

Don't Hesitate – Investigate!

by Ray C. Stedman

We have in English a number of proverbs that urge us to action when the time is right:

- Shakespeare wrote, “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.”
- In the days when blacksmiths were common, we used to hear the proverb, “Strike while the iron is hot.”
- Not many would understand that these days; today we have shortened it to: “Get with it!”

In the second chapter of Nehemiah we come to just such a moment. Last week we left our hero weeping and praying over the ruins of Jerusalem, beseeching God to lead him in a program of recovery. In the wonderful way the Bible has, this is intended to illustrate the damaged and ruined areas of our lives that need to be rebuilt, repaired or recovered. As we pursue that interpretation through Nehemiah, we shall find much practical help on how to reclaim a ruined life.

Many today find themselves in almost total ruin. They have lost their way and are wide open to the attacks of any destructive or hostile force. Others have severely damaged areas in their lives. They are, perhaps, still held in bondage to wrongful attitudes or habits. It almost goes without saying that if you are praying for help, as Nehemiah prayed for help in the opening chapter of this book, then you should expect an answer:

- Expect God to do something.
- Be ready for it when it comes.

An opportunity to change will surely appear, at times rather unexpectedly or after a longer period of time than you think it ought to take, but it will happen because the God we worship is a God who answers prayer.

We find Nehemiah at that **point of opportunity** as the second chapter opens:

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, {Neh 2:1-4 NIV}

Notice that this chapter has a different date than the opening words of Chapter 1. It is in the month of Nisan of the Hebrew calendar when Nehemiah finally has an opportunity to inform the king of his concern over Jerusalem. Last week we looked at incidents that took place in the month of Kislev, which is approximately the same as our month of December. Nisan corresponds to our April, so there is a lapse of about four months be-

tween these chapters. We are not told why Nehemiah delayed that long in bringing his problem to the king. But we can presume that because he was a man of prayer he was waiting for the Lord to indicate the right time. Suddenly, in Nisan, that time came.

God often works in lives this way today. We are hasty, impatient creatures. We want our prayers answered tomorrow, or even yesterday! We pray, and we expect God's answer right away. But God often delays his answers. It is not because he is impotent or unwilling. There is much teaching in Scripture that a delayed answer does not indicate an unwilling God. We are taught again and again in Scripture to persevere in prayer – to keep praying till the answer comes. Evidently Nehemiah has been doing this and the indication of it is that his heart is still deeply troubled over the state of Jerusalem. So much so that when he comes before the king in the performance of his normal duties of serving the wine, his face shows his concern. This is the first time he had ever allowed it to appear but apparently his concern is so great it breaks through his control. The king notices this immediately and asks him why he is so sad. Nehemiah tells us that his response to that question was: "I was very much afraid."

That may sound strange to us for it looks as though the king is simply being solicitous here. He seems truly concerned about the welfare of a trusted and beloved servant, and he is quite naturally inquiring about the cause. But Nehemiah's fear has a sound basis. He was the cupbearer, remember. It was his responsibility to taste the king's wine before it was served to make sure that no one had poisoned it. In those days of totalitarian monarchs, assassination was the only way one could be removed from office. The usual method was to poison his food or his wine. This was a dangerous job Nehemiah had. It is obvious that he had to be a man of unlimited integrity and trustworthiness. The king relied upon him to keep him safe. He must be always above suspicion, keeping the king's trust at all times. If the king grew suspicious or distrustful, Nehemiah's life would be in danger. He would not only lose his job, but he could also lose his head. That is why he was "very much afraid."

But Nehemiah was just such a man as the job required. He was trustworthy and thoroughly reliable. You who are devotees of Public Television

might well think of Angus Hudson, the butler in "Upstairs, Downstairs," as the kind of man that Nehemiah must have been. If you are not acquainted with that series, then please forgive me for that referral.

Though this is a moment of danger, it is also one of great opportunity. Nehemiah immediately senses that. This is God's open door. Nehemiah's response is to shoot up a prayer to heaven for help. I hope you are familiar with this kind of praying; we used to call it an "arrow prayer." Perhaps we ought to update it and say that Nehemiah *faxed* a prayer to heaven! In his thoughts, without words, he formulated a quick plea for help, and then made his response.

