which has so paralyzed people that for over a hundred years they had done nothing about the problem because the problem seemed bigger than their ability to deal with it. Sometimes we just come to accept problems because we say, “That problem has been around so long I’ve given up trying. There’s absolutely nothing I can do about it.”

We can marshal a lot of arguments at this point why Nehemiah couldn’t succeed. If I had been one of Nehemiah’s constituency I’d have said there is no way you’re going to be able to do what you’ve proposed because there’s been a hundred years of apathy. There’s formidable external opposition. You have no previous experience as a builder. There have been other ventures tried through the years by better men than yourself and they have failed. You are a stranger to Jerusalem. You don’t really know the people. And besides, inside the town there is a class struggle between the rich and the poor. The rich are gouging the poor. Nehemiah, there are just too many problems.

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All Nehemiah really has going for him in this context is God. I think again if we apply this to our lives, if our life is governed by the problem and not by the promise of God, then walls in our life will never be rebuilt. Nehemiah focuses on how God has already led him, a very tenuous slender thread—just his times in prayer and the king has given him letters but that pyramids into a context of faith and belief to trust God to do it.

Matthew Henry said of this passage, “Saying and doing are often two different things. Many are ready to say ‘Let us rise up and build,’ but sit still and do nothing. Like that first son who said, ‘I go’ but went not. Nehemiah is both ready to say and to do.”

III. Nehemiah demonstrates to us this matter of microscoping in on the problem and enlisting other people to deal with the problem. Then he’s not at all intimidated by opposition.

I would suggest that anytime we try to solve a personal problem that is spiritual in nature, whether we’re doing that personally or as a group of people, there is going to be some period of time the Sanballats, the Tobiahs, and the Geshems—external circumstances—will come and will throw great discouragement and say it cannot be done.

Nehemiah’s confidence here is not on Artaxerxes’ decree or his military escort but in the Lord. In fact when he responds to the opposition in verse 20, he says, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding.” Nehemiah says nothing about the accusation made against him. He doesn’t say, “You guys don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve got the decree from Artaxerxes, which allows me to rebuild. And look at the military escort he sent.”

Nehemiah at this point is not depending on the political instruments, which have established his power, as important as they are. But he goes back to ultimate authority. It is God who is going to

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give me success in dealing with this. So he says, “My focus is on the Lord, and because it is and your focus is not, then you have no part in realizing what God has promised.”

This is exactly what is involved in Nehemiah when he says, “The good hand of the Lord will give me success.” He is playing before the audience of the Lord Himself and His confidence is growing. He has started out at the end of chapter 1 by simply praying “Grant Your servant success.” And he winds up in chapter 2 saying, “The God of heaven will give us success.” What had been first a petition had now become a confidence. God indeed will give us success.

I believe that’s how the Lord wants us to focus upon the needs and problems that we may face.

Closing Prayer

As we approach this Scripture today we’re confident, Lord, that this speaks to us of principles in our Christian experience that you who have begun a good work will indeed bring it to completion and there will not fail us any one of Your good promises. We lay before You the individual needs which we may have brought today. We lay before You too in our heart those dreams that You have for us and for Your body and for the involvement in the body. So often we come to You with what we see. But now we take a moment to just ask, “What do You see about us? What dreams have You dreamed for us? What success do You wish to give us that maybe we haven’t focused upon?” Lord, we would really reach out to You today in the words of Nehemiah and say, “Grant us success.” Where we have failed and suffered as a result we can take our stand upon Your word that says that if we will return we will be healed. We thank You for Your graciousness, for Your power. As we think about our own individual situations I always want to in this moment bring before You our destiny and calling as a whole people, this whole church body. Lord, at the outset of what is for us a rebuilding of walls physically, entering forth an adventure that is going to call upon the resources of us all, we this moment thank You for the

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good success that You are going to give. Whatever You call us to do You give us the strength and the power to accomplish it and we praise You. But more fundamentally keep our eyes upon the fact that You're in the work of building us as people; more than the building of physical walls You want to build our life in the image of Jesus our Lord. Make us. We know that whatever You put Your hand to You will do well. In Jesus' name. Amen.