

Sunday School Notes: 16 September 2018: Nehemiah's Plans, problems and prayers

Nehemiah travelled back to Jerusalem, escorted by soldiers because some of the people who had moved into Israel while the Jews were away were not thrilled to hear that someone was coming to help the Jews.

When he got to Jerusalem, he waited 3 days before doing anything. I suppose he was recovering from the journey, but I suspect he was also praying for wisdom. Then during the night, without telling anyone what God was telling him to do, he got up to inspect the city walls. Imagine the scene. The few men with him were on foot, probably carrying flaming torches so he could see properly; Nehemiah rode a donkey as far as he could. He went round the city anti-clockwise, as far as he could go.

Now that he knew for himself what the situation was, he called a meeting of the city's leaders. No one could say he was uninformed – he had seen for himself! The leaders couldn't drown him out as a newcomer. He explained why he was there – how God had called him and helped him and then encouraged them to build with him.

They all agreed: "Let us start building!" Nehemiah's plan was that each family should build the bit of wall nearest them. Chapter 3 tells us exactly who built what part. Everyone got involved – just as we should in the church.

But, just because it was God's plan, didn't mean there were no problems. There are always people who try to derail God's perfect will and they use whatever sneaky ways they can to do this.

Problem One: They accused Nehemiah of being a traitor to the king!

What nonsense. He had the king's letter to prove he was there with the king's permission. Nehemiah simply replied that God, the greater King, was also on their side – Their enemies were wasting their time trying to find fault with this.

Problem Two: The enemies mocked them!

Read the language in Neh 4: 2 and 3 – it is delightfully provocative!

Nehemiah didn't even reply. He just prayed. *(In the light of Christ we know that this wasn't the right kind of prayer, praying for the enemy to suffer. But we can't blame him. We all get really angry like this and so it is the sign of an honest prayer. Only Jesus within us can help us to pray in the forgiving way of Stephen. It is okay to start by telling God how angry we are. But Christians then have to pray for their enemies – and as we do so God will change our attitude towards them. Please don't let the children feel it is wrong to hate evil.)*

Problem Three and Four: The enemy planned to invade and the builders got tired and scared!

Wisely, Nehemiah listened. He didn't just tell them not to be silly or even that God was greater than their enemies. He then set up groups of people on guard at all the weak places – with bows and arrows and swords and spears. Only then did he remind them of God watching over them all. And God was – how else would they have happened to overhear the enemy's plans? And the enemy realised their plans were known and knew that these evil plans would not work.

And then Nehemiah made some further plans.

- From that day on half the people worked on building and the other half kept watch.
- Every builder was armed.
- A trumpeter was appointed to stay next to Nehemiah all day. If the enemy was seen to try anything, the trumpet would sound and the Jews would know to gather with Nehemiah so that all the forces could go to the problem area.
- None of the men were allowed to go to their homes outside of the city – this way, there were always men to fight and to build, and the enemy couldn't sneak in along with the men in the morning when they returned to work.

Problem Five: Greed!

Nehemiah discovered that some of the leaders were doing a Zuma. There was profiteering. The people were struggling to keep the farms going because everyone was busy with the building and the landlords were charging huge interest rates on unpaid rents. So much so, that children were having to be sold into slavery to meet the needs.

Nehemiah challenged them, pointing out their sin, and asked that they give back what they had falsely taken. (give back the land????!) The landowners agreed and kept their word.

Meanwhile Nehemiah himself did not use his position to enrich himself. He did not acquire land for himself, and he did not even draw on his entertainment allowance to feed his officials and workers. He bore the costs himself.

Problem Six: Cheap tricks! Phishing!

They had tried everything else, so the enemies set out to trick Nehemiah so that they could kill him.

They pretended that they wanted to meet him to discuss the fact that there were reports circulating that he was rebelling against the king. Four times they invited him to a meeting, but he knew that God wanted him on site and so he refused to meet the men.

Then the enemy pretended that Nehemiah was in danger and they set up a trap to lure him to seek safety in the temple where they would kill him. Nehemiah realised that God was with him – he didn't need to go into hiding. And that plan failed too when he refused to seek more safety for himself than for the other workers.

Finally in 52 days they built the walls which people had been struggling to build for years! And the enemies realised how great God is. This didn't mean they stopped trying, but Nehemiah's trust had undermined their power.

This is such a modern story. These same problems arise today. There is bullying, threatening, mocking today too. We can't stop the problems, but we can answer them with prayer as Nehemiah did.