

227—LET US RISE UP AND BUILD

(Nehemiah 1–7)

Though the temple had been rebuilt and dedicated in Jerusalem by the returning exiles from Babylon, under the benevolent decrees of Cyrus and Darius, the city walls had never been rebuilt. This failure to build was due primarily to the antagonism and interference of others in the area. Those most difficult to deal with were the people who settled in Samaria after the Assyrians took the Northern Kingdom into captivity.⁸²

In 445 BC, the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes in the Persian Empire, a Jew named Nehemiah held the high office of cupbearer to the king at the palace in Shushan.⁸³ Some men came to Shushan from Jerusalem that year and told Nehemiah about the sorry state of Jews who had returned from captivity. “The remnant that returned is in great affliction and reproach,” they reported to Nehemiah. “The walls of Jerusalem are also broken down and the city gates have been burned.”

Nehemiah wept for the hardships of his people, fasting and praying for many days. “These are Thy servants and Thy people, O Lord,” he prayed. “Let Thine ear be attentive to their prayers as they desire to honor Thy name. And please prosper me also and grant me mercy in the sight of the king.”

As Nehemiah performed his duties, King Artaxerxes noticed that his countenance was sad, and the king asked him, “Why are you sad when you are not sick? There must certainly be sorrow in your heart.”

Nehemiah was frightened by the king’s inquiry. “Let the king live forever,” he answered hesitantly. “Why should I not be sad when the city of my fathers’ sepulchers lies waste and the city gates have been burned with fire?”

King Artaxerxes was sympathetic to what Nehemiah was telling him. “What do you wish me to do?” he asked.

⁸² See story “182—Assyria’s Victory and Israel’s Captivity.”

⁸³ Shushan (or Susa) was originally the capital of Elam, an area named for Shem’s son. Later it was part of the Assyrian Empire. At the time of Daniel, Shushan was in the possession of the Babylonians and was in the province of Elam (see Daniel 8:2). The conquest of Babylon by Cyrus transferred Shushan to Persia; it was not long before it became the Persian capital and the chief place of the king’s residence, probably during the reign of Darius (see William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible, GospeLink*, CD-ROM, s.v. “Shushan”).

This was the opportunity that Nehemiah had prayed for. “If it pleases you and if I have found favor in your sight,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “I would have you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers, that I may rebuild it.”

“When will you go and how long will you be gone?” asked the king, responding favorably to Nehemiah’s petition. And Nehemiah gave him a time.

Then Nehemiah said to King Artaxerxes, “If it pleases you, give me letters to the governors west of the Euphrates, that I may have safe passage through their lands—and also a letter to the keeper of the forest, that he will give me timber for the city’s many gates.”

In a short time Nehemiah was on his way to Jerusalem with the desired letters from the king, as well as a letter appointing him governor of Judea. The king also sent horsemen and captains from his army to accompany Nehemiah and protect him on his journey.

When Nehemiah first arrived in Jerusalem, he told no one why he had come. But when he had been in the city three days, he went out by night to survey the city walls to see the extent of the damage. When he returned from surveying the desolation, he spoke to the Jewish leaders. “You see how Jerusalem lies in waste and the gates are burned with fire,” he said. “Come now, let us build up the walls of our city that we are no longer a disgrace.”

And when Nehemiah told the Jewish leaders of the words of King Artaxerxes—how he was appointed governor of Judea and had been charged to rebuild the city walls—and how the hand of Jehovah had brought him to Jerusalem, they were excited. “Let us rise up and build!” they cried.

The rebuilding of the city walls was not without opposition, however. Nehemiah’s plan was certainly not popular with the governors of the surrounding territories. Chief among the opponents were Sanballat the Horonite,⁸⁴ Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian. When these men heard of Nehemiah’s plan, they despised the Jews and laughed them to scorn. They were not pleased that anyone should come to promote the welfare of Judah. “Will you rebel against the king?” they asked Nehemiah.

