

Nehemiah like all great leaders encountered opposition. The way he responded has lessons for us. Move kings [the powerful] by prayer. Move obstacles by preparation and Move men by 7 principles.

1 THE PRAYER THAT MOVES KINGS [2:1 - 10]

[i] The King's Questions

In April 445 BC ["Nissan"] and the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes rule in the Persian Empire Nehemiah the cupbearer to the king [1:11] showed his sad face at court. Nehemiah admits "I am never been sad in his presence before" [1:1]. Three questions were put to Nehemiah.

"Why so sad?" [2:2]. Heartened by the king's discernment of sorrow of heart in his servant Nehemiah replied and shared Hanani's report [1:3] on the state of Jerusalem; that the city was in ruins and the gates burned [2:3].

"What do you want?" [2:4]. The king acknowledged a cry for help and confronted his servant with the enquiry. In response to fear and interrogation Nehemiah "prayed to the God of heaven". Then he was able to answer the king with truth and directness "send me home to rebuild the city" [2:5].

"How long will you be away?". This question shows acceptance of Nehemiah's proposal together with sensitivity for his feelings, but also indicates the king's concern for his security while the food taster is away. Nehemiah rejoiced in the king's permission and confidently "set a time".

[ii] Nehemiah's Requests were realistic and grateful. He sought letters of safe conduct to the governors of the Trans-Euphrates regions [2:7] and requisitions for timber from the royal forests [2:8] to provide security [gates in Jerusalem] and shelter [housing in Jerusalem]. Nehemiah testified "God's good hand was upon me; and the king granted my requests. The lesson is clear. Pray to God [2:4] and request from powerful people [2:5, 7-8]. When gifts are received give glory to God [2:8]. The king also gave Nehemiah and armed escort [2:9] so that he went as the king's ambassador.

[iii] The Enemies' Displeasure

The first rule of progress is that 'you cannot please everyone'. Sanballot a future governor of Samaria and Tobiah an Ammonite with the Hebrew name which means 'God is good' were "disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites" [2:10]. Racial prejudice and political expediency are blind to the leading of God's Spirit so they opposed Nehemiah.

2 THE PREPARATION THAT MOVES OBSTACLES [2:22-20]

Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem was the biggest event since the Babylonians sacked the city decades before. He gave the citizens time to adjust to his arrival. He took "a few days" to survey the scene [2:11]. The he took a "few men" young and strong enough to accept the challenge of new ideas and robust enough to clamber over ruins in the dark! Nehemiah alone rode [2:12]. God's blessing on his servant included the loyalty of these men though Nehemiah "told no one" what he was doing. The survey took this small party as far as was practicable and then they returned. [2:13-15] "Officials and workers did not know" about this secret expedition [2:16].

Having made these preparations time came to share the vision of the rebuilding of the walls. Like Winston Churchill after him in the dark days of Britain in 1940, Nehemiah accepted responsibility for the present as well as setting the vision for the future. "See the trouble we are in...Jerusalem in ruins." [2:17]. He presented a clear set of achievable aims. [2:17-18b]

"Come let us rebuild the walls". This was a fellowship activity which would restore the confidence and reputation of God's people. "Let us no longer be in disgrace." It was not left to the unidentifiable 'they' as is so often the case now. Inspiration was drawn from God [2:18]. "The gracious hand of God is upon me". The response was encouraging as God moved his people and they rolled up their sleeves for work [2:18c].

But ‘you cannot please everyone’! Sanballot and Tobiah conspired with an Arab [6:6] named Geshem to “ridicule” Nehemiah and accuse him of “rebellion against the king”; that is, King Artaxerxes who sent him to Jerusalem. The answer to the political intrigue of men is friendship with the God of Heaven. “He will give his servants good success” [2:20]. Paul later asked in the New Testament, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” [Romans 8:31]. Nehemiah made it clear that the task of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls was the privilege of God’s people. The conspirators had “no share by present right or historic claim”. Whatever the obstacles are in your life today, --- sickness, sorrow, broken relationships, stress, opposition - -- healing will come from the Lord. Turn to him and trust him.

John Newton captured the idea in a hymn based on Psalm 78...

“Saviour, since of Zion’s city
I through grace a member am,
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Thy name:
Fading is the worldling’s pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None by Zion’s children know”

3 THE PRINCIPLES THAT MOVE MEN [3:1-32]

[i] Priests left their temple duties to rebuild the Sheep gate and the adjacent wall; that is, the one near the Temple [3:1]. This was a two for the price of one opportunity, since they dedicated [set aside for God] each section as they built it.

[ii] Families took their share of the work [3:2-4]. Children learned the importance of responsibility as well as the joy of belonging to a family.

[iii] Frequent use of the word for repair, the Hebrew idea of making something firm occurs many times. This is not patching but reconstructing; nothing shoddy. The New Testament idea of ‘faith’ is derived from this concept.

[iv] “Nobles of Tekoa would not put their shoulders to the work under supervisors” [3:5], so ordinary men of Tekoa covered their shame by building a second section of the wall. Others took more than their share of the work. Baruch built a second section [3:20]

[v] Social distinctions were put aside [3:8-9]. Goldsmiths, perfume makers and merchants [3:32] became labours for carpenters and stonemasons. Shallum’s daughters helped [3:12] just as women left the homes and went into the fields and factories in Australia during the second world war to release men for the war effort.

Traditions and tried and tested ways are helpful, but great work for God’s glory may require unorthodox methods, so that maximum results can be achieved for all the effort expended. An attitude of service especially on the part of leaders will bring out the best in the community of faith. These were among the most exhilaratingly meaningful 52 days [6:6] that God’s people had experienced in many centuries.

Recently following an evangelistic crusade in New Orleans veteran evangelist 87 year old Billy Graham led the 16000 strong crowd down into the sleazy Bourbon Street area to share the Gospel. It was an unorthodox, impromptu outreach to the most needy part of that city carried along to the strains of ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’ and ‘Amazing Grace’. Stunned crowds abandoned the strip joints and bars to join in this unusual procession. Veteran policeman Tom Phillips feared a riot at first, but considered the event was more a revival. Hours later Christians were still sharing Good News with people hungry to hear it. Imagine the effect we could have if we went out into the strip joints, bars and clubs of George, William and Oxford Streets of Sydney!