

Assessing Obstacles

Nehemiah 2b

So, who are these guys – Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem? And why are they so upset that the wall around Jerusalem might be rebuilt? Judging from their names and titles, they seem to be men who had jurisdiction over the various parts of the Persian Empire that surrounded Judea – in other words they had basically the same sort of authority in their territories that King Artaxerxes had given Nehemiah over Jerusalem. Archeologists tell us that a man named Sanballat was in charge of Samaria, which lay immediately to the north. And although Tobiah is a Jewish name, verse 10 says he was in charge of Ammon, which lay to the east across the Jordan River. Finally Geshem is said to be an Arab, and again archeologists have found evidence that he and his sons ruled the tribes who lived in the deserts to the east and south of Judea. In short, the rulers of all the areas surrounding Judea were opposed to Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

But why did they care? I suppose we should give at least a little credence to what they said in verse 19 – they said they were concerned that a fortified Jerusalem would inspire the Jews to rebel against the power of King Artaxerxes, to declare their independence from the Persian Empire. After all, a big part of the reason cities had walls in those days was to keep out invading armies.

But further reflection should have convinced these guys that rebellion wasn't on Nehemiah's mind. After all, we learned in the first part of this chapter that he had received express permission from the king, along with generous funding, to conduct this project. So what sense would it make for him to turn around and rebel against his royal patron? Moreover, as the people had learned back in the days when Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem, city walls are only as strong as the armies that stand behind them. After all, it wasn't battering rams that had given the city into the hands of the Babylonians – it was the siege that lasted a year and a half that had brought a starving army of Judea to its knees.

In sum, there was simply no way that Jerusalem could stand against the armies of King Artaxerxes, even if it had a well-built wall. Even if the whole province of Judea could suddenly become populous, wealthy and powerful, it could never hope to be a match for the combined power of the Persian empire, which at that time included the entire Middle East, stretching from what is now Turkey all the way east to Afghanistan and south to Egypt.

So, why were these three guys so opposed to Jerusalem having some protection, if not from Persian armies, then at least from raiders and thieves? Well, it could be that at least some of their own people were engaged in some raiding and thieving, and thus liked to have easy pickings close at hand. Or perhaps they were just envious of the obviously close relationship Nehemiah had with the Persian King – that wouldn't be the last time that powerful people were motivated by jealousy, would it? Maybe they wanted to divert some of those resources to infrastructure projects in their own territories.

But the bottom line for Nehemiah, and for us, is that whenever the people of God attempt to do the work of the Kingdom of God, we should expect opposition. We should not be surprised when obstacles arise. This is in no small part a reason that verse 12 tells us Nehemiah kept his mission a secret until after his night-time journey around the walls. He needed to fly under the radar of the neighboring officials, at least at first, at least until he had a chance to get his own people united behind

the project. In short, when he began assessing the obstacles to rebuilding the walls, he wasn't just looking at the rubble that stood in the way – he was also aware of the enemies surrounding the people of God.

Well, what if we were to do the same sort of assessment? As we look at the rubble, the ruins of what used to be a Christian society all around us, what obstacles are standing in the way of the work of the kingdom of God? Oh, I know, it's easy to point to tyrannical Communist or Muslim governments that prevent churches from doing evangelism overseas. But what about here? What about in modern America?

Powerful government officials stood in Nehemiah's way, and perhaps we are tempted to blame the church's problems on political leaders we don't like. Or perhaps we'd like to point the finger at government requirements that keep churches from providing alternatives to failing public schools, or at regulations that prevent homeless shelters or soup kitchens from allowing people to work for the ministry in return for food or housing. Maybe we know of a church or ministry that has been hassled by a zoning board when they have tried to build a new worship space or expand an existing one. It's not hard to pin the blame for many of the Church's woes on Washington or Jackson.

Or perhaps we could expand our criticism, pointing an accusing finger at Hollywood and New York. After all, long gone are the days when the church could count on the mass media to support our values. Now, it seems that movies, TV, radio, and the internet are dominated by those who believe the only absolute truth is that there's no absolute truth. And those who stand up for Biblical notions of right and wrong are all too often either vilified or simply ignored.

Yes, as we walk with Nehemiah through the rubble of what was once a Christian civilization, as we assess the obstacles to Kingdom work in modern America, it's easy for us to blame the enemies outside the Church, people like Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem who will do all that is in their power to prevent our beliefs from spreading.

