



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 2:9-20

Topic

Not knowing exactly what to expect, Nehemiah goes from gate-to-gate along Jerusalem's ruined wall

Title

"Gate Expectations"

You might remember Florida senator Marco Rubio joking about the small size of Donald Trump's hands at a campaign rally in Roanoke, Virginia. He later offered a public apology.

Trump's on-line detractors use hashtags like #tinytrump or #tinyhands

There are claims that his camp digitally alters the length of his fingers in the media they release.

The tiny hands debate goes back to an article written more than thirty years ago. At last the issue can be resolved.

There is a website that allows you to print-out an actual-size outline of Donald Trump's left hand. It was created based on a bronzed handprint hanging in the New York branch of Madame Tussauds Wax Museum.

Are Trump's hands really #tiny? Not exactly. At 7.25" long, they're only slightly smaller than average.

Nehemiah twice in chapter two refers to the "hand" of God - in verses eight and eighteen. The hand of God was and would be upon him as he journeyed to Jerusalem, and as he rallied the Jews to rebuild its walls.

It's a good backdrop for us to discuss the hand of God in **our** lives... And to recall with exceeding joy that we who are in Christ are God's handiwork.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 It Is Because You Are His Handiwork That God's Hand Is Shown By You, and #2 It Is Because You Are His Handiwork That God's Hand Is Upon You.

#1 It Is Because You Are His Handiwork That God's Hand Is Shown By You

(v9-10 & 19-20)

I am art-ignorant. By that I mean I do not recognize most paintings or sculptures. I can probably pick-out the Mona Lisa from a line-up, but that's about it.

Artists have a certain style that makes them recognizable to the discerning eye. In the 1960's, Andy Warhol pioneered Pop Art - showcasing a collection of paintings that focused on mass-produced commercial goods. When you see his art, you say, "That's an Andy Warhol."

The same is true in other media, e.g., film. The live action *Dumbo* was recently released.

People say it is, “from the imagination of Tim Burton.”

Do you ever think of God as an Artist? In Psalm 19:1 we read, “The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork.”

The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 2:10, said of believers, “we are God’s handiwork” (NIV). The word translated “handiwork” is the Greek word, *poiēma*, so we think poem. The word can mean most any kind of artistic, creative work.

Creation is the “handiwork” of God. *So are you as His **new** creation in Jesus.*

What is God making you? Or, better yet, **who** is God making you?

You are “predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). It doesn’t mean that a person is predestined, before they are born, to either Heaven or Hell. It means that *after* you are born again, it is your destiny to become like Jesus.

Since Christians are God's handiwork, then even before we are completed, others ought to see God's style through our lives. They should by looking at us, or by listening to us, be able to say, "I'm pretty sure that's a Jesus."

Nehemiah gets ridiculed by opponents of God's work. He lets them know they are seeing the Master at work in and through him, and that God's work will prosper.

Neh 2:9 Then I went to the governors *in the region* beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.

When Ezra journeyed, he refused an armed escort. He thought it would detract from the testimony of God's ability to provide for, and to protect, the caravan.

Did Nehemiah therefore lack faith? I'd rather think that he was led differently.

Bible characters were led by God in all kinds of ways. Some seem logical; others seem odd, to say the least. All of them were designed by God for maximum spiritual effect.

Joseph provides a great example. Sold by his brothers into slavery... Wrongfully imprisoned, then forgotten there... He was suddenly raised to second only to Pharaoh. In the end, he saw God's unusual leading, declaring, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:20).

We are all being conformed to the image of Jesus... But our paths will be very different, because we each are unique.

The certainty of God's handiwork in my life can assure me that I am on the path that will best accomplish His work in me. God either sets me on the path, or He permits me to walk it, and as with Joseph, He works everything together for the good.

Neh 2:10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard *of it*, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.

These guys will dog Nehemiah the whole time. Their plots will be pretty sinister.

Are people plotting against you? Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they're not out to get you. But seriously, sometimes it feels like certain individuals oppose you every opportunity they get.

