

“What Is This Thing That Ye Do?”

Nehemiah 2:17-20

The enemies of Nehemiah and the Israelites that were determined to make things better in Jerusalem (mentioned in 1:10) mocked them and asked this very thought-provoking question. They meant the question to be intimidating but it serves as a reminder for us today that people are watching how we act, what we do, how we respond to trials, etc. What happened in response to this question in the days to come, as recorded in the book of Nehemiah, is a good example for us to follow, knowing that we are not fighting this battle alone.

When I preached through this text many years ago, I addressed this text from the idea of the church needing revival. There is much here we can learn as it relates to revival, but what this text (and what follows) shows is not just the need for revival, but what that revival is to produce. Although the situation in Jerusalem was a very real, physical problem, there are striking parallels to the spiritual decline of the family and the church in recent decades. As many have said in the past, “As goes the home so goes the nation.” The Psalmist said, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance.” When we cease to honor God in our homes and in our lives (and, as is the case all too often, in our churches) then we will cease to honor God in our nation, and as such, He will withhold His blessings from us.

Nehemiah has called the people together, having gone out without their knowledge to view the situation in the city, and he is now calling them to action. No more time to wait – no more time to rest

– it was now time to work. Spiritually applied, it was time for revival to produce results that could be seen. Revival will produce real-world results, as history has shown over and over.

In his “motivational” address of the people, he gives a few things that will help them get the job done. These same simple principles are still valid and relevant today.

I. RECOGNIZE WHAT NEEDS DONE – VS. 17

A. The ultimate goal for Nehemiah in addressing the need was to eliminate the reproach of the enemies upon the people of Israel in Jerusalem.

B. “Ye see the distress that we are in”

1. The word for “distress” – הַרְעָה – is a word that means, in its most common usage, bad or evil. Here, it is speaking to the evil case, the very dire situation they found themselves in.

Let me say at this point – the situation was one of their own making, for the most part. They would have known that the most important thing they could have done for their own security was to rebuild the walls and the gates when they returned to the land, but they didn’t. It seems they either just didn’t care, or they were waiting for someone else to come along and do the work for them. Either way, they really had no one else to blame but themselves.

2. “That we are in” – this is a verbless clause in the Hebrew, where the verb “are” is

implied. They had been in the land for some 90 years – two generations now had had the opportunity to rebuild the walls and they chose to build their own houses, and care for their own selfish needs rather than consider the good of others.

There's a sociological lesson to be learned here. If we, as believers (and as a church) don't care for society around us – both the good that it offers, as well as the bad that it holds – then we are no better than the enemies that came against Nehemiah. If we don't show we care for others, then we certainly aren't demonstrating the love of Christ.

Matthew 22:36–40

³⁶ Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

³⁷ Jesus said unto him, **Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.**

³⁸ **This is the first and great commandment.**

³⁹ **And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.**

⁴⁰ **On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.**

C. Nehemiah then describes this distressing state that they were in:

1. "How Jerusalem lieth waste"
2. "And the gates thereof are burned with fire"

D. "Come, and let us build up the wall of

Jerusalem”

1. He didn't wait to allow committees to meet and work out all the solutions; he didn't appoint a board to consider all the ramifications. He simply said, "Here's the need – lets get busy and do the job."
2. "Come" – לָכוּ – the imperative form of the verb הֵלַךְ – a verb that means, in its simplest form, to walk. The idea is to move toward something – here, Nehemiah is telling the children of Israel to follow him in the direction of the goal of rebuilding the walls and the gates.
3. "And let us build up the wall of Jerusalem"
 - a) We will see a principle found in this verse throughout the work of Nehemiah in Jerusalem – it was a joint effort – "let us." He wasn't in it alone – in fact, even if he wanted to, he could not have done it alone.

There is no way one person can do the work that God wants done, that needs done, in the church today. If we are not all going to work together then this church will not be what God wants it to be.

- b) The need was that the walls and gates needed rebuilt. Spiritually, in our lives and in the ministry of the church, the need is that the protective "walls and gates" of our lives have been broken down by sin and the flesh and in revival those walls need rebuilt.

E. "That we be no more a reproach"

1. They were laughed at and mocked by their neighbors because they had lived in the rubble of the city for so long. “[T]o their neighbours about them, who scoffed at them as a defenceless people and frequently came in upon them, and spoiled and plundered them of their goods and substance” (Gill).
2. To many people, to many neighbors of churches, especially in this country, we have lived so long in the contentment of our situation that we are a “reproach” to them. They don’t see us as having any impact on society; they don’t see us as having any value at all to offer them; they just see us as a “club,” of sorts, that has no real purpose to anyone but the “club.”

II. DETERMINE TO DO WHAT NEEDS DONE – VS. 18

A. The first part of this verse is a motivational speech, given to encourage the people to get busy and do the work. Part of that motivation was to show them that God was with Nehemiah when he set out on this project, and if God was with him, He would be with them as well.

B. A lesson to be learned from this is that we need to tell others what God has done for us – it will encourage them to know He will do the same for them.

C. The second part is the response of the people to Nehemiah’s motivation – “Let us rise up and build.”

1. “Let us” (part of the verb) – again, we see

the desire to get all involved – a joint effort.

2. “Rise up and build” – וַיָּקוּמוּ וַיִּבְנֶינּוּ – the people took the initiative here to get up and get busy doing the work. They say the need and were determined to do something about it.

