

Nehemiah 2
October 10, 2021

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: When we watch other people live their lives, we tend to admire and/or be drawn to people who exhibit a strong faith in God. Think about people you know in your circle of influence who show strong faith in their walk with the Lord. What is the *evidence* that they are walking by faith? [Let people engage]

Transition: Nehemiah is a great example of a God-fearing man who exercised great faith in God. He could easily be included in the “Hall of Faith” with the likes of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Esther, Deborah, and David. We will see evidences of Nehemiah’s faith throughout this chapter. Let’s begin and see how the story unfolds.

BOOK:

Artaxerxes Sends Nehemiah to Jerusalem

2 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?”

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 favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

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.

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.

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 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 reentered 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.

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.

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."

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

We need to examine our own hearts to see whether or not we are really walking and working by faith.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Ne 2)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

II. Nehemiah Prepares for the Work (2)

Four months passed during which Nehemiah waited for God's time to approach the king. "Whoever believes will not act hastily, says Isa. 28:16 (NKJV). Indeed, faith and patience go together (Heb. 6:12). But Nehemiah had a plan in his mind, given to him by the Lord, and he knew just what to do when the right hour arrived. How like the Lord Jesus Christ (John 6:5-6).

A. Nehemiah and the king (vv. 1-8).

No one was to appear before the king with sadness or bad news (Esther 4:1-2), but the burden on Nehemiah's heart revealed itself on his face. He was a man of sorrows, and the king noticed it. Were it not for the providence of God, this sadness might have caused Nehemiah's death. Before taking his burden to Artaxerxes, Nehemiah quickly went to the throne of grace in prayer; then he told the king all his heart. He knew God would open the way (Prov. 21:1). So thoroughly had Nehemiah worked out his plan that he was able to give the king a time schedule (v. 6) and a list of the materials he would need to do the task (vv. 7-8). God's strong hand (1:10) and good hand (2:8) did the impossible!

B. Nehemiah and the ruins (vv. 9-16).

It took three months for Nehemiah to arrive at the city, and he arrived as a governor, not a servant. A man of patience, Nehemiah waited three days before taking any steps. The enemies were watching and Nehemiah had to be wise and cautious. Later he would discover that some of the nobles of Judah were allied with Tobiah, the enemy of the Jews (6:17-19). By night he investigated the situation, keeping his counsel to himself. He was awake when others were sleeping and concerned while others were at ease. He saw more of the situation at night than others could see in the light.

C. Nehemiah and the Jews (vv. 17-20).

Nehemiah did not believe in a one-man ministry; he challenged the leaders of the remnant to work with him (not for him) in repairing the walls. The motive? "That we may no longer be a reproach." He was concerned with the glory of God as well as the good of the nation. Nehemiah showed them the need, outlined the task, and assured them of God's blessing. Immediately the opposition was aroused (as it always is), but Nehemiah knew that God's hand was upon him and his work.

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Determined* (pp. 23-36). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

The Mountain Starts to Move

Unknown to him, Nehemiah was about to join the glorious ranks of the “champions of faith”; and in the centuries to follow, his name would be included with heroes like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Esther, Deborah, and David. One person can make a big difference in this world, if that person knows God and really trusts in Him. Because faith makes a difference, we can make a difference in our world to the glory of God.

“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace,” said Martin Luther. “It is so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.” The promise is that “all things are possible to him who believes” (Mark 9:23, NKJV). Jesus said living faith can move mountains! (Matt. 17:20)

This chapter describes three evidences of Nehemiah’s faith. As we study these evidences of faith, we must examine our own hearts to see whether or not we are really walking and working by faith.

1. He had the faith to wait (Neh. 2:1–3)

Since the Jewish month of Nisan would be our mid-March to mid-April, it would indicate that four months have passed since Nehemiah received the bad news about the plight of Jerusalem. As every believer should, Nehemiah patiently waited on the Lord for directions; because it is “through faith and patience” that we inherit the promises (Heb. 6:12). “He that believeth shall not make haste” (Isa. 28:16). True faith in God brings a calmness to the heart that keeps us from rushing about and trying to do in our own strength what only God can do. We must know not only how to *weep and pray*, but also how to *wait and pray*.