Expect it rather than be shocked by it. Hopefully they oppose you for seeing a "Jesus," which offends their conscience. Pray for them; minister to them. They need Who you have.

The most exciting line in verse ten is, "a man had come." God sent a man through whom He might work, and thereby show others His handiwork.

God has chosen to work through men and women and children who have received Jesus. He has better, more powerful, more faithful servants in the angels. But it's us He sends with the Gospel.

I like, but am simultaneously terrified, by something the apostle Paul said: "Follow me as I follow Christ" (First Corinthians 11:1). The gist of that is not that we be like Paul, but that we be like Jesus Whom Paul follows. We should show Him in our actions and in our reactions; in our words; in our walk.

If you want a slightly different art analogy, in another New Testament passage we read, "You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men" (Second Corinthians 3:2). We are literature; God's poem; to be read by others.

Let's drop down to verse nineteen and keep with Sanballat and Tobiah.

Neh 2:19 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?"

They are joined by a third opponent, Geshem.

Ridicule. False accusations. If you haven't experienced these, just wait; you will. Sticks and stones can break your bones. Words can break your spirit. The only words that matter, in the long run, are Jesus' promises to you, found in Scripture. Let His Word overcome the words of men.

Feeling lonely? Unloved? Jesus said He'd never leave you, never forsake you; He loves you with a pure, everlasting love. Because you can't physically touch Him, do you think it isn't enough?

I don't want to sound insensitive, but, really -
Our relationship with Jesus ought to fill our hearts.

Neh 2:20 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."

Nehemiah had a godly confidence that the walls would be rebuilt. He spoke boldly about Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem's true spiritual condition.

When we present the Gospel, it is only good news if folks hear the bad news, too. They are sinners, spiritually dead, condemned to Hell. At the Cross Jesus took their place. He exchanges His righteousness for their sin so that God can declare the believing sinner justified. He rose from the dead, offering them His empowering by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Jesus isn't offering you a better life, or your best life. He is promising you eternal life in Heaven rather than in Hell.

Everyone would see God's work in that the wall would be rebuilt; and it would be rebuilt in only 52 days. They would look upon the wall and acknowledge, "That's a God."

It must have been the Six Day War in 1967. After Israel's decisive victory, my dad (not a believer) said, "Those are God's people."

You, individually, are the temple of God on the earth. We, collectively, are the temple of God on the earth. The age we live in, between the ascension of Jesus to Heaven and His return to resurrect the dead in Christ and rapture those alive at His coming - it's the story of us, as we have been entrusted with the treasure of the Gospel in these earthen vessels.

Let's put it in question form, for each of us to answer: When people look at me, or at us, **do they see a Jesus?**

#2 It Is Because You Are His Handiwork That God's Hand Is Shown By You

(v11-18)

God's handprints would be all over the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was careful to keep the focus on the Lord.

Still, God wasn't going to rebuild the walls Himself. He would do it through a man leading other men.

Whether it was Noah, or Abraham, or Moses or Joshua; or Peter or Paul or John; or Wesley or Whitfield or Graham or Smith; God works through men, women, and children whom He saves and empowers.

We need reminding that His greatest work isn't what He does through us, using us. **We are His greatest work.**

Allow me to suggest a line of reasoning that substantiates what I just said. As glorious as creation is, we read in the Bible that, "the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" (Second Peter 3:10). In place of the current creation will follow "a new heaven, and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1).

What survives the old creation to inhabit the re-creation is **us** - believers, *God's new creation*. Paul exclaimed, "For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:19). It's all about Jesus completing His work in us.

Read these remaining verses not so much about the walls, but about God's handiwork upon Nehemiah.

Neh 2:11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

I'm not sure if this is meant to be read as a delay, or if it's saying it only took him three days to recover from the 4month trip.

Some works for God require urgency; others, waiting. In your life you will experience both, and they are designed to reveal different things about where you are in your walk with Jesus.

Neh 2:12 Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem; nor was there any animal with me, except the one on which I rode.

