

# The Men Who Wrote Nasty Letters

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*We've all had our day ruined by a piece of mail that brought bad news. It may have been a bill we didn't know was coming, or a note telling us a relative has died, or perhaps an unexpected legal problem. And whether on TV or in movies, threatening letters and blackmail attempts are common plot devices.*

*But such letters aren't a modern phenomenon. In the past, when there was no radio, TV or Twitter to spread news quickly, receiving a nasty letter could mean it was already too late to prepare for the worst. What do you do then?*

*This story comes from Nehemiah 6:1-7:3.*

Nehemiah was the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes of Persia.

A cupbearer had a dangerous job;  
he was always the first to taste the king's food  
to make sure no one had poisoned it.

As a result, the cupbearer was a trusted member of the king's court  
and even gave him advice on occasion.

One day the king noticed that Nehemiah was depressed.

When he asked why, Nehemiah told him that some men from Judah,  
the part of Israel where his family had once lived,  
had arrived a few weeks earlier and told him  
that the walls of Jerusalem had been torn down and the gates burned,  
so the Jews who lived there were in constant danger.

"Is there anything I can do?" the king asked.

Since Judah was part of the king's empire,  
Nehemiah asked him for help rebuilding the city walls.  
He had been unable to stop thinking about the problem  
and had worked out a plan to get the rebuilding done.

Much to Nehemiah's surprise,

the king not only agreed to help but he sent Nehemiah,  
along with soldiers to protect him  
and letters commanding his governors to help him,  
to oversee the work and make sure his people were safe again.

But it wasn't long before two enemies of Israel,

known as Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite,  
heard that Nehemiah had arrived to help the Israelites.

If the Jews rebuilt their walls, Jerusalem would become powerful again.

They became very angry and decided that Nehemiah had to be stopped!

They started simply enough:

As Nehemiah's people dug the burned stones from the rubble,  
Sanballat and Tobiah and their allies ridiculed the Jews.  
But the builders kept building, and in time  
the wall was back to half its original size,  
although there were gaps where the gates should be.  
Nehemiah encouraged the people, and they kept rebuilding.

Seeing that ridicule didn't work,  
the two men organized an attack on the builders.  
But some friends of the Jews who lived outside the city  
learned about the attack and warned Nehemiah.  
So when the attack came, the builders were ready!  
The attack failed, and from that time on  
Nehemiah made sure the builders always worked in pairs—  
one man built while another stood guard with a sword, to protect him.  
As before, Nehemiah encouraged the people, and they kept rebuilding.

And that's when the nasty letters started.  
Since they couldn't stop the rebuilding by attacking the people,  
Sanballat and Tobiah attacked Nehemiah himself!  
The letters were full of lies,  
saying that people were going to tell King Artaxerxes  
that Nehemiah planned to rebuild the walls and make himself king,  
and that the king would surely come and destroy the Jews.

The letters said that if Nehemiah would just come talk to them  
they might be able to stop these lies from reaching the king.  
But the letters were only meant to make him afraid,  
to get him to leave the city so they could attack him.

However, Nehemiah wasn't fooled by their tricks.  
God made him wise enough to know his enemies wanted to kill him,  
so he sent this response:

*"I am doing a great work, rebuilding these walls.  
I don't have time to come and talk to you."*

Five times Sanballat and Tobiah sent these letters,  
hoping that Nehemiah would come and they could kill him.  
They even bribed the priest inside the city,  
telling him to use the letters as an excuse  
to lure Nehemiah into an ambush.

But Nehemiah wasn't fooled.  
He responded to each letter the same way:  
*"I am doing a great work, rebuilding these walls.  
I don't have time to come and talk to you."*

Because he kept his mind on his work  
and didn't let his enemies distract him,  
*it took only fifty-two days*  
for Nehemiah and the Jews to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem!  
Nehemiah did exactly as King Artaxerxes had commanded him;  
he acted as governor of Judah for twelve years,  
making sure that the Jews were safe  
before returning to the Persian capital.

Nehemiah's faith in God was an intelligent faith.  
He didn't ignore the dangers he faced,  
but he didn't let them overwhelm him either.  
When his people were threatened by attackers  
he set guards to defend them,  
but when the threats were just words  
he ignored them and did what he was supposed to do.  
He prayed and trusted God  
to give him wisdom to know the difference between  
what he needed to do  
and what he could ignore...  
and because of that, he was successful.

That's the kind of faith we all should have.