

A Bible Adventure

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The Man Who Built a Dream

A retelling of the book of Nehemiah

In the fifth century BC, I, Nehemiah, served in the honored position of royal cupbearer entrusted to bring unpoisoned drink to King Artaxerxes of Persia. This was at the time when God's chosen people had been carried away into captivity as a punishment for their sins and rebellion against God.

When I, being a Jew, heard that Hanani and certain men of Judah had arrived from Jerusalem, over one thousand kilometers away, I was anxious for news about my people and immediately sent for them to come to the royal palace at Shushan.

I asked what life was like in Jerusalem, and Hanani recounted the sad story of affliction and suffering of those who'd returned from captivity. The once great wall of the city was still in ruins and the gates were burned down, yet no one had done anything to rebuild.

Upon hearing this, I wept and fasted and prayed for several days. I realized that we, the people of Israel, had suffered these troubles because of our own sins. I confessed to the Lord that I and my people and my father's house had done wickedly.

"Many years ago, Lord," I prayed. "You warned us through Your servant Moses that if we were a rebellious house, You would scatter us among the nations, and we'd be taken captive by our enemies, who would treat us cruelly. Now all of this has come to pass. But You also said that if we would repent and turn to You and once again be obedient, You would bless us and bring us again to our land."¹

My heart burned with the desire to help my people in Jerusalem, but how could a servant of the king obtain permission to go? As I prayed, the thought came to me that surely God could do a miracle.

"O Lord," I prayed, "have mercy on me in the sight of King Artaxerxes by giving me his favor!"

See "In Defense of the Poor"
for another story on Nehemiah's life.

During the months that followed, it became increasingly difficult for me to hide my sorrow. One day, as I brought wine to the king (the queen was also sitting with him), he took note of my ever-saddening face, as I was usually cheerful in his presence.

“You are not sick,” he said, “so what is causing you such sorrow?”

“O king,” I answered, “how can I not be sad when I know that the city where my fathers are buried is in ruinous heaps, and my people are in great trouble?”

“Well, then, how can I help you?” the king asked.

I took the plunge and requested that the king send me to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. The king was pensive for a minute or so. I had been a diligent and loyal

servant to him—and King Artaxerxes desired to be kind to me.

“How long will you be away?” he asked. I gave him a specific time, and the king granted my request.

Along with personal letters of recommendation, and appointing me governor of Judah, Artaxerxes authorized the keeper of the royal forest near Jerusalem to give me all the timber needed for construction. The king also gave me a military escort for the long and hazardous journey.

After arriving in Jerusalem, I inspected the wall under cover of night because many enemies existed who would oppose any strengthening of the city’s defenses. Therefore, I told no one of my intentions until I had a well-devised plan.

When the time was ready, I called together the rulers, priests, and nobles of the city and told them how the hand of God was with me to rebuild Jerusalem and about the support I had received from the king.

“Let us rise up and rebuild!” the people shouted in response.

My faith and vision sparked a flame of new hope in the hearts of all who heard me. Before my arrival, they had been discouraged and without direction, but now they found themselves happily uniting to work toward a common goal.

Not all was well, however. Israel had enemies. Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite were angry that someone was seeking to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Soon they launched vicious rumors in

an attempt to discredit my leadership, accusing me of rebelling against the king by fortifying Jerusalem’s defenses.

But I would not be intimidated. Instead, I replied that God would give us success and that we, His servants, were going to rebuild Jerusalem, and that they had neither part in it nor the right to interfere.

At once, I organized the work force by allotting a portion of the wall for each family to rebuild, confident that they would reach their goal. The people also had a mind to work, and when my enemies saw that the wall was rising daily before them, they were outraged, and their verbal attacks increased. They stood at the construction site and continually mocked the workers and me.

“What are you doing?” they shouted. “Do you actually think you’ll be able to rebuild that huge wall? Your construction is so weak that if a fox ran into it, the whole thing would cave in!”

But the more they insulted us, the more I prayed, and the more God gave me strength to continue. Finally, when Sanballat and Tobiah saw that the wall was nearly finished, they plotted to stop the work by infiltrating the city and slaying the workmen one by one in order to instill fear in the troops, thus breaking their morale.

Nevertheless, when I heard the rumors of their intentions, instead of

cowering, I armed the workers with swords, bows, and spears, and posted a twenty-four-hour guard.

“Be not afraid of them,” I shouted. “Remember the Lord, your God! Fight for your people, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!”

From then on, the workers worked with their swords at their sides, and those who fetched building materials worked with one hand and held a weapon with the other. We were so vigilant that we even slept fully clothed so that we were ready to jump to the rescue in case of any trouble.

When it was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah that the wall and the gates were nearly complete, they sent me a special envoy, saying, “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the Plain of Ono.”

But I knew that this invitation to talk peace was a trap to harm me.

“I am doing a great work and I cannot come down,” I replied. “Why should the work cease while I go to speak with you?”

The enemy then sent four more messages, but when I still refused to meet them, they sent an open letter saying that reliable sources

had informed them that I’d fortified Jerusalem in order to rebel against King Artaxerxes. They threatened that if I refused to negotiate with them, they would report my treasonous conduct to the king.

Disloyal nobles of Judah acted as spies for Tobiah, reporting my every move while slyly trying to convince me of Tobiah’s supposed goodness, all in an attempt to discourage and confuse me. Yet I kept my eyes on the Lord and on the work.

“Lord,” I prayed, “they are trying to frighten us, thinking we are weakened by much labor. But now, Lord, strengthen my hands.”

True, the people had grown weary with building under the constant barrage of misinformation from our enemies, but my faith remained undaunted, and I persevered. The secret was not depending on my own strength, but seeking the Lord for His strength and wisdom, and God blessed me mightily for this.

Soon the seemingly impossible job of rebuilding the wall was finished—and in only fifty-two days! Jubilation filled the city when the gigantic wood and iron gates were finally mounted and shut. Those same people, who before my arrival had

been weary, discouraged, and without hope, were now singing in the streets for joy that the work was finally completed!

“When all of the surrounding nations heard about this,” I later wrote, “they were afraid and lost their self-confidence, realizing that we had done this work with the help of our God.”

Because of our faith and obedience, God poured out His Spirit upon us in a tremendous spiritual awakening. The whole nation gathered together while the priests taught them the Word of the Lord.

For seven days, the people spent each morning listening to the Word of God and confessing their sins, making things right with the Lord. Everyone praised God and counted their blessings, which the Lord had given them, in spite of their many mistakes and sins.

And as the multitude began to realize what the Lord had intended for them all along and how the Lord really

loved them in spite of their sins, they began to lament for their past failures. But I stood up before the great congregation to encourage their hearts.

“Neither mourn nor weep!” I said. “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and give some to the poor who have nothing. This day is sacred to the Lord. Do not be sorrowful, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!”²

See “Heroes of the Bible: Nehemiah”
for more on this fascinating Bible character.

Footnotes:

¹ Deuteronomy 4:27–31, 12:5

² See Nehemiah 8:10.