

AUTHENTIC VALOR
Nehemiah 1:5-6, 2:2-5 & 2:15-18

INTRODUCTION:

I hope you recall that for the last two weeks, I've been referring to incidents that occurred in and around the time that the Jews were carried off into captivity in Babylonia, present day Iraq. I've been doing this so we can focus on people who demonstrated authenticity in their service to the Lord.

After seventy years of exile in Babylonia, there were some major winds of change. Cyrus, the king of Persia, defeated Babylonia and took control of all of Babylonia's possessions, including the Jewish detainees that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had captured.

King Cyrus decided to send the Jews back to their own homeland, let them resettle the land and then charge them taxes to increase his revenue.

The first wave of Jews returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC. And while they returned with great enthusiasm, it wasn't long before they got sidetracked from their work of rebuilding their nation and they settled into living life in the midst of the ruins of their once-proud capital.

Fully 82 years later, Ezra led a second wave of Jews back to Jerusalem and they succeeded in restoring the worship of Jehovah among His chosen people.

But there was some unfinished business. The protective wall around Jerusalem had not been rebuilt. The people had rebuilt their houses. The temple had been rebuilt. (It was but a shadow of its former glory but it was rebuilt.) But the wall around the city was still in ruins.

Back in the city of Susa, the capital of Persia, Nehemiah was serving as a cup-bearer (or wine-taster) to the king. By this time, the king of Persia was a man by the name of Artaxerxes.

One day, as Nehemiah was bringing the wine to the king, Artaxerxes noticed that, for the first time since he'd known Nehemiah, he appeared sad. The king asked why and Nehemiah said he found out that the work in the city of Jerusalem had stalled and the people seemed content with only a partial restoration.

When Artaxerxes learned the cause of Nehemiah's sadness, he sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem with about 5000 men to complete the task that had been started under Zerubbabel over ninety years earlier.

In June of 1987, President Ronald Reagan told Mikhail Gorbachev, "Mr. President, tear down this wall." In June of 457 B.C., Nehemiah told the citizens of Jerusalem, "Rebuild this wall." The Berlin Wall was designed to keep the citizens in. The Jerusalem Wall was designed to keep the enemies out.

If we look at how Nehemiah went about rebuilding the wall, we can see a lot about the valor of this hero who protected the people. And on this Veterans Day weekend, we can learn about the valor of those who have protected us, too.

I. People of Real Valor are PASSIONATE (1:1-2:10)

Nehemiah was a passionate person.

When residents of Jerusalem came to Susa on business or to visit, Nehemiah routinely asked them about the progress on rebuilding the city. He was told,

"Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

Nehemiah recorded:

"When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

When word came to him about the lack of progress on rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, he cared. He really, deeply cared. He cared enough that it affected his normally cheerful demeanor. He cared enough to leave a comfortable position, a nice residence in the palace and a privileged lifestyle to go to a war zone to help to protect his fellow countrymen.

Surely you see parallels to the veterans we honor today. They cared enough to serve. I'm sure that not all were volunteers; some were, no doubt drafted into service. But they were still willing to serve. We have a day set aside to honor all veterans, whether volunteers or conscripts, but no day set aside to honor those who evaded the draft.

Each of those who served their country in military service, left the familiar for the unknown. They left that which was comfortable, predictable and safe. They were interrupted, inconvenienced and endangered. But they served anyway. And the very best among them were passionate about their serving.

Can you imagine the difference it would make in the Army of the Lord if all of us, who have proclaimed our allegiance to King Jesus, were as

passionate in his service? Can you imagine if we gave him the same loyal, devoted and sacrificial service that our military gave to their commanders? When the soldiers of Christ are as passionate as the soldiers of men, the very gates of hell will not be able to withstand their advance!

II. **People of Real Valor are PREPARED (2:10-16)**

Well, our friend Nehemiah sought and received permission from King Artaxerxes to take a company of men back to Jerusalem to finish the work on the wall.

Nehemiah 2:7-9 records that the king gave Nehemiah letters of introduction and authorization to show that he had the king's support in this effort. But when Nehemiah and his men got to Jerusalem, he did not call for a town meeting and wave his letters before the people.

No, the first thing Nehemiah did was to go out and survey the wall for himself. And he went under the cover of darkness so he would not arouse interest or suspicion in what he was doing.

When Nehemiah finally did call the people together to muster them to rebuild the wall, he did so as a man who was fully prepared. He was not relying on hearsay but had seen with his own eyes the disrepair of the wall. And by the time he assembled the people, he had a plan of action for the engineering project.

Obviously, the purpose of our troops going into boot camp or basic training is so they can be prepared for battle. Ultimately, that is what our youth groups are for. Our young people are on the front lines of the combat between good and evil, between the army of heaven and the forces of hell. They are at the point of impact in the clash between the sacred and the secular, the pious and the profane.