In Verses 5-8, we learn just **how ready he was** for this occasion:

and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates [the provinces on the west of the river], so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. {Neh 2:5-8 NIV}

Observe how tactful is Nehemiah's presentation. Twice he refers to Jerusalem, not as the capital of Judah, or even by its name, for it had a reputation as a troublesome city and had been the source of revolt in the empire before, but he designates it as "the city where my fathers are buried." That is an accommodation to the emperor's own concerns. These ancient kings were greatly concerned about their burial. The pyramids in Egypt which the pharaohs have left are ample evidence of that. They expended vast amounts of labor and

money on their memorials. This king would be immediately sympathetic to Nehemiah's desire to go and restore the city where his fathers were buried. Nehemiah wisely plays upon that interest and presents his case in the best possible light.

Note also the thoroughness with which he had thought out all that he would need. He knew it would require a lengthy period of time, so he asked for the time he needed. The king had asked him how long it would take, and Nehemiah records, "It pleased the king to send me, so I set a time." He was actually gone for twelve years. I doubt if he asked for that long a time at the beginning, but it took that long in the working out of his plans. He must have known it would take at least a number of years and whatever he asked for he was granted that amount.

In parenthesis, as it were, Nehemiah says that he asked the king, "with the queen sitting beside him." There is obviously a reason for this inclusion. Some Bible scholars think this queen might well have been Queen Esther. She was a Jewess and would be very interested in restoring the site of Jerusalem. Other scholars feel that Esther's reign came before this time, though Esther may have been the mother-in-law of the queen who is mentioned here. Whatever position you may take on that, there is at least a high likelihood that Esther had some influence upon this queen and, through her, upon king Artaxerxes.

Not only did Nehemiah need sufficient time for this expedition, but he needed secure travel. So he asked for letters to the governors of the provinces that he would have to pass through, to provide safe conduct for him. We learn later in this book that this not only gave him diplomatic immunity, but it also meant that he was appointed as the governor of Judah. He does not tell us that at this point, but it becomes clear that he was actually sent as a governor of the province of Judah. This would, therefore, give him diplomatic status as he traveled. From secular sources we learn that there had been trouble in the province of Syria (just north of Judah), two years earlier. The satrap (governor) of that province had rebelled against Artaxerxes. It is likely that the king welcomed this opportunity to place a trusted man in the governorship of Judah and interpose a buffer between Syria and Egypt who were often at war in those days. Thus this proposed journey of Nehemiah was something the king found very satisfying.

Finally, Nehemiah knew he would need some special supplies which only the king's authority could provide. He asked for special timbers to be cut for him out of the king's forest. Some have taken that to be located in the mountains of Lebanon. But others say it was probably a local forest, south of Jerusalem, from which King Solomon had taken wood for the building of his temple. At any rate, Nehemiah got what he asked for. He had done his homework thoroughly.

This suggests to us that if we are truly concerned about rebuilding parts of our life, we need to think seriously about what it will require. We must assess

- what we will actually need,
- what steps we should take, and
- what may be involved in changing our habits so that we can be freed to be what God wants us to be.

Nehemiah teaches us that we need to face honestly our situation.

In Verses 9-10, we get **the account of his journey.**

So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites. {Neh 2:9-10 NIV}

This was an impressive array. I know what a difference it makes to have a military escort. Several years ago, when I was in Israel, I was driving from Galilee back to Jerusalem through what is now known as the West Bank. In those days it was much less tense than it is today. On the way I picked up three submachine-gun carrying Israeli soldiers who were hitchhiking. I drove them down into the city of Nablus, which is the major city of the West Bank. Just south of that is the little village of Sychar, where Jacob's well is located, I asked them if they would like to visit it with me, and found – to my amazement – that though they were stationed just outside the city they had not known that Jacob's well was located there. We

went up to the gate and knocked on it. It was at the noon hour when the site was normally closed, but the Syrian priest in charge of it came to the gate. When he saw me with three armed soldiers behind me, he flung the gate open and took me on a tour of all the premises! He really rolled out the carpet! So I know from personal experience that an armed escort makes a great impression and commands immediate attention.

Nehemiah not only came with a full military escort but it is apparent from this account that he came with the full authority of the throne of Persia behind him. I want you to remember that

- if you set out to change something in your life for the better,
- you have the full authority of the throne of God behind you;
- you may proceed with full confidence that the unseen, but very real, power of God is backing you up!

Nehemiah met two very troublesome enemies when he got there: Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite. An Horonite is a devotee of the god Horon, a local deity of Palestine. This indicates this man was a pagan. Tobiah was a citizen of Ammon, which was the country that we now call Jordan (whose capital, by the way, is named Amman). Ammon was one of the tribes descended from Lot, the nephew of Abraham, and thus related to Israel but always an enemy of Israel. This records the first appearance in this book of the enemies of Nehemiah.

