

STUDY GUIDE & DAILY READINGS

Sunday, February 1, 2009

Resolutions that Matter (Week 4)

EPIC

Nehemiah 6:1-9

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates- Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written:

“It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports, you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together.”

I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.”

They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.”

But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

The Word from the Bible, the Amplified Bible

The Book of Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah contains primarily an account of the career of Nehemiah and the story of Ezra’s public reading of the Torah. Whereas the book of Ezra focuses on the rebuilding of the Temple, the book of Nehemiah provides an account of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah 1-7 describe Nehemiah’s return to Palestine and his rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem; Nehemiah 8-10 depict Ezra’s reading of the law and the responses to it; Nehemiah 11-13 report additional acts of Nehemiah in restoring the community and nation of Israel.

Despite incredible obstacles, Nehemiah organizes the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, reestablishing the security of the nation. The task takes an incredibly short period of time – only 52 days, not counting the Sabbath days that were faithfully observed by Nehemiah and Ezra.

Authorized by the Persian authorities, Nehemiah led a group of Jewish exiles home and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, despite persistent opposition of Sanballat of Samaria and his allies. Nehemiah corrected abuses dealing with loans and the charging of interest. He provided for others at his table with no help from the taxes enjoyed by former governors.

Nehemiah 6:1-9

All the gaps in the wall have been filled. The doors on the gates have yet to be replaced, but Nehemiah is nearing the completion of the restoration. When Sanballat and Geshem hear about the progress on the wall, they propose a meeting with Nehemiah in an unknown village in the plain of Ono. This plain, primarily populated by Jews, is about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah detects an ambush to do him harm. Nehemiah declines their proposal courteously, noting that he is engaged in building the wall, and his absence might stop the work. This is exactly what Nehemiah’s enemies desire – to stop or hinder the rebuilding. At the very least, they wanted to eliminate Nehemiah so they could restore their influence in Jerusalem.

After his opponents have extended the invitation to meet four times (followed by the same rejection by Nehemiah), they send an open letter to Nehemiah. The letter accuses Nehemiah of open rebellion against Persia and the establishment of a new kingdom with Nehemiah as king. The open letter was like publishing these accusations in a newspaper. They obviously are trying to undermine Nehemiah's leadership and create a problem among his followers.

Sanballat notes cynically at the end of his letter that this open report will surely find its way back to the king. That is, Sanballat might leak it to him, or others who had heard about the letter might report it to the authorities. For the fifth time, Sanballat says, "Let's meet."

From Nehemiah's point of view, his opponents were trying to intimidate him, weaken the workers' resolve, and stop work on the wall. Nehemiah claims that he knows the secret thoughts and strategies of his opponents. Their threats, however, prove to be counterproductive and only solidify Nehemiah's resolve.

The last clause in verse nine is better translated, "But in fact, I redoubled my resolve." The hands that the opponents hoped to weaken become strong than ever. The section ends with Nehemiah calling on God for strength. This prayer is difficult to translate into English because we do not have words to express the strong absolute trust that Nehemiah has in God. It is not so much a request as an affirmation, "**Now God strengthens my hands!**"

I resolve in 2009 to finish what God has started in me – to create a life worth remembering.

A Clear and Compelling Focus — The challenges recorded in chapter 6 were not the first time Nehemiah is challenged. He has faced a reluctant work force and dangers from rival neighboring tribes. Now as Nehemiah is about to finish the task of rebuilding the wall, he comes under opposition once again. Unlike before, under threat of attack, this one comes in the form of deception and accusations. But just like before, Nehemiah's clear and compelling focus keeps him on task to finish the great job God had called him to do.

Persevere through distractions and disruptions — Nehemiah stays focused in spite of the distractions created by his opponents. "**Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave the same answer,**" says Nehemiah. In Psalm 121, the Israelites were tempted to find comfort and gratification in the false shrines on the hills surrounding Jerusalem, but true help and peace comes from the Lord alone. Distractions come in all shapes and sizes, and it is all too easy to get distracted or fatigued in your job, your relationships and with your family life.

Ignore gossip and negative accusations — Sanballat starts rumors and lies about Nehemiah, putting the project in jeopardy. Will Nehemiah's people turn against him, or will the Persians stop him? Nehemiah kept reminding himself of his divine purpose. We too should be reminded of these words, "**...nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.**"

Intuitive Faith — Nehemiah had a faith that drove him to trust and rely on God, even when logic and circumstances were clearly against him. It is this kind of risk-taking faith that drives us out of our comfort zone and into the purposes and tasks God gives to us.

Discussion Questions

- Do you have a compelling life focus? What is it?
- Do you maintain healthy boundaries in your life? What are they?
- Has gossip or false accusations ever hindered you from finishing a job, project or life dream? Explain.
- Have you ever stepped out and trusted God with intuitive faith? Describe your experience.

- Where in your life do you need to rely on your faith in God, instead of your logical thinking?
- What is one way God is calling you to step out and risk beyond your comfort zone?

Daily Readings

Please note: We begin the year by focusing our attention on the gospel of Mark. For the next several weeks we will move carefully through Mark's gospel following the message and story of Jesus the Christ. This is week four of our reading from Mark.

Monday, February 2 — *Read Mark 7:1-23.* This teaching narrative includes Jesus challenging the Pharisees and scribes. These men are experts on the law, and yet Jesus confronts them for the way they treat others. These religious leaders justify their actions based on technicalities in the law. Jesus then teaches the disciples that what goes into the body is not nearly as important as what come out of the heart. What is coming out of your heart today? Read and reflect on the list of those things that defile. Where does your temptation lie?

Tuesday, February 3 — *Read Mark 7:24-30.* The demon mentioned in these verses is cast out by Jesus from a distance. The divine power of Jesus was effective no matter how close Jesus might have been to the person. The word of Jesus was sufficient for every good work. In what areas do you need the divine power of Jesus today? How can the word of Jesus heal and free you for a life of joy?

Wednesday, February 4 — *Read Mark 7:31-37.* This passage describing the healing of the deaf mute is probably included because of the statement made by the disciples in verse 37, ***“He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”*** Why are the disciples still amazed? By now, they have seen Jesus' authority over nature, illness, demons and death. What do they need to believe? What do we need to believe? Why do we doubt when things get difficult?

Thursday, February 5 — *Read Mark 8:1-10.* These followers were ignoring their hunger to hear the words of Jesus. What are you willing to ignore to hear the words of Jesus? Can you name the things you would be willing to skip to worship the King of Kings?

Friday, February 6 — *Read Mark 8:11-21.* Again Jesus must deal with the challenges of the Pharisees and the lack of understanding from his disciples. In verse 21, Jesus says, ***“Do you not yet understand?”*** How long will it take for us to understand the working of God in this world? We worry about so much. We ask for signs. For you, what stands in the way of total devotion to Christ in all things? Are you willing to give these things up for Christ?