

What is Waiting Outside the Wall



Gary Wilkerson March 19, 2012

Nehemiah is known as the man who led the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. Israel was in captivity when God first stirred Nehemiah's heart toward this noble work. And when Nehemiah asked the Persian king to let him return to Jerusalem for this purpose, God moved the king's heart to grant his request.

Overwhelming joy flooded the hearts of the people when the glorious rebuilding was finished. They held a dedication ceremony with the priest Ezra reading aloud the Law — an event that took all day. As the Israelites listened, their hearts melted in conviction, and they fell to their knees in repentance and worship.

Here was an important moment in Israel's history — a cause for both great celebration and heartfelt thanksgiving. The symbols of God's presence among his people had been restored — and the people's hearts were renewed in faithfulness and gratitude.

It must have been a rewarding moment for Nehemiah, who had served as Israel's leader and captain through the captivity. Yet his work wasn't finished on that day. Even at that wondrous moment, there remained a real threat to Israel, both inside and outside the walls.

As Nehemiah strolled through the city on the sabbath, he noticed something that astonished him.

"In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day" (Nehemiah 13:15).

Nehemiah was astonished at what he beheld: People busily made wine, merchants shouted orders, donkeys came and went, carrying loads of grain. And it was all happening on God's designated day of rest and worship. The people's focus wasn't on communion with God — there was no adoration, gratitude or sacrifice of praise — but on their own self-serving agenda.

I can hear the words of the prophets racing through Nehemiah's mind: "My people have forgotten me for days without number," "My people are bent on backsliding." Nehemiah then sprang into action, racing up to the city leaders. "Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day?'" (13:17).

Nehemiah saw something these men didn't: *God's people had quickly returned to the things that robbed them of their spiritual life in the first place.* Nehemiah said to them, "Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath" (13:18).

It's important to understand just how central the sabbath was to Israel. It constituted the core of their relationship with God. Through this holy ordinance God was declaring, "I have set aside an entire day to enjoy and be with my people. I want to walk with them in intimacy, as I did with Adam and Eve in the garden. My sabbath is the culmination of their days — a time to be spent in my presence and to refocus their hearts."

Now this blessed people were profaning God's invitation. Nehemiah put a stop to it right away: "As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day" (13:19).

Here is the spiritual reality behind what Nehemiah was doing: *He had identified the forces that kept God's people from being free.* An earlier generation in Israel had also been greatly blessed by God, but they, too, "forgot God" and lived according to their own desires. That caused all kinds of difficulties and led directly to the Persian captivity. Nehemiah saw that history was about to repeat itself, and it put a fright in his heart.

What this godly man saw has direct meaning for God's people today. Think of it: We have been saved by our Redeemer; we've been cleaned up, sanctified and consecrated for his purposes; and he has built holy walls around us that keep us in his Spirit.

Yet here is what's waiting outside the walls: "Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem" (13:20). Those merchants who did business on the sabbath didn't leave Jerusalem altogether. They camped outside the walls, waiting for the chance to get inside again.

Nehemiah would have some powerful words for those nagging merchants. But for now, I want to look at what those figures represent — both to Nehemiah's generation and to us today.

Nehemiah's story tells us how God not only drives out all bondages but also how he keeps us free.

Think of a young man who grew up in a home where his father abused his mother. He remembers the fists flying and his mother's tears and bruises. That young man vows in his heart, "I will not be like my father. I won't have that anger in my heart."

But when he gets married, an anger does begin to bubble up in him. He finds himself working to suppress the rage that he has carried his whole life. He prays and gets relief from the urge to fly into a rage — but later that same urge begins to resurface. This cycle happens so often that he begins to think, "I'll never get rid of this. I just have to learn to contain it and manage it."

What about a former addict? By God's grace and power she gets clean and sober, and her lifestyle reflects her gratitude to Jesus. But after a while, a coldness of heart sets in; the old things that drew her to addiction in the first place start to plague her again.

How do God's people keep the victory he gives them? How do we walk in a flow of continual grace without returning to those sinful habits that plagued us in the past?

I'm personally assaulted at times by despondency. My wife can see it coming on me — a sense that today will bring one more disappointment that drains my spirit and chips away at my trust. On those days, all I can see is a glass half empty. Kelly prays for me all day and reminds me, "Gary, keep your eyes off of circumstances. God has cast out every power of darkness that would thwart your belief in him. Don't let that dark voice entangle you again."

What about you? Is your battle with loneliness? Depression? A past hurt? It stirs in you an urge to escape so strongly that you finally give in to it. You turn back to your previous bondage — the thing that robbed you of freedom in the first place — and soon all sense of victory is gone. You wonder, "Isn't there some way to be free of this — and to stay free? I have moments of victory, but then I spiral down. This addiction comes right back on me."

Show me a sincere Christian who turns back to a sinful habit or addiction, and I'll show you somebody who's dealing with deep and powerful emotions — anger, hurt, fear, trying desperately to drown them out. That believer no longer pursues communion with God; in his mind it would just stir further shame. In effect, he has cut himself off from his one source of grace, freedom and victory.

The capture of Jerusalem is symbolic of what happens to us in our deepest struggles.

When Jerusalem fell it wasn't just captured — it was utterly decimated. The conquering Persians wanted to make sure the Israelites could never fortify themselves again. So they demolished everything: the Temple, the water wells, the protective outer walls.

Here is a perfect picture of what the enemy does to us in our struggles. He works to tear down every bit of spiritual infrastructure Christ has built up. Prayer, worship, Bible study — in short, our faithful communion with the Lord — all go out the window, chased by an overpowering sense of shame.

