

Nehemiah, Lesson #3

Good Questions have groups talking

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Creative element

Consider this quote by Theodore Roosevelt:

It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.”

“Citizenship in a Republic,”
Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910

As we study this passage today, consider how Nehemiah was the quintessential “man in the arena.” If you would like to see this clip in a movie, [look here](#).

Nehemiah 2.19 - 20; 4.1 - 14¹

ACCOUNTABILITY

- What three fellowships do we have schedule for the next three months? Who will invite every member? Who will help invite every prospect? Who will help plan the party?

OPEN

- Let’s each share your name and who was the school bully when you were in school—if you can remember.

DIG

1. **As we read through section, see what you can about Nehemiah that is admirable?**¹

¹Anyone can go through life as a destroyer; God has called His people to be builders. What an example Nehemiah is to us! Trace his “so” statements and see how God used him: “So I prayed” (2:4); “So I came to Jerusalem” (v. 11); “So they strengthened their hands for this good work” (v. 18); “So built we the wall” (4:6); “So we labored in the work” (v. 21); “So the wall was finished” (6:15).

Were it not for the dedication and determination that came from his faith in a great God, Nehemiah never would have accepted the challenge or finished the work. He had never seen the verse, but what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:58 was what kept him going: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (nkjv).

No matter how difficult the task, or how strong the opposition, Be Determined! As Dr. V. Raymond Edman used to say, “It is always too soon to quit.” – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

2. Nehemiah 2:19 introduces us to Nehemiah's constant nemesis. If you were casting a movie, who might you pick for these characters: Sanballat and Tobiah?²
3. Were Sanballat and Tobiah God followers?³
4. What was Sanballat and Tobiah's method of stopping Nehemiah?⁴
5. Describe a time when you were mocked. What did that feel like?⁵
6. Why is ridicule so a popular past-time? Why is it so much fun?⁶

²Nehemiah's enemies (2:10). The two men mentioned here prove to be persistent enemies of the Jews and Nehemiah. Sanballat was the chief political enemy of Nehemiah. He was governor of Samaria at the time (cf. 4:2), a position confirmed by a letter found by archeologists dated to 407 B.C. which names his sons, and calls him pehah of Samaria. Tobiah is thought to be a Jew with lands in Gilead. The phrase "Ammonite official" refers to his position as governor of Ammonite lands rather than to his race. Tobiah had many family ties with Jews in Jerusalem (cf. 3:4, 30; 13:4-7). – Bible Reader's Companion.

³Nehemiah's enemies were well informed of his activities, no doubt by friends within Jerusalem. Apparently both Sanballat and Tobiah considered themselves Yahwists, if we can judge by the names of their children; but they were syncretistic. Such a mixture of worship of Yahweh along with adherence to other gods and pagan customs really was paganism. Nehemiah would not accept their brand of syncretistic Yahwism but testified that God would prosper the Jews who served him alone. Some of the Jewish families, however, did form relationships with those of mixed allegiance, and they faced the anger of Nehemiah. Later one of Sanballat's daughters was married to a member of the Jewish high priest's family (Neh 13:28). – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

⁴Here is the enemy -- three men. This is not a nice little trio to have around you, friend. I suppose that every man of God not only has wonderful men around him, but he also has a few like Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian. The enemy will use different methods to try to discourage you. Generally, ridicule is the first method the enemy tries. – Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

⁵When I was converted, I worked in a bank and I had gone the limit into sin, I must confess. I was in grave sin. I shall never forget the reaction when I made the announcement that I was resigning and that the Lord had called me into the ministry. I did not know anyone could be ridiculed like that. I remember how discouraged I was when I left that place. I felt like giving it all up and going back and saying, "Look fellows, I was kidding you. I just want to come back and be one of you again." But I soon found that I was frozen out. I had lost a lot of my so-called friends. It was during the days of prohibition, and they were only interested in drinking rot-gut liquor and running around. I went back to school and, oh, how discouraged I felt. The enemy started out by using ridicule. He doesn't do that to me anymore. That is the first phase of the devil's warfare against you, friends. He will have folks make fun of you as a Christian. At times you will find the going extremely rough. It was true of Nehemiah. The three leading enemies used the weapon of ridicule at first to deter the people from attempting the herculean project of rebuilding the walls and gates. – Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

⁶When the Eiffel Tower was built in Paris, there were many objections. Prominent names like Gounod, Leconte de Lisle, Coppee, Bennat, and Maupassant were signed on a petition to have it taken down. These leaders, and many others, feared that it would topple to the ground. It took more than twenty-five years to convince that citizenry that there was nothing to fear.