But so are the adults. We also live at the intersection of the holy and the unholy. Do not every forget that we live our lives in a war zone. Just as with the youth, so we, too, must be prepared for battle. So we study God's Word, which Scripture describes as the Sword of the Spirit. We study it in the privacy of our own homes and in the classrooms of our Sunday School. We study it in our Sunday worship services and in our Wednesday evening gatherings. We study it not as interesting history but as vital information for engaging the enemy in battle every day of our lives.

III. **People of Real Valor are PERSUASIVE (2:17-3:32)**

Nehemiah was passionate but that wasn't enough. Nehemiah was prepared but that, too, was not enough. Nehemiah was also persuasive.

When Nehemiah gathered the people together, he records:

¹⁷ *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."*

¹⁸ *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.*

His plan was to put the families in charge of rebuilding the wall that was closest to their own homes. What a brilliant and insightful strategy. The people would be highly motivated to work quickly and to do a good job.

The text indicates that Nehemiah did not just assign the tasks to the families but that he also checked up on them and encouraged them. He was not only commander-in-chief, he was the quality-assurance director and the master of motivation. He wasn't just persuasive to get the job started; he was persuasive to get it done.

Good leadership requires follow-up to ensure that those who have agreed to do a job actually get it done. Some people don't appreciate being held accountable but that is a vital part of effective leadership that the mature both expect and accept.

IV. People of Real Valor are PERSISTENT (4:1-6:14)

The rebuilding of the protective wall around Jerusalem did not go without opposition. First of all, there was opposition from the enemies of the Jews. Their leaders of the surrounding towns always knew that if they ever wanted to, they could march against Jerusalem and easily defeat her. She was unprotected.

But now Nehemiah was leading the people to raise a fortress to protect the people. The king of Samaria made fun of the Jews. The king of Ammon criticized their workmanship. A consortium of enemies plotted an attack on the Jews. But Nehemiah kept the people working and reminded them that they were fighting, not just for themselves, but for their brothers, their sons, their daughters, their wives and their homes (4:14).

Eventually, half the people worked while half the people stood guard but the work continued. Eventually, the men of Judah slept in their clothes with their swords at their sides but the work continued.

Not only did Nehemiah have to deal with opposition from the enemies of the Jews, he also had to deal with opposition from among the Jews. Some of the people who had been living in Jerusalem but who had failed to rebuild the wall, began to complain that they were facing financial ruin and needed a bailout.

When he investigated the root of the problem, Nehemiah learned that some of the Jews had borrowed money from other Jews to pay taxes to the King of Persia. Now the interest was killing them. Nehemiah called all of the creditors together and explained to them that God's Law forbid charging interest to a fellow Jew and he ordered them not only stop charging interest but to give back the interest they had already collected. The wealthy Jews agreed to do so and the work on the wall continued.

The next opposition came again from the enemies of the Jews. They sought to ambush Nehemiah. They invited him to a summit conference of all the kings of the cities around Jerusalem. It would have been a heady experience and might have tempted a man who was not so focused as Nehemiah. But he did not fall for the ruse. He explained:

"I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

Nehemiah was a man of valor who was persistent in his service to the Lord and in his service to his country. Great wars are not won in a single day or in a single battle or even a single campaign. Victories are won over time by the persistent service of valiant warriors. It was true among our veterans and it is true in the army of God. Romans 2:6-7 instructs us:

⁶ God "will give to each person according to what he has done." ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

Persistence is a prerequisite for victory. It was for Nehemiah, it was for our veterans and it will be for the Soldiers of Christ.

CONCLUSION:

Nehemiah demonstrated real valor and he was effective. After only 52 days, the wall was completed. Think of it, a project that had been on the "To Do List" of God's people for over 90 years was finally finished in 52 days! Because of a person of authentic valor.

As I said, Nehemiah demonstrated real valor. He was effective. After only 52 days, the wall was completed. But in the end, it is not walls that protect people. Nor armies. Nor armaments. God is the mighty fortress for His people.

INVITATION: #151 – "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

The Greek historian, Plutarch, in his book, *The Life of Agesilaus*, records that an ambassador from Epirus sought an audience with Agesilaus, King of Sparta. When he arrived in Sparta, the ambassador was surprised that he did not see any stone walls like he typically saw around other Greek cities. When he inquired about this of King Agesilaus, the king assured that ambassador that the next day at sunup he would show him the walls of Sparta.

At dawn on the morrow, the ambassador of Epirus stood with Agesilaus as soldiers of the Spartan army drew up in rank and file before him. When the last soldier was in place, Agesilaus gestured toward the troops and said, "Sir, behold the walls of Sparta...and each man a brick."