

Introduction

- Threats and challenges to God's work
 - sensing the demonic opposition clad in human clothes, the efforts to divert and disrupt
- Careful not to see everything that goes wrong as Satanic opposition!
 - sometimes we're just stupid, ignorant, wilful, or wrong in our approach!
 - but when challenges arise wise to ask whether there is something more going on than mere human activity...

Head on: opposition to the rebuilding

- We'd got hints earlier of opposition to the rebuilding, and here it comes out into the open a bit more

First of all there is ridicule

- Mocking, derision, ridicule
 - your strength is too little, your impact is too small, your God is not real, your having a laugh!

Answer:

- Prayer, for God to vindicate himself
- We live in an atmosphere of ridicule, of mocking, of dismissal
 - pray, for God to vindicate himself

Second there is threat

- Direct, overt action:
 - **you can't do this**
 - legal challenges, oppression, persecution, funding decisions (eg Lottery, no to proselytisation, etc)

Answer:

- First, prayer for God's strength (v.9)
- And second practical action to continue what God has called them to as much as they are able (v.9,13)
 - obviously going slower now, with only one arm for tools!
- Undergirded by encouraging leadership and vision sharing (v.14) that points back to God, and sets an example (v.23)

Round the side: undermining the community

- The menace, the danger to God's work here is hunger and exploitation
 - before we can understand Nehemiah's actions, we need to understand the people's complaint

The People's Complaint

- Exact chronology isn't made clear - most likely the complaint came to a head during the building of the wall, in the sequence we have in Nehemiah
- Just possible this is an incident that happened around the same time, while Nehemiah was in charge in Jerusalem
- Assume in chronological sequence - the effort expended on building the wall most likely the straw that broke the camel's back
- Unlikely whole thing arose and was sorted in just the 52 days it took to build the wall, but extra strain wall building put on resources could well bring it to head
- Remember, variety of returning exiles and existing locals
- Small-holding at core of economy - most people would have some land of their own

- Serious problem - when a small-holder loses title to their land, almost no hope of raising the capital to get it back
- Likewise selling children into slavery - theoretical, though little practical, chance of buying them back
- Rather like a harsh pawn-broker!
- What was extra shocking was that this was treatment meted out by countrymen, brothers

Nehemiah's Response

- **Anger!**
- His anger was the measure of the depth of his love and concern - not merely an administrative hiccup that needs set straight...
- Compare: Jesus' reaction to Pharisees when healing man with withered hand on the Sabbath (Mark 3:5);
 - or Jesus clearing the temple (John 2:14ff);
 - or Paul writing to the Corinthians, "who is weak and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Cor 11:29)
- Nehemiah's response was of outrage at injustice, not a carelessly angry lashing out
- It seems that what the rich folk were doing was not technically illegal - secured loans to help those in need - but the way they were doing it
- Indeed Nehemiah himself (v.10) was granting loans - but not with the unbearably harsh conditions others were imposing
- So he acts, clearly, rapidly and publicly:
 - public meeting - "can you do this without shame before your people?"
 - only possible answer is "no!"
 - in the open, and measured against the generous actions of others, the "smart deals" look impossibly shabby
 - doesn't just shame them, but shames them into action!
- Nehemiah is shrewd, understanding human nature well:
 - he gets them to swear oaths (equivalent to legally binding contracts!) then and there! Makes sure justice is done, not merely nodded at
- Debts are actually cancelled - not just unjust interest rates stopped
- There are situations where cancellation is justice, even when a debt is owed

Our Response

- Injustice within God's new community hinders God's work
- Take the biggest debt issue, on hugely wide scale - 3rd World Debt
- Huge burden round poorest countries necks: eg Zambia, 4.5 billion pounds, 479 pounds per person, more than a third of average annual income!
- Cash crops planted to pay off debts; more cash crops around; prices fall; less cash; meanwhile people starve...
- Tear Times - Jubilee 2000 initiative to encourage governments to cancel unpayable debts
- I'm not enough of an economist to know the ins and outs, but if we are serious about seeing God's Kingdom grow, a Kingdom where love and justice are the characteristics of life, then we will seek in whatever ways we can to break the chains of oppression
- Its as we are obedient that we'll find the joy the people of Jerusalem found as they "did the right thing" at last, and found themselves able to say "AMEN!" and praise God with open hearts (v.13)

Nehemiah Governs Fairly

- That was all one specific incident
 - but, importantly, it was characteristic of Nehemiah's leadership - not just a one off incident
 - that same generosity of spirit typical of Nehemiah, not just when wall was going up, but throughout his years as governor
- for instance, unlike his predecessors, he didn't grab his rights to food from the locals
- Notice why:
 - 1. his focus is on serving God, not having others serve him. To have taken the food would therefore dishonour God
 - 2. he sees the people as brother, his fellows, equals, not to be exploited
- Nehemiah loved God first, and his neighbour as himself
 - his attitude was the same as Paul's in 1 Cor 9, esp. v.12Bff
- Helmut Thielicke suggested that "Our cheque books have more to do with heaven and hell than our hymn books."
 - disturbing thought - would we go berserk and report the matter to the Police if we lost our copy of "Praise!"?!?
- Nehemiah could have lived in more luxury than he did. He consciously chose to adopt a simple lifestyle. His money was where his mouth was
 - easy to say - harder to do - me and computers!
 - Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger - Ron Sider

Summary

- Do we sense the enemy's hand behind opposition?
 - do we get on our knees and pray?
 - do we take strength from God and resist the pressure to go the world's way?
 - do we resist those attempts to undermine the community life of God's people?
 - do we live justly?
 - do we relate openly, transparently, with trust, integrity and accountability?
- *Lord, help me be a Nehemiah for this generation!*