(continued...)

7. What are some forms that ridicule can take?⁷
8. How did Nehemiah respond to the ridicule? What can we learn from Nehemiah about handling ridicule?⁸
9. In verse 20 we find that Nehemiah uses a word that we tend to not use in church very much: success. What are some other verses that speak of success?⁹
10. We will be skipping Nehemiah 3. Skim over it. Do any verses stand out?¹⁰
11. Several times in chapter 3 (see verse 23) we see where Nehemiah assigned someone to build the wall near their house. Why do you think he did this?¹¹

⁶(...continued)

Now Parisians vie for a place to live or a place to do business—in the shadow of the tall pile of steel.

Progress is always the victim of criticism, or protest and ridicule. In the crowd that had gathered to see the first locomotive make its trial run, was a man who prophesied:

“It will never start.”

When it finally chugged down the rails, someone asked him what he thought now. He groaned: “It will never stop.” – Encyclopedia of 15,000 Illustrations: Signs of the Times.

⁷Ridicule is one of the most effective means there is to discourage us from acting. The superior smirk, the raised eyebrow, the mocking laugh, have kept many a young Christian from living out his or her faith.

Nehemiah kept his eyes on God, and we must too. – Bible Reader’s Companion.

⁸For the sake of the workers, Nehemiah’s response to this first oppositional strategy was important. His answer had three parts: (1) He did not speak of his authority or the king’s but of his trust in “the God of heaven.” (2) Nehemiah advised his people to ignore the ridicule and threats and simply work. (3) He refused to compromise. He denied his opponents a share in the work, the land, or the worship of the Jewish community (cf. Ezra 4:3). – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

⁹Jos 1:7 - 8 Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

Neh 1:11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” I was cupbearer to the king.

Ps 118:25 O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success.

¹⁰The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors. Nehemiah 3:5 (NIV)

Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters. Nehemiah 3:12 (NIV)

¹¹This is a basic leadership principle of ownership. People are motivated by self-interest. Good leaders try to capitalize on this for the greater good.

12. In chapter 4, Sanballat and friends resume their ridicule. What are some other biblical examples of people who were ridiculed for following God?¹²
13. Verse 4. How did Nehemiah respond to this ridicule?¹³
14. There is an old childhood saying that goes, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me.” Is this true? What do we learn about this from Nehemiah’s story?¹⁴
15. Have you ever heard anyone pray this kind of “God, get ‘em!” kind of prayer?¹⁵
16. Verse 6. What complications come to a project when it reaches about the half-way point?¹⁶

¹²British critic and author Thomas Carlyle called ridicule “the language of the devil.” Some people who can stand bravely when they are shot at will collapse when they are laughed at.

Shakespeare called ridicule “paper bullets of the brain,” but those bullets have slain many a warrior.

It is not unusual for the enemy to insult the servants of God. Goliath ridiculed David when the shepherd boy met the giant with only a sling in his hand (1 Sam. 17:41-47). Jesus was mocked by the soldiers during His trial (Luke 22:63-65) and by the rabble while He was hanging on the cross (23:35-37); and some of the heroes of the faith had to endure mocking (Heb. 11:36). When the enemy laughs at what God’s people are doing, it is usually a sign that God is going to bless His people in a wonderful way. When the enemy rages on earth, God laughs in heaven (Ps. 2:4). – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹³How did Nehemiah respond to this ridicule? He prayed and asked God to fight the enemy for him. This is the third time you find Nehemiah praying (1:4-11; 2:4), and it will not be the last time. Nehemiah didn’t allow himself to get detoured from his work by taking time to reply to their words. The Lord had heard the sneering taunts of Sanballat and Tobiah, and He would deal with them in His own way and His own time. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁴The things people say may hurt us, but they can never harm us, unless we let them get into our system and poison us. If we spend time pondering the enemy’s words, we will give Satan a foothold from which he can launch another attack closer to home. The best thing to do is to pray and commit the whole thing to the Lord; and then get back to your work! Anything that keeps you from doing what God has called you to do will only help the enemy. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁵Nehemiah’s prayer resembles the “imprecatory psalms,” such as Psalms 69; 79; and 139:19-22. We must remember that Nehemiah was praying as a servant of God concerned for the glory of God. He was not requesting personal vengeance but official vindication for God’s people. The enemy had blasphemously provoked God before the builders, and this was a terrible sin. The opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah against the Jews was in reality opposition against God. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁶We often have a burst of enthusiasm at the beginning. When we get near the end and we can see the finish line, we get some energy from that. But, the middle! We have been going long enough to get tired. The burst of adrenalin we had at first has waned. We are too far away from the end to feel any energy from that.

