

## Weathering the Storms - June 21, 2020

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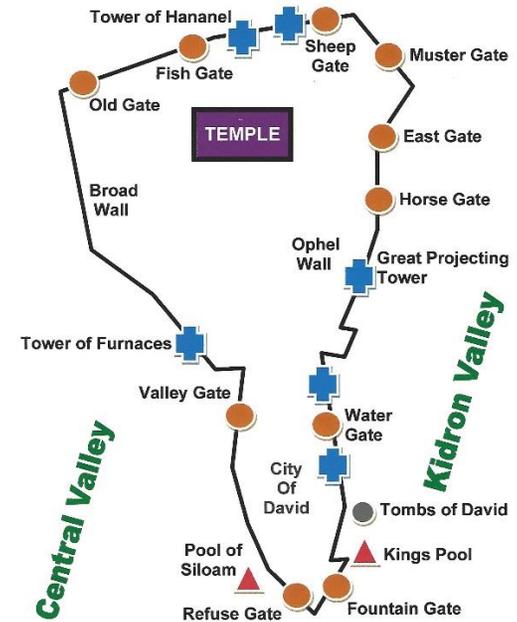
Most of us have seen photos of the devastating storm that slammed southern Alberta last week. Hail and water damage is estimated to reach a billion dollars! How did Nehemiah brave the winds and hail of opposition? Herbert Lockyer said of him, “*Prayer was the maintained attitude and constant habit of Nehemiah. He prayed all the time, all the way through and about everything, and he prospered because he prayed.*” (*All The Prayers Of The Bible*, Zondervan, 1982, 90)

Yes, the story of Nehemiah calls believers to a renewed enthusiasm for “building the walls” of God’s Kingdom. But it is not primarily a building lesson. His story shows us amazing possibilities that open when we discard self-reliance for dependence upon God – especially expressed in prayer.

Nehemiah was doing very well in his profession as an attendant in the royal court of Persia. Then he faced a dramatic detour. Having heard a report about the desolation of Jerusalem, he answered God’s call to rebuild the walls and restore God’s honor to the city.

Read Nehemiah 3. What do you notice? It is a striking picture of how the work on the walls progressed. The description of the rebuilding begins at the north end of the city and moves counterclockwise, starting at the “Sheep Gate”. Ten gates are described in chapter 3; and two more are mentioned in chapter 12. This is significant to the eternal implications of the New Jerusalem, described in Revelation 21:10 having twelve gates.

Rebuilding the walls divided up by households. These worked “**next to**” each other – this phrased is used over two dozen times! A synergy came from the collective effort to bring glory to God. However, as with so much of our service for God, once the project began the opposition ramped up. In chapter four we find two specific storms which Nehemiah weathered.



DIG

### [A] A storm of intimidation - read Nehemiah 4:1-6

Nehemiah had already been detoured from his life of prestige in Persia. Now in Jerusalem, making himself available to serve God, he faced another detour! Even though he was already sacrificing so much, he now faced a storm of opposition to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

- **What was the source of the intimidation? vv. 1-3**

The source of the intimidation was two petty political leaders in the region. In Nehemiah 2:10 we are introduced to Sanballat (from Beth-Horon – NW of Jerusalem) and Tobiah (from Ammon – E of the Jordan River). These men likely had political aspirations to rule Jerusalem but Nehemiah represented a frustrating factor to their selfish desires.

These men are like the Pharisees who were too self-absorbed to embrace the joyful message of redemption in Jesus. Sanballat and Tobiah we so caught up in their personal ambitions that they could not appreciate what was taking place before their very eyes – renewal and revival! As a result, they were like putty in Satan’s hands – perfect instruments to sow seeds of self-doubt in Nehemiah.

- **How do we survive the intimidation? vv. 4-6**

The short answer is simple: prayer and action. But in practice, we discover it is difficult. Nehemiah knew that this was not a time not to be self-reliant. Nor was it a time to rely on other people. It was a time to be fully dependent upon God! What that means for us even today can be more fully understood when we see Nehemiah's prayer in verses 4-5 as *imprecatory*.

This kind of prayer seeks God to hold our intimidators accountable. As such it is a great example of dependence upon God to silence the enemies. We must let God fight for us because in ourselves we will be defeated. How do we know that this was an expression of trust? Work continued – see v. 6!

The Israelites often faced impossible odds. But at every turn, the answer was the same – complete trust and dependence upon God. Consider when the Egyptian army had them pinned down at the Red Sea. In Exodus 14:13-14 we read Moses' rally cry: *“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”*

**[B] A storm of insecurity - read Nehemiah 4:7-23**

Storms on land are bad enough but at sea? No thanks! Eighteenth Century English writer Samuel Johnson wrote, *“Being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned.”* Legendary surfer Buzzy Trent said, *“Waves are not measured in feet or inches; they are measured in increments of fear.”*

Fearing storms and angry waves is not limited to time on the ocean. Nehemiah's story demonstrates just how vulnerable are those who serve God and build His Kingdom. There are many Sanballats and Tobiah's who will be angry, bitter, or jealous about the work that God is doing through us.

- **The storm - vv. 7-8**

The second storm Nehemiah faced was an outright attack. Opposition grew to include Arabs and men from Ashdod. Unified in anger at the rebuilding they plotted to fight against Jerusalem. Yet Nehemiah remained focused in the face of fear and danger. Though many followers of Jesus face violence for their faith, this might not be our specific experience.

As we read in Hebrews 12:4, *“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”* Though we may not face physical harm, Satan still stirs up storms of *insecurity* against God's servants.

- **The prayer - v. 9**

The second prayer in this chapter is again in response to threat. We may not have the content of Nehemiah's prayer, but we see his commitment to trust God. Notice also – *“we prayed”* – he was inspiring faith in others. This is a wonderful byproduct of prayer! This is not to say that the threat did not exist – nor were they immune to fear or discouragement – see vv. 10-12. So a guard was posted and they pressed forward.

- **The tension - vv. 16-20**

Now, does the fact that the people worked *and weaponized* indicate a lack of trust in God? No. This was not a fearful but faithful response. To work with weapons in hand was a matter of diligence. It was an expression of dependence. How can we be sure? Look at the statement in verse 20: *“Our God will fight for us!”* Had Nehemiah's team weaponized *only*, and not continued the work, then their enemies would have won. Nehemiah *“knew God would protect him, but he was careful to add a sword to the equipment used to build the wall. He trusted God but kept his powder dry.”* (Lockyer, 90)

<b>REFLECT</b>
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Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem had greater implications that politics or military strategy. As the walls and city of Jerusalem were restored, there was a renewed focus upon God and His gracious dealings with His people. And – not “but” – there were storms of intimidation and insecurity. How are you weathering the storms that come against you as you attempt to serve God?

- **What does this story tell us about God?**
- **What does it tell us about people?**
- **How can you put what you have learned into action?**
- **Who else could benefit from hearing this?**

How are we called to react to the storms of opposition? Consider these texts:

- **Romans 8:28-39**
- **Matthew 26:41**
- **Colossians 4:2-6**