This situation sounds very much like normal Christianity. I have always enjoyed the definition of a Christian that says he is one who is

- completely fearless,
- continually cheerful,
- and constantly in trouble!

It is often God's way to let us face troublesome difficulties. But he also has unknown provisions waiting for us, as we will see in Nehemiah's case.

I shall never forget once sitting at lunch with Cameron Townsend, the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators, and hearing from his own lips the story of how Wycliffe came into Mexico. This was back in the '20s at a time when Mexico was very sensitive to anything religious. They had just thrown off the shackles of the church, and they

were very opposed to public preaching or the building up of churches. Cameron Townsend went to a tiny Indian village up in the mountains and began to work there, translating the Scriptures into their language. Although he could do no preaching, he found that he could help the people. Their economy was suffering because they had poor crops, and he taught them how to dam up a stream and divert the water to their fields. This greatly increased the amount of crops they raised and soon their economy was at a higher level. He also taught them certain industries they could establish right there in the village. Soon word of the changes there got back to Lazaro Cardenas who had just been elected president of Mexico. He had a great heart of concern to help the Indians. One day the President drove out in his limousine to the Indian village, and, when Cameron Townsend saw the presidential limousine, he went up to it to greet the President and introduce himself. The president said, "You're the very man I came to see." He invited Townsend to come to the capital and they became close friends for the duration of Cardenes' presidency. He opened a wide door to the entire work of Wycliffe Translators, and later presidents continued that support. Thus, in a most unexpected way, Wycliffe found an open door for widespread labors through that incident.

In many wonderful ways God demonstrates that he can work in our lives! This is what Nehemiah relied upon. If you are struggling with some habit, some attitude of mind or heart that has possessed you, limited you, and made you difficult to live with, and you want to be free from it, you can expect God to help, often in ways that you cannot anticipate. That is the lesson of this great story.

Having seized the critical moment and entered the open door that God set before him, Nehemiah now takes the third step to recovery: **He honestly faces the full reality of his problem.**

1. First, we are told that he enjoyed *a brief period of recovery.*

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. {Neh 2:11-12a NIV}

2. He takes time to recover from his journey (his jet lag), and then begins to examine, individu-

ally and personally, *the extent of the problem* he faces.

I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool [the pool of Siloam], but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work. {Neh 2:12b-16 NIV}

Anticipating opposition, Nehemiah kept his own counsel. He did not tell anybody what he was going to do until he had seen for himself what needed to be done. Apparently the walls were in such a state of ruin that rubble and debris had strewn the valley floor so that he could not even ride his mount through it. He found during this moonlight ride that the walls were in a very sad state of repair.

It is most important that we do something like this in recovering our own ruined areas:

- We must face the facts as they are,
 - name them, and
 - acknowledge to ourselves and others that they are true.
- We must not try to cover them over or in any way excuse them.

If you are acquainted with the work of Alcoholics Anonymous you know that they require that everyone they work with must publicly acknowledge their problem to be alcohol addiction. They must state it clearly, "I am an alcoholic." If they are not willing to do this, there is little hope for their recovery.

3. So Nehemiah personally explores the extent of his problem, and then, as the account records, informs the ones who must do the work with him. This is a moment of challenge when Nehemiah *begins to involve others in this work.*

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work. {Neh 2:17-18 NIV}

This is a wonderful example of good leadership. He cannot do this work alone. He must involve others. First, he appeals to their pride, "You can see the ruin around you," he points out. Actually the ruins had been there for almost one hundred years. He is saying, in effect, "That is long enough. It is disgraceful that nothing has been done until now. Let us begin to act." He puts it to them plainly that now is the time because, as he suggests, "God is with us." God had already helped them. He had moved the heart of the king, setting up the possibility of repair. Now was the time to act.

When leadership steps out like that, it is almost certain to find a following. Nehemiah galvanizes the Jews to action, to begin the process of rebuilding. He appeals to their sense of self-respect, and supplies an encouraging motive to begin.

4. But, when you actually start recovering your ruin, you will also *meet severe resistance*, as Nehemiah discovers.

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab [here is a third enemy coming in now] heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" {Neh 2:19 NIV}

Whenever anybody says, "I will arise and build," Satan always replies, "Then I will arise

and oppose.” You can count on it! It is a necessary part of the process. God allows it for it is good for us to have opposition.

Right after this meeting many of you are going to go home and watch the Bears and the 49ERS struggling valiantly on Soldier Field. It will be a difficult game, made all the more difficult by inclement weather. Regardless of which team wins, one thing is certain: the game would be meaningless if the teams did not have someone to oppose them. Any member of either team could grab the football and run down and place it over the goal line if there was nobody there to oppose. It is the opposition that makes the players dig in and fight through.