It was at this point in Israel's captivity that God stirred the heart of Nehemiah. This man was moved to see Jerusalem's walls rebuilt, and God made a way for it to happen. Tell me, is God stirring a similar passion in you as you read this message? Do you want to see your first love restored? Are you being tugged toward a renewed passion for Jesus, to see him re-enthroned in your heart?

Maybe your discouragements have turned you to "sabbath wine-making," instead of life-giving communion with your Redeemer. Or maybe you think in your condition, "I've been so far away from the Lord, it's too long to go back. I'd have to spend many years in counseling."

I beg to differ, based on God's Word. How long did it take Nehemiah and his band of workers to rebuild Jerusalem's mighty walls? *Fifty-two days*. That's less than two months — not even a modern city crew could accomplish it. But because God gave these servants his vision and passion, the small crew worked faithfully — and a glorious work was accomplished in virtually no time.

When God is on the move, he makes glorious things happen. And it doesn't take him long to accomplish his restoration of your spirit. He only asks you to take your eyes off your circumstances, because Jesus has already won your victory. Do you see your glass as half empty? He has declared otherwise. And he has already initiated the quick work of rebuilding your spiritual walls.

Nehemiah saw God's people rebuilding the city with one hand while tearing it down with the other.

What Nehemiah beheld was a strange mixture in the people. Not long before this, they had been weeping and worshipping, crying out to God. Yet, instead of maintaining a heart of repentance and gratitude, they clung to the things that had destroyed them — and would destroy them again.

Isn't this what some Christians do today? They go to church and worship on Sunday, and on Monday night they're in a bar. They pour over God's Word in the evening and gaze at web pornography late at night. Does this perhaps describe you? A double-heart condition has kept you in bondage. It won't let you enter glorious worship at church, but instead makes you question God's reality. You've sinned so often that you question whether God was ever real in your life: "Is there such a thing as victory? Or did I just imagine it all those times?"

Yes, it is possible for Christians to get so mixed in their practices that they wipe away every trace of victory and freedom. Now let me tell you the good news: The work that Nehemiah did on Israel's behalf is the same work the Holy Spirit does on our behalf today. He did three things in particular that reveal what God is doing for us now.

1. God commands the gates to be shut. "As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath" (13:19).

God starts moving to resolve your problem even before you know you have a problem. Nehemiah didn't tell those making wine to stop. He went straight to the city gates and shut off the source of their busyness. This is the kind of action the Puritans called "prevenient grace." God does it to prevent the circumstances that lead to your temptation.

I believe you're going to see the Spirit of God closing doors to your temptation, whatever it is — to rage, to drink, to view porn. This "prevenient grace" may appear from without, or it may be a sudden quickening within you. Either way it is God's plan of action unfolding to confront the forces coming against you.

2. God not only casts out but *keeps out* the tempting forces in your life. "I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice" (13:19-20).

Yes, those tempting forces are still lodged outside the gates, poised for a moment of weakness when they can come back in. Indeed, temptation always seems to be close by. But God's Spirit stands guard at the gate to

prevent the forces of temptation from reentering.

What a merciful work this is by our Lord. He not only casts out our sinful temptation — our despondency, our rage, our addiction — but he faithfully keeps it out. He knows this is something we can't do on our own. We may tremble, thinking, "Lord, at any moment I could get despondent again. I could explode in a rage. I could go back to alcohol or porn." But he stands guard faithfully at the gates of our heart.

In turn, God invites us to bring him the *source* of our temptation — our hurt, our anger, our disappointment — because he wants to address it and heal it, through intimate communion with him. This is the healing work that's at the heart of his sabbath command: We find lasting victory only in his presence. That's right — both our *salvation* and our *sanctification* come through ongoing fellowship with the Father.

3. God tells our tempter, "Back off!" "Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. But I warned them and said to them, 'Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.' From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath" (13:20-21).

We have a resource so profound, so powerful, so dynamic and glorious that it actually threatens our tempter. Jesus Christ himself stands between Satan and us, and whenever the enemy approaches, our Redeemer stops him in his tracks, saying, "Back off! You've come up against a power that will crush you. This gate isn't here to let you in, devil — it's here to let me out, so I can take you on. And if that happens, I'm going to pummel you."

Satan knows the Lord means business. So he shouts to us from outside the gate, "You can't stay free forever. Do you think you're stronger than your forefathers? They couldn't stay free either. It's in your nature to come back for more. Now, open these gates and let me in."

Jesus says differently. He asks Satan, "Why do you lodge outside the wall?" (13:21). In other words: "Why waste your time? You're not going to overcome my loved one. I am his victory. You don't stand a chance. Take one more step and I'll crush you under my foot."

That is the power we have! The very God of the universe is at work on our behalf — casting out our enemy, standing guard to keep him from reentering, and nourishing our broken spirits to health in communion with him.

At times we're going to be tempted to fall back into old patterns of sin. But there is no problem in our lives — no habit or emotion — that Jesus doesn't have power over. There's no enemy he can't keep outside the gates. He simply tells us, "If you'll fix your eyes on me — Christ, your victor — you will see the last of this enemy. He may buffet you, but I'll stand guard continually on the wall of your heart."

Ask the Holy Spirit, "Lord, be the voice of Nehemiah to me in my complacency. Confront the sins I tolerate. And restore my spiritual walls. Then heal the source of it all — my loneliness, my depression, my hurt.

"I trust you to keep me inside your safe walls, Lord. You're my victory in everything. Now, restore me to right relationship with you. And help me to turn to you again in all things, even my failures. Then I'll know your victory and freedom. Amen."

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