But Nehemiah didn't just face opposition from outside the church, did he? After all, until he had a good idea of what it would take to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem, until he had taken a personal survey of the scope of the project, verse 16 makes it clear that he also didn't tell any of God's people about his plans.

Why would he need to keep his mission secret from the church? Well, let's face it. Pointing out problems isn't always a popular thing to do. In the first place, it gets folks to thinking about what caused the problems – and sometimes that leads them to place not outside the Church, but on the man in the mirror. For why had God allowed the Babylonians to tear down the walls so many years before? It wasn't because the Babylonians were so wicked – it's because God's people had been so faithless. So, being reminded of the problem could very easily raise uncomfortable questions about the extent of their own generation's devotion, the exclusiveness of their own loyalty to God.

In the same way, while we love to point our fingers at Washington and Jackson, aren't we the ones who have elected the politicians who've made all those dumb decisions? And while we love to decry the godlessness of the mass media, they wouldn't make those movies unless folks bought tickets to see them. And even though Roseanne Barr got fired for saying something stupid, ultimately it's ratings that determine what's on TV. That means there's a very real sense in which all the politicians

and the mass media do is to hold up a mirror to the culture. So, why should we condemn them for just giving “We the People” what we want? Could it be that our attitudes, our own priorities are part of the problems we find in our church and our culture?

But there’s another reason that Nehemiah may have wanted to keep his mission a secret from his own people, at least at first. Yes it’s true that people often don’t want to hear about problems in the culture because they might see they are at least partly to blame for them. But it’s also true that folks don’t want to hear about social problems because they don’t want to be bothered to do the hard work of making things right.

I mean, we all love to shift the blame, don’t we? We love to point fingers at stupid politicians or dumb regulations or high taxes or cultural decay. But then as now, it is so much easier to focus on the problems than to resolve to do something about them.

For think about it. When Nehemiah showed up in Jerusalem, the only folks who came with him were a small military escort. Yes, he had managed to secure a building permit and the necessary materials to reconstruct the wall, but he hadn’t brought a work crew with him. That meant that the hard work of putting the wall back together would have to be done by the people themselves. So, as Nehemiah rode around the city, every toppled stone he stepped over, every ruined gate he rode by would eventually end up on someone’s to-do list.

And the same thing is true for us Christians today. It’s easy for us to pick a side in the culture wars. We can tune in to whichever news outlets, podcasts, or facebook friends we agree with and place the blame for the sorry state of our culture on whomever we wish. We can even diagnose the problems our church and our culture face in different ways – we understand that it’s okay to disagree about things that aren’t essential to the gospel. But what we can’t do is assume that someone else is going to clean up whatever mess it is that we find. No, however we modern American Christians assess the obstacles that stand in the way of the expansion of the Kingdom of God, ultimately, we are going to have to take a hand in removing them.

So, let’s take a little time to assess the obstacles that we face as a congregation, as a community. Let’s take a good, hard look at the rubble and let’s be aware of our opponents. But let’s also resolve not to let the magnitude of those obstacles deter us. After all, in verse 17 Nehemiah clearly pointed out the problems to his people. He didn’t hold anything back. But in verse 18 he encouraged them to rise up and build because the good hand of God was upon them. Because God had opened a door for the project to move forward, they could rely on God to help them bring it to completion.

Well, we worship the same God, don’t we? And in a similar way God has called us to rise and build His Church, not with wood and brick and mortar, but with living stones, followers of Jesus Christ. God has called all of us to make disciples by living out and teaching the law of love that He has given to us.

So, how can we do that this week? How can we build up this congregation? How can we better encourage and equip one another to do the work of the Kingdom? How might we be able to reach out to young folks, a great number of whom aren’t worshipping anywhere on a regular basis? What needs do our neighbors have that we can pray for or try to help with? How can we invite them not just into our worship space on Sunday, but into our lives, building real community throughout the week?

And how can we build up our community? How can we bring truth to bear on the problems all around us? What social needs do we recognize that we can help to solve? How can we encourage people whose families are fractured or who struggle with addictions? What opportunities can we provide for folks who need a hand up, not a hand-out? Instead of waiting for government regulations to change, instead of waiting for someone else to make things better, what can each of us do to build our congregation, to rebuild our community?

No, none of this will be easy. Yes, it will take time, talent, and treasure to make a difference in the lives of others. Yes, we can expect opposition to arise from various quarters. But as we seek to do God's good work, as we seek to rise up and build God's Kingdom, we can be sure that the hand of our God will be upon us as well.