That is what God is after in our lives. It is opposition that makes us strong. If we did not have any difficulty we would be moral cream puffs, unable to function in the kingdom of God. So in his wisdom and grace God allows opposition to rise.

Notice the way Nehemiah handles this:

I answered them by saying, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.” {Neh 2:20 NIV}

These men stood outside the covenant of promise. One was a pagan, Sanballat the Horonite; one was a renegade son of Lot, an enemy though also a relative of Israel; and one was a total foreigner, a descendant of Ishmael. All three had no claim to the promise of God to inherit the land. That is why Nehemiah took this stand.

The form their opposition took is also prophetic of our struggles. They first “mocked and ridiculed.” This is usually the first weapon the enemy employs. You may have felt it when you began to recover from your ruin. Your friends laughed at your desires to change. They may ridicule your religious convictions and resent with scorn your implied criticisms of their conduct.

Also, Nehemiah’s enemies began to threaten and slander him with charges of rebellion and disloyalty. If ridicule does not work, then the opposition stiffens and becomes openly unfriendly and threatening. It is the next level

of resistance which those who seek to rebuild will encounter.

These are but pictures for us. They picture something very real: the opposition and the resistance that we will experience from Satan himself. What was true of these opposing forces in Nehemiah’s case is true also of Satan. He is a usurper. He has no right to possess humankind. He has tricked us. He has bedeviled us and led us astray. He has confused, manipulated and misled us. Yet he has no right to do so. Jesus came to restore God’s property to him and to loose the hold of the devil upon the human race. That is what he does in our lives. So when we face resistance we must see it as allowed of God to strengthen us, but it has no real right to our lives. We do not have to be weak, failing, and unable to function. We are called to be free. That is the glorious note which the epistle to the Galatians states: “it is for freedom that Christ has set us free!” {cf, Gal 5:1a NIV}.

What that means in practice is that we do not need to be bound by habits from the past. No matter how innocently they may have begun, we do not need to be slaves to drugs, sex, alcohol, tobacco, or whatever it may be controlling and limiting us. Remember Paul’s great cry, “I will not be brought under the power of anything!” {cf, 1 Cor 6:12}. Why? Because he was under the power of God. This is what Nehemiah declares here. There is no necessity to be a slave to a hot temper, or a critical, censorious attitude, or a complaining spirit. These areas of ruin in our lives can be set aside because we are trusting in the program of God. We are expecting God to grant us the grace to stand.

That is why, with great determination, Nehemiah clenches his fist and says, “Look, the God of heaven is with us. He will give us success. We, his servants, will start rebuilding. Do what you like. It is not going to stop us. You are usurpers and have no right to this land.”

There is a fascinating historic note here also. There is a reason why this Satanic opposition is so severe and will continue to increase as we go on in this book. That historic note is found in the ninth chapter of Daniel. There, Daniel is given a great prophecy of the history of Israel and is told of a period of 490 years that would be marked off in which God was going to do tremendous things for Israel. The chronological event that would mark

the beginning of that period is precisely stated. It is this: “When the decree goes forth to rebuild Jerusalem ...” {cf, Dan 9:25}. That is when God’s clock for Israel will begin to move. That is the decree we are dealing with here. This decree of Artaxerxes, given to Nehemiah as the governor of the province, to begin rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem was issued in 445 B.C. That is the starting point of God’s special period of 490 years for the people of Israel. During that time, wonderful events would take place. The Messiah would appear toward the end of it, and then would be “cut off and have nothing,” {cf, Dan 9:26}. This is certainly a reference to the crucifixion. But after that there would be a strange period of seven years which many have thought to be fulfilled in the events following the crucifixion, but it will not fit. We learn in the New Testament (Matthew 24, Second Thessalonians 2, and the book of Revelation) that these things are yet to be fulfilled for Israel during times of great judgment which we call the Great Tribulation. All of this ties together with the book of Ne-

hemiah in a fascinating way. We cannot pursue it at length here, but it indicates that Satanic opposition often has far deeper dimensions to it than we may suspect.

But let us not lose our way: What we are tracing here are the steps of recovery from ruin. There are three of them that we have covered so far:

1. First, **a deep concern** that leads us to prayer and to sorrow;
2. Then, **an opportunity to change** to which we must make response; and
3. Then, **the facing of the facts** of our situation honestly and squarely.

When we begin these steps, we have well begun the process of change. Let us take them with confidence that God will enable us to rebuild our walls and restore our gates, to his praise and glory and our grateful relief.