Nehemiah answered his detractors that Jehovah would prosper his servants. “We will arise and build,” he said, “for we have the king’s blessing. And because you have no portion, no right, and no memorial in the city of Jerusalem, you have no right to tell us what we can do.”

The work of building was divided so that different groups of men were assigned to rebuild different

⁸⁴ Sanballat was a Moabite who was in authority in Samaria.

portions of the wall. The entire wall was being rebuilt at the same time, and the work went rapidly.

Sanballat, however, was not willing to let the matter rest. In his determination to stop the work, he mocked the workers and spoke out against their work to the Samaritan army. “What will these Jews do?” he asked. “Will they fortify themselves with stones from rubbish heaps?”

Tobiah also mocked the Jewish builders and made sarcastic comments. “The quality of the work is poor,” he said. “If a fox were to go up on this wall that they are building, the fox’s weight would break it down.” But work on the wall continued despite the opposition.

When Sanballat and those who listened to his rantings saw that the city walls continued to rise, they determined to do battle against Jerusalem, but Nehemiah and his workers offered their prayers to Jehovah and set men to keep watch over the city both day and night.

As fear and fatigue increased and the project slowed, Nehemiah spoke to his people to encourage them. “Do not fear our enemies,” he told them. “Trust in Jehovah, who is great and revered, then fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.”

Once Judah’s enemies discovered that Nehemiah and his workers knew of their plot and that God had brought their evil counsel to naught, the workers were able to return to their labors with renewed energy. From that time forth, half the men worked on the wall while the other half stood guard. Every man labored, as it were, with one hand, while holding his weapon in the other. Those with homes outside Jerusalem no longer left the city at night. They labored on the wall by day and stood guard by night, and none of the laborers took off their clothes except to wash them.

Nehemiah warned the people, because the wall was large and the workers were widely scattered, that when the trumpet sounded, they should assemble quickly to the sound. They were assured that Jehovah would fight for them if it became necessary to fight.⁸⁵

When Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem learned that there were no longer breaches in the city wall, they requested Nehemiah to come out to meet them at a village on the plain of Ono. Nehemiah understood, however, that the motive of these men was to lure him out of the city to do him harm. Thus, he responded to

their message saying, “I will not come because I am doing a great work. Why should my work cease while I go to see you?”

Four times Nehemiah’s detractors sent their invitation, and four times he gave the same reply. On the fifth time, Sanballat’s servant came with an open letter in his hand. The letter said, “It has been reported that the Jews seek to rebel against King Artaxerxes and that you are building this wall so that you can be king. It is also reported that you have appointed prophets who are preaching that you will be king in Judah. If you will not come now and counsel with us, we will report this matter to the king.”

Nehemiah was furious at such accusations. He knew that this was no more than blackmail, and he sent a quick reply: “There are no such things done. You have only imagined them in your hearts.”

The devious opposition continued. Shemaiah, who had been a faithful helper, also came to Nehemiah, prophesying that his life was in danger. “Hide in the temple,” he urged Nehemiah, “so your enemies cannot murder you in the night.”

“Should a man such as I flee?” Nehemiah asked Shemaiah. “Who indeed is my enemy that a man such as I would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!”

Then Nehemiah perceived that Jehovah had not sent Shemaiah but that Sanballat and Tobiah had hired him. They sought to use Shemaiah to make him afraid for his life so that they might give an evil report.

But in spite of the myriad distractions and the efforts of Judah’s enemies to thwart the work, the city walls were eventually finished and the gates were hung. This was the cause of great distress for Sanballat and his heathen friends, for they perceived that completion of the walls was the work of Jehovah.

Because there were but few inhabitants in Jerusalem, Nehemiah gave his brother Hanani charge over the city with careful instructions about opening and closing the gates and how the gates should be controlled. Then, as he had promised, Nehemiah returned to Persia to his position as cupbearer in the house of Artaxerxes.

⁸⁵ In addition to the problems caused by Judah’s enemies during the construction of the city wall, there were also internal problems that hindered the work. These problems and Nehemiah’s solution are discussed in story “228—Should You Not Walk in the Fear of God?”