Nehemiah led a secret-survey group under cover of darkness. In an effort to be stealthy, the only animal was the one he rode, while the “few men” proceeded on foot. Even more super-spylike, it seems no one, not even these few men, knew what he had returned for.

It was a practical strategy. Nehemiah knew what God wanted. He didn't need to consult with the locals. This wasn't going to be a discussion; they weren't going to take a vote.

Why take anyone along, then? I don't know - except that even though there would be no discussion, support would be needed, and Nehemiah seemed to be discipling these guys to that end.

Most of us pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

We can think of it in terms of a secret-survey accompanied by God the Holy Spirit.

These honest appraisals are one of the key ways God molds and shapes you as handiwork. Just remember to be honest.

Neh 2:13 And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire.

I wasn't able to find much data on the original walls of Jerusalem, or after Nehemiah's rebuild. I did run across a description of the walls when they were rebuilt in the 16th century by the Ottomans:

The length of the walls is 2.4966 miles, their average height is 39.37 feet, and the average thickness is 8.2 feet. The walls contain 34 watchtowers and seven main gates.

It seemed an insurmountable task, as evidenced by the fact no one was working on them.

You might be thinking, “Nobody looks at me and sees a Jesus.” Maybe; maybe not. You might feel like you’re that project in your garage under blankets with boxes piled on top that was started years ago only to be abandoned.

But He Who began the work of conforming you to His image has promised to complete it. Let that refresh you, and get back to cooperating with Jesus. If it seems Jesus is not doing anything, He is; you just don’t see it, and you are impatient. Great art takes time.

I mentioned the Mona Lisa. Leonardo da Vinci worked on it for about 15 years.

Neh 2:14 Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but *there was* no room for the animal under me to pass.

The ruin and rubble was extensive in some areas. It did not dissuade Nehemiah.

God's handiwork is interrupted by apathy; by sin; by backsliding. The ruin can be extensive.

It will not dissuade Jesus, Who offers forgiveness upon your repentance, and restoration.

Neh 2:15 So I went up in the night by the valley, and viewed the wall; then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

Nehemiah could only go so far before he was forced to turn back. He seems to be presenting the situation as way more difficult than he had thought. A couple of thoughts on that:

1. First, you might get to a point in your life where the things you committed to get a lot more difficult than you thought. Marriage is the easy example. Are you going to follow through on your vows, or head back to Babylon?

2. Second, the difficulty of the situation isn't really the point if God is involved. In fact, the more difficult it seems, the more God can be glorified.

I shouldn't have to tell you that it is in the furnace, in the press, in the storm, where God's handiwork is refined.

Neh 2:16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work.

Nehemiah's arrival had been a pretty big event. Here was the servant of the Persian king, with letters from the king, escorted by an elite military force. Nehemiah let anticipation grow until he'd make a big reveal.

When is the last time you thought about God's big reveal of us? In Second Thessalonians 1:10 we read, "When He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among

all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.” At His Second Coming, we return with Jesus, and He is glorified through the lives of believers whom He has transformed by making us saints out of sinners. He reveals us in our completed state to those on the earth to show His ultimate handiwork.

Neh 2:17 Then I said to them, "You see the distress that we *are* in, how Jerusalem *lies* waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach."

Nehemiah may have said more than this. I rather think this was all he said. It was certainly all that he needed to say.

People need to be motivated by truth; by the Word of God. Submitted to God's Word, you accept its explanations and judgments, and you apply its corrections and rebukes.

Neh 2:18 And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. So they said, "Let us rise up and build." Then they set their hands to *this good work*.

The King of kings and the king were both in support - with greater emphasis on God.

The people “set their hands” to the work. But, again, it was in the context of “the hand of God” being upon Nehemiah, and, by extension, upon them.

In the work - *you are the work*, God’s handiwork.

The Master poet... The Master potter... The Master builder... The Master metalsmith... The Master goldsmith and silversmith... The Master gardener... Jesus is the true Master of the Arts.

You are His masterpiece.

