

## When the Going Gets Tough

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For several years my grandfather was a cowpuncher, joining cattle drives along part of the Western Trail from Vernon, Texas to Dodge City, Kansas. He'd be gone for weeks. We have letters that he and my grandmother wrote to each other while he was on the trail.

I still can see my grandfather sitting "tall in the saddle," riding out in the afternoon to bring up the cows to be milked. My sister and I loved to listen to his stories about the "olden days" when he was a cowboy. They were romantic times; but Granddaddy never—**ever**—said that those days were better than today.

Oh, he **could** have. There would have been plenty of evidence. In fact, many in his generation *did* sing that song. His generation was very young when the 20<sup>th</sup> century began. It was a time of extreme optimism: high expectations. The age of science was in full swing, the Industrial Revolution was producing great technological advances, medical science was making progress against disease. Some theologians were teaching that "The Kingdom of God" was emerging in America. It was a time when inevitable progress was simply assumed.

Then on August 1, 1914, that came to a halt. Germany declared war on Russia. After the war came the Great Depression (My grandfather lost his farm, and spent the rest of his life farming for other people.)

Then came World War II; and the constant fear of "the bomb." Korea was heating up, there were "beatniks" on the street, and Joe McCarthy was looking for a communist under every bed. And then, for my grandfather, the onset of diabetes, and then a crippling stroke...

If anyone had the right to sing the blues, it was my grandfather's generation. Our text today tells the story of a people for whom the going got tough—and pretty much stayed there!

<p>NEHEMIAH 6:1-15 (NIV) <i>When word came to ... our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—<sup>2</sup>Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." But they were scheming to harm me; <sup>3</sup>so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "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?" <sup>4</sup>Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer. <sup>5</sup>Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the</i></p>	<p><i>same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter <sup>6</sup>in which was written: "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king <sup>7</sup>and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together." <sup>8</sup>I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head." <sup>9</sup>They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for</i></p>
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*the work, and it will not be completed.” But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”* <sup>10</sup>*One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.”* <sup>11</sup>*But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!”* <sup>12</sup>*I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.* <sup>13</sup>*He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.* <sup>14</sup>*Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me.* <sup>15</sup>*So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.*

Now, our Gregorian calendar didn't exist until 1582; but if we project our calendar back to the year 444 BCE, the twenty-fifth day of Elul in the Jewish calendar would have been September 22; so, counting back 52 days, the rebuilding of the Wall began August 1. So, they had worked through the heat of the summer.

And as the project drew to a close, the critics and the nay-sayers mounted one final campaign to sabotage the wall. A couple of questions come to mind:

First, why were those Arabs so opposed to the Israelites? Why were they enemies? Some Arab traditions point all the way back to story in Genesis. God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son; but both he and his wife were getting on in years, so they decided to help God out.

So, Abraham fathered a son through Sarah's maid, Hagar. The son was Ishmael, and as the first-born was entitled to all the rights and privileges of inheritance. But God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son; and God keeps his promises. Lo and behold, along comes Isaac; and Sarah, in a jealous rage, convinces Abraham to banish Ishmael and Hager from the camp—turn them out in the desert like stray dogs!

Ishmael is known as the forefather of the Arab nations; and to this day the Arabs see him as the rightful heir to the promise to Abraham—and thus to the land which was given to Abraham. And they're still fighting over that.

And the hatred continues. In 1948 Jews from around the world converged upon Palestine—and with history repeating itself, took the land away from the people who had occupied it for 2,000 years. Evangelical Christians—including some members of the U.S. Congress—believed God's chosen people were returning to the Holy Land in fulfillment of prophecy and in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ; so they sided with the Jews, and now the Arabs hate Christians; and especially American Christians.

The last time I was in Jerusalem I stood on the north wall of the ancient city with our Guide, a Christian Arab named Gabriel. He pointed to a house and

said, "That was my father's house, and his father's before him, and his father's before him. But we had to leave when these people came with their guns and their claims that God had given them this land. I was four years old; and I watched them kill my older brother."

To Jews, and many Christians, David is a hero—the prototype of the Jewish Messiah. But to Arabs, David was the one who led the first Jewish take-over of their land and their homes. I suspect Arabs living in that area cheered as Nebuchadnezzar's army sacked the city and destroyed Solomon's magnificent temple.

But now the Jews are back. And there's anxiety. Will history repeat itself?

My second question is more strategic. Why didn't those Arabs and Bedouins simply use their superior strength to keep the Jews out? The Jews came in relatively small groups as they made the trip from Babylon. They weren't soldiers; in fact, they'd been a captive people. They wouldn't have put up much of a fight.

Maybe the Arabs just didn't take them seriously. After all, Jews had been trickling back into the area for almost 100 years, and nothing had been done. There was a temple, with shops and homes around it; but they still were living on the pile of rubble that had been Jerusalem. Why should anything change?

Then along comes this Nehemiah character; and things start popping! At first it's a big joke. "Hey, that wall won't stand up! If a fox ran across the top of it it would fall down!" But the work continued.

And by the time they realized something serious was going down, Nehemiah had the Israelites organized, with some military training. By then it was too late.

So they tried to trick Nehemiah into coming onto their turf so they could kill him. That didn't work, either; and the work was completed in 52 days.

Nehemiah was a strong leader who commanded respect and trust. Still there was resistance: sometimes from outside; sometimes from within. But when the going got tough, Nehemiah knew the source of his strength. When he first heard the report of crumbled walls and burned gates, he prayed. When he surveyed the ruins of the city, he prayed. When he needed a plan, he prayed. And when resistance threatened to block the work, he prayed. He said, and he believed: "*We are servants of the God who rules from heaven, and he will make our work succeed.*" (2:20)

Today we look at rebuilding our own Endurance and when the going gets tough we can draw confidence from Nehemiah's story and its conclusion that God blesses, not the powerful, but the obedient.