17. Verse 6 says they worked with all their heart? How important is wholeheartedness to success? Does anything good ever come to those who are not wholehearted?¹⁷
18. What price do people pay for luke-warmness, for lack of wholeheartedness?¹⁸
19. Verse 9 contains two secrets of success. What are they?¹⁹
20. Verse 13. Besides praying and encouraging the people, what did Nehemiah do in response to his enemies?²⁰

¹⁷The first principle in making an impact for God is wholeheartedness. “In everything that he undertook in the service of God’s temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. And so he prospered” (2 Chron. 31:21). The Apostle Paul exhorts us along similar lines, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men (Col. 3:23). Solomon put it this way: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (Ecc. 9:10). As we read these passages, we can see that God wants people who are eager and zealous. But what do we find to be the spirit of the age in which we live? Are we frequently exhorted to wholeheartedness? Hardly. Almost daily we hear people telling us, “Take it easy” / “Don’t work too hard” / “Don’t overdo it.” The dangerous thing is that this lack of wholeheartedness can be picked up by Christian leaders. When it is, it spells mediocrity and failure in their work. – Be the Leader You Were Meant to Be: Growing Into the Leader God Called You to Be.

¹⁸Leaders must consider the following fact. They are not only building for the present but also for the future. If their hearts are lukewarm, what will the future hold? What will the people they have trained be like? Will their hearts burn with wholehearted zeal for God? Not if the leaders’ hearts are lukewarm, for only fire kindles fire. When Jesus cleansed the temple, His actions reminded the apostles of the Old Testament Scripture, “Zeal for your house will consume me” (John 2:17; see Ps. 119:139). Both passages speak of being consumed with zeal for God. When was the last time you reminded anyone of a Scripture that spoke of being devoured with holy zeal? Is an eager and ardent spirit as out of date as the horse and buggy? Are cheerleaders at high school sports events the only ones left in our society who enter into their jobs with zeal and gusto? A truly Christlike leader will demonstrate the same fire and intensity that Jesus displayed.

Wholeheartedness and zeal are the outgrowths of a love that burns in the leader’s heart. From there it spreads to the hearts and lives of others, who catch the flame of that spirit. Some feel that leaders should “play it cool” lest they frighten off some people. This is not so. If the leader plays an adult game, then adults will come to play. The first commandment is still in the book: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” {Mark 12:29-30}. – Be the Leader You Were Meant to Be: Growing Into the Leader God Called You to Be.

¹⁹I love this verse, for it demonstrates the importance of BOTH warm hearted spirituality (prayed to their God) AND clear-headed practicality. We don’t need to be godless pragmatist, and we don’t need to be so spiritually minded we are no earthly good. They narrow way suggests that we are both.

²⁰I would outline the book of Nehemiah around these success principles:
 Ask in prayer.
 Aim – set a goal.
 Act – get going. Take action. Do something.

(continued...)

21. Let's summarize. What do you learn about following God from this passage?²¹
22. How can we support one another in prayer this week?

1.(19) But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" (20) 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." Nehemiah 2:19-20 (NIV)

1 When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, 2 and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble--burned as they are?"

3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building--if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"

4 Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. 8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. 9 But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

10 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."

11 Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."

12 Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."

13 Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. 14 After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." Neh 4:1-14 (NIV)

²⁰(...continued)

Assess. Ask: is what I am doing getting me the results I desire. If you keep on doing what you have been doing you will keep on getting what you have been getting?

Adjust. This is what Nehemiah does here. This is the genius of Nehemiah's leadership. If we would be successful at almost anything, we must adjust the plan based on the feedback we receive.

²¹The issue of combining practicality and spirituality is one real key to me. Another is the importance of adaptability.