D. “So they strengthened their hands for this good work”

1. “So they strengthened” – “they vigorously set about the good work” (K&D). The verb (קָדַח) is in a tense (Piel – וַיִּזְדַּקְוּ) that denotes strong action or emotion. Here, in using a fairly common verb meaning to be strong, or to strengthen, it carries the idea that the people took it upon themselves to set aside anything else that they were doing, “roll up their sleeves,” so to speak, and put themselves in a very serious, active way, into rebuilding the walls.
2. “Their hands” – metaphorical in use here – they put themselves to work.
3. “For this good work” – the words “this” and “work” are supplied by the translators for ease of understanding. This literally reads simply “for the good” – לְטוֹבָה. The reason “work” is added is because that was the “good” that was being done.

Anytime we do something for the Lord it is considered to be “good.” As a church, the work we do for Christ is a “good work” and will be rewarded as such, but only if we do

it for the right reason and we are united together in the task. Otherwise, the good work will be of no value – will not accomplish what God intends.

Philippians 2:13

¹³ For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

2 Thessalonians 1:11

¹¹ Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power:

2 Timothy 1:9

⁹ Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began,

III. KNOW THERE WILL BE OPPOSITION TO DOING WHAT NEEDS DONE – VS. 19

A. We find a couple enemies here that were seen earlier and will be seen again throughout the book of Nehemiah.

1. "Sanballat the Horonite"

- a) Mentioned ten times in the book.
- b) "Sanballat" is a Babylonian name meaning "the moon god gives life" (Zodhiates).

What is meant by "the Horonite" is relatively unknown. Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible gives this description: "An epithet applied to Sanballat, who opposed Nehemiah in his

attempt to restore Jerusalem. The name may denote a citizen of Horonaim, or, more probably, of Beth-horon." Horonaim is a city of Moab; Beth-horon was a town 10-12 miles north of Jerusalem.

- c) The Lexham Bible Dictionary (LBD) refers to Sanballat as the "Horonite governor of Samaria."

2. "Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite"

- a) Mentioned fifteen times in the book.
- b) The LBD refers to Tobiah as, "Wealthy governor of Ammon with strong Judaeen connections..."
- c) His name, oddly enough, means "pleasing to Jehovah" (GHCLLOT), or "goodness of Jehovah" (McClintock and Strong Biblical Cyclopedia).

Zondervan's PBD: "The founder of a family who returned from the Babylonian Exile but could not prove their Israelitish descent (Ezra 2:60; Neh. 7:62...). An Ammonite 'servant,' probably, a Persian governmental official, who joined with Sanballat and others in persistently opposing the work of Nehemiah. Both he and his son Jehohanan were married to Jewish women. He was in high favor with the high priest, Eliashib, who gave him a guest room in the Temple compound...Some scholars think that the house of Tobiah which in the 3rd cent. B.C. vied with the house of Oniah for the high priesthood was descended from Tobiah."

3. "Geshem the Arabian"

- a) Only mentioned twice in Nehemiah.
 - b) "We may conclude that he was an inhabitant of Arabia Petraea or of the Arabian desert, and probably the chief of a tribe. 'Gashum said it", made him a type of those who create a common report." (Smith's Bible Dictionary)
4. We can thus make the observation that a Babylonian, an Ammonite (with possible Jewish heritage), and an Arabian joined together to oppose the work of the Jews in Jerusalem.

The opposition will always be multi-faceted in our work for the Lord.

B. One thought to consider as it relates to opposition – it's important to know who they are and from where they will attack. What is their "world view?" What is their reason for attack?

C. These three (and the crowds they led) "laughed us to scorn, and despised us" – something the enemy will always do to try and take our desire for service away and to instill discouragement in our way.

- 1. "Laughed us to scorn" – literally, "and they laughed at us" (וַיִּלְעָגוּ לָנוּ) – they simply mocked the people and the leaders.
- 2. "Despised us" – they felt them contemptuous and the work they were about to do equally abhorrent.

D. "And said, What is this thing that ye do?"

– the very question was itself a mock. “This thing” – they knew what it was they were going to do but they wouldn’t even acknowledge it by name (at this point).

E. “Will ye rebel against the king?” – this was what their point was in this case. They wanted to instill fear in the heart of the people – plant a seed of discord at this early stage to try and disrupt the work before it even began.

IV. DO WHAT NEEDS DONE – TOGETHER – VS. 20

A. The end result of any “motivational” speech is to get people to do something. If there is nothing to show as a result, then there was no benefit to the speech.

B. “Then answered I them, and said unto them” – there are times when we need to answer the enemy, confront the opposition, and do so with both the truth of the Word of God, as well as our own personal triumphs over sin and the enemy in the past.

C. “The God of heaven, he will prosper us” – and this is still true for us today.

D. “Therefore we his servants will arise and build” – going back to the beginning, they weren’t just talking about it anymore. They were actually going to do what needed done – together.

E. “But ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem” – if you’re not

going to help, then you can simply leave. You don't belong here; you don't have a say in what happens.

F. Applying to the work of the believer today, unless someone has taken an active roll in the work, has put something of value into it, they have no voice, no say, in what happens. Past input is not valid – it's what we are doing now that matters.

Nehemiah didn't care why the walls were still down and the gates hadn't been reinstalled. He didn't care what got them to the place they were – he only cared what they were doing right then and what they determined they were going to do.

Conclusion: Do you really want revival? Many preachers, and many believers (so-called at least) say they want revival; that they are praying for revival, but when it comes down to it, they are unwilling to do what needs done as a result of that revival. Too many are the "Sanballats" and "Tobias" and "Geshems" of Nehemiah – they are here to tell us it can't be done. Or, they are there to tell us how to do it but aren't willing to "put their money where their mouth is."

If you don't do anything for the Lord, He's not obligated to do much for you – it's that simple.