

Overcoming Opposition

Nehemiah 2:19-20

Nehemiah 2:19-20 - *“But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?’²⁰ So I answered them, and said to them, ‘The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.’”*

Background Notes

Nehemiah was a Jew who was employed by the Persian king, Artaxerxes I, during the 5th century BC. He requested permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls. The walls were in ruins because of the destruction that had taken place years before, when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies conquered the city.

Not only did Artaxerxes grant Nehemiah's request, but he also sent Nehemiah back to Judah as governor, with all the authority he needed to direct operations. The king even gave him authority to obtain building materials from the king's forest.

Everything was ready to go. The king's permission was granted. Nehemiah had traveled to Jerusalem. The planning stages were over, he challenged the people about the condition of the city walls, they responded to the challenge, and they resolved to build the wall. Verse 18: *“Let us rise up and build.’ Then they set their hands to this good work.”*

But then opposition to the wall building began to arise (v19). Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were enemies from surrounding provinces of the Persian Empire. (We read about Sanballat and Tobiah back in Nehemiah 2:10.) Sanballat was leader of the province of Samaria, and Tobiah led the province of Ammon. Geshem the Arab. He was one of the leaders of large Arab territories that ran north from Egypt all the way to the southern end of the Dead Sea, and then all the way over into northern Arabia.

Sanballat has been documented in extra biblical literature, as has Geshem the Arab. Inscriptions from both Egypt and Arabia contain his name. Once again we see that archaeology really does support the historical accuracy of the Bible.

These leaders were disturbed by reports that Nehemiah had come back to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem (v10). They didn't want the wall building to proceed, because a strong Jewish province would be a threat to their authority in the area. Once the city walls were built, the city of Jerusalem would be a strong city, and it might possibly be a threat to the trade monopolies that were presently under the enemies' control.

So they began to mock and threaten Nehemiah and the Jews in hopes of discouraging them. Furthermore, they threatened to notify King Artaxerxes that the Jews were planning a rebellion, and that they would no longer be subject to the Persian Empire. Of course their threats were all lies - but that's what they were doing.

Doctrinal Points

1. Separation must be maintained when it comes to the work of the Lord.

Notice what Nehemiah told the enemies who were mocking and threatening him: *"You have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem"*(v20).

Notice what he didn't say. He didn't try to make a deal with the enemies. He didn't compromise. No, clear lines were drawn. Separation was maintained, because his was the work of the Lord, and the work of the Lord was to be done by the Lord's people. Unbelievers were not to interfere, and they were not to be included. They had no right or claim in this work of the Lord.

In the same way, separation must be maintained when it comes to the work of the Lord today. Sometimes unbelievers are invited to support the work of the Lord, and when that happens there will invariably be some bad fallout. Strings can become attached to their financial support. They may request that the gospel be watered down. Error may even be mixed in with the truth.

If you look at a church or ministry that is no longer biblically sound, most likely you'll find that somewhere along the line, separation was not maintained when it came to the work of the Lord.

However, at this point it's important to say that in His sovereignty, God may, at times, choose to work in the ranks of the unbelievers to open up doors, or God may use them in some way to support His work. But that choice is **God's** prerogative. We're not to be seeking out or inviting unbelievers to participate in the work of the Lord.

Right here in Nehemiah, we see that God's sovereignty at work in the hearts and minds of unbelievers. He worked in the heart of Artaxerxes to grant permission for Nehemiah to come back to rebuild the walls. He even worked in the king's heart to provide building materials and support for the repairs!

So God may sometimes work in the heart of unbelievers to open up doors for ministry, and even to support His work. But we, as Christians, should not seek out or invite unbelievers to join us and participate in the ministry. Separation must be maintained when it comes to the work of the Lord.

2. The Jews have a biblical right to the land in the Middle East.

Notice what verse 20 says about the enemies from the surrounding provinces, who were not Jews: *“You have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.”* What does the word “memorial” mean here? It means that these non-Jewish nations had no historical claim in Jerusalem.

These Samaritans under Sanballat, the enemies under Tobiah, and the Arabs under Geshem had no past or present claim on the land. Under the Abrahamic Covenant, God had given the land to the Jews. The Jews had a biblical right to the land.

The Jews still have a biblical right to the land. Under the “Abrahamic Covenant” (a promise that God made with Abraham), the right to the land was an unconditional gift from God. “Unconditional” means that the recipient didn’t have to do anything in return to deserve the gift or to keep the gift. In Genesis 13 Abraham was in Bethel, in the central part of what is today the state of Israel. In verse 14-15 God told him: *“Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.”* In other words, God told Abraham that He was giving the land of the present state of Israel to Abraham and to his descendants **forever**.

True, there is a spiritual side to the Abrahamic Covenant that applies to all believers. All believers are the spiritual seed of Abraham (Galatians 3). But just because all believers are the spiritual seed of Abraham doesn’t mean that the promise of the land to the physical descendants of Abraham has been changed or negated. No. The Jews have a biblical right, even to this day, to that specific land in the Middle East.

This doesn’t justify or allow the present secular state of Israel using unbiblical means to attempt grab more land, although they certainly do have the right to defend themselves and their land from attack and terror. But the doctrinal point that we’re making here is that the Jews really do have the biblical right to land in the Middle East.

Practical Applications

1. Maintain a positive attitude when opposition arises.

Look how Nehemiah reacted to this ridicule and threat. He maintained a positive attitude. He answered them: *“The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build.”* He didn’t run away scared. He didn’t back off. He didn’t lash out at the enemies. He maintained a positive attitude.

We too should maintain a positive attitude when opposition arises. And opposition will arise - make no mistake about it! When you get involved in the work of the Lord, you can be sure that some kind of opposition will arise. Satan would love to discourage and defeat you, and put a stop to any service you’re doing or the Lord.

So when opposition arises – if you're mocked at for being a Christian, or if you feel threatened in some way - maintain a positive attitude. Maintaining a positive Christ-centered attitude really is a principle of victory.

2. Always put God first in the way you think about everything.

Once again notice what Nehemiah said as he responded to the ridicule and the threat: *"The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build."*

He didn't say that King Artaxerxes had put him there. He didn't say, "I have letters of permission from the King!" He didn't say, "King Artaxerxes made me the governor." That's what I would have done!

But not Nehemiah! He said, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us." He put God first. Why? Because Nehemiah always put God first - in the way he thought about everything! And so should we.

In whatever we're involved, we should put God first – in our thinking, our jobs, in our careers, in our leisure time activities, in whatever decisions we have to make. It doesn't mean that we don't think about other things as well, but we should put God first.

We should always start as much as possible from God's perspective. How does God view this situation? How does God see this decision that I must make? What is God's mind on this matter? Always put God first in the way we think about everything.

Let me emphasize this once again: **always** put God first in the way we think about **everything!**