

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 2

In chapter 1 we saw how Nehemiah had heard of the terrible state of God's city and how that drove him to his knees in repentance and in seeking an opportunity to be part of the solution. That should have challenged our view of the work of God in the world (are we distressed at the state of the church? Are we prayerful for it, and desiring to be used by God in it?).

In this chapter we see God answering Nehemiah's prayer, and we see his great wisdom as he begins the work. Doing God's work will require great courage, but knowing we serve the King of Kings will mean we fear him, and not men (see 1 Peter 3:13-15). We also see in this chapter that prayerfulness and wise careful planning/leadership are not mutually exclusive. We must be pious people (constantly prayerful), but not pietistic (only praying and never doing anything else). God worked through Nehemiah's godly common sense as much as his quiet times!

¹ In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; ² so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

I was very much afraid, ³ but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

The date given in verse 1 is significant because it shows that Nehemiah has been fasting and praying for four months since he first heard the news about the state of Jerusalem. But though sometimes God takes longer than we might like before he answers our prayers, he does answer and opens the door for Nehemiah to speak to the king (which was what he has been praying for, remember 1:11).

As cupbearer to the King Nehemiah has privileged access to the King, but it was a requirement of the job that he must not look sad before the King. We do not know whether the King's initial statement in verse 2 was a threat or a polite inquiry, but Nehemiah takes the opportunity presented to him.

There is wisdom in how Nehemiah begins to address the issue. It was a sensitive political issue, but as Kidner points out in his commentary Nehemiah introduces this in terms of a personal sadness, stressing his connection to Jerusalem ("where my Fathers are buried").

⁴ The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵ and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."

God continues to bless Nehemiah with the King's positive response continuing the conversation. Nehemiah's arrow prayer (verse 4 – quickly shot up to God in the midst of this hard conversation) comes out of a life devoted to prayer as we saw in chapter 1. Nehemiah can have confidence before this King because he knows the King of Kings. He is bold to ask for an opportunity to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild it. Remember Nehemiah did not know what the outcome would be, but was prepared like Daniel's friends in Daniel 3 to act and "if I perish I perish". Faithfulness was more important to him than his life.

⁶ Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. ⁷ I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? ⁸ And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. ⁹ So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

God answers Nehemiah's prayers in a way which is overwhelming and possibly beyond Nehemiah's wildest hopes. However Nehemiah's careful thought about what was needed is shown by what he requested of the King – verse 7 and 8 shows that this was no whim. He had prayed and planned and thought hard about what was needed to rebuild the walls. Nehemiah is abundantly clear about why the King acted so positively. He knew it was not because he had caught him on a good day, no – "the gracious hand of God was upon me". He can change the heart and minds of Kings, all the wealth of the world belongs to him.

¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

An important theme of Nehemiah is introduced here. There are those with great influence who do not want to see Jerusalem rebuilt, because they were opposed to "the Israelites".

Nehemiah Inspects Jerusalem's Walls

¹¹ I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

¹³ By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal [\[a\]](#) Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; ¹⁵ so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the Valley Gate. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

While these might seem like unimportant verses before we get on to the beginning of the rebuilding of the walls, these verses show Nehemiah's great wisdom and leadership skills. He was a careful planner as well as a faithful prayer. Both are needed in God's work – it is not unspiritual to prepare and think hard and act in a wise way.

Nehemiah does not rush into action. He does an inspection of the city carefully to see how bad things really are. So far all he has been going on was second hand accounts, he needed to see the state of the city for himself. He looks round the city quietly "by night". He did not draw attention to himself or whip up excitement before he knew exactly what needed doing (verse 16). He also presumably did this quietly because he was already aware of the enemies of God's people (verse 10).

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.

Only after Nehemiah had inspected the city and knew what needed to be done did he begin the work, and the first job needed was to convince the people that the walls needed to be rebuilt. Nehemiah is wise in how he does this – he stresses the disgrace of the people (this is not just a building project, it is about rebuilding the people), and he gives them confidence by recounting how God has already been at work so far.

Notice also, the call to rebuild the walls comes from the people themselves (verse 18). Nehemiah vividly points out the problem, he draws from them the desire for the solution. This is wise leadership! They now have a sense of ownership over the project rather than feeling they have been pushed into it.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

²⁰ I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

As they begin the opposition starts – verbally at first, with mockery and slander. Nehemiah dismisses them, not by focusing on his own strength to do the work, but by a knowledge that this is God’s work so it cannot fail, and by focussing on the fact that the enemies have no part in God’s people so do not have any right to the inheritance of the land. Kidner points out that the words used for “share....claim.....historical right” focus on the fact that the enemies have no right to Jerusalem in the past, present or future.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Nisan in 2:1 is four months on from Kislev (1:1). What does this tell us about the prayer of Nehemiah?

- Does God answer prayers straight away, even when they are prayers for his glory?
- What must we do when there is a delay?

Look at the conversation between Nehemiah and the King in verses 2-9

- What do we learn about Nehemiah’s courage?
- Why do you think Nehemiah can be so bold? How can we stand and speak for God even before powerful people (see 1 Peter 1:13-15).
- Why do you think Nehemiah is so clear about what he wants (verse 7-8)? What else has he been doing in the last 4 months? What can we learn from that?

- Why does Nehemiah get such a positive result from the King? Has he just caught the King on a good day?

What do we learn about Nehemiah's wisdom in verses 11-16. Why does he inspect the city? Why does he do it by night? Surely he'd want to get stuck into the work?

What are the dangers of launching into God's work without careful thought?

How does Nehemiah begin the work (verse 17-18)?

What happens as God's work begins to be done? (see verse 10 and 19)

How does Nehemiah show how to deal with that (see verse 20)?