Three statements in Scripture have a calming effect on me whenever I get nervous and want to rush ahead of the Lord: “Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord” (Ex. 14:13); “Sit still ... until you know how the matter will turn out” (Ruth 3:18, NKJV); “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). When you wait on the Lord in prayer, you are not wasting your time; you are investing it. God is preparing both you and your circumstances so that His purposes will be accomplished. However, when the right time arrives for us to act by faith, we dare not delay.

Eastern monarchs were sheltered from anything that might bring them unhappiness (Es. 4:1–2); but on that particular day, Nehemiah could not hide his sorrow. “By sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken” (Prov. 15:13), and Psalm 102 certainly describes Nehemiah’s feelings about Jerusalem. Perhaps each morning, Nehemiah prayed, “Lord, if today is the day I speak to the king about our plans, then open the way for me.”

The king noticed that his cupbearer was carrying a burden. Had Artaxerxes been in a bad mood, he might have banished Nehemiah or even ordered him killed; but instead, the king inquired why his servant was so sad. “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water He turneth it whithersoever He will” (Prov. 21:1). World leaders are only God’s servants, whether they know it or not. “O Lord God of our fathers, are You not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in Your hand, and no one can withstand You” (2 Chron. 20:6, NIV).

2. He had the faith to ask (Neh. 2:4–8)

The king asked him, “What is it you want?” What an opportunity for Nehemiah! All the power and wealth of the kingdom were wrapped up in that question!

As he was accustomed to do, Nehemiah sent one of his quick “telegraph prayers” to the Lord (4:4; 5:9; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). But keep in mind that these “emergency prayers” were

backed up by four months of fasting and praying. If Nehemiah had not been diligent to pray in private, his “telegraph prayers” might have gone unanswered. “He had only an instant for that prayer,” wrote George Morrison. “Silence would have been misinterpreted. Had he closed his eyes and lingered in devotion, the king immediately would have suspected treason.”

It encourages my prayer life when I contrast the earthly throne of Artaxerxes with the throne of grace in heaven. Nehemiah had to wait for an invitation before he could share his burden with the king, but we can come to the throne of grace at any time with any need (Heb. 4:14–16). Artaxerxes saw the sorrow on Nehemiah’s face, but our Lord sees our hearts and not only knows our sorrows but also feels them with us. People approaching the throne of Persia had to be very careful what they said, lest they anger the king; but God’s people can tell Him whatever burdens them. (The word *boldly* in Heb. 4:16 means “freedom of speech.”) You are never sure of the mood of a human leader, but you can always be sure of God’s loving welcome.

Jewish rabbis often answer a question with a question, and Nehemiah followed that example. Instead of telling the king what he planned to do, he aroused the king’s sympathy and interest with a question regarding how he should feel about the sad plight of his ancestral city and the graves of his forefathers. It was good psychology, and God used Nehemiah’s reply to get the king’s sympathetic attention (Luke 21:14–15). A pagan monarch would probably not sorrow over the ruins of Jerusalem, but he would certainly show respect for the dead.

Nehemiah was a true patriot whose dreams for the future were motivated by the values of the past. He did not try to duplicate the past, for that was impossible; rather, he built on the past so that Israel would have a future. To Nehemiah, the past was a rudder to guide him and not an anchor to hold him back. When Samuel Johnson called patriotism “the last refuge of a scoundrel,” he was referring to that temporary zeal that uses “love of country” as propaganda for selfish purposes. United States Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson said that patriotism was not “a short and frenzied outburst of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.” That certainly describes Nehemiah’s kind of patriotism.

Not only had Nehemiah *prayed* for this opportunity, but he had also *planned* for it and had his answer ready. During those four months of waiting, he had thought the matter through and knew exactly how he would approach the project. His reply to the king can be summarized in two requests: “Send me!” (Neh. 2:4–6) and “Give me!” (vv. 7–10)

Nehemiah could not leave his post without the approval of the king, nor could he work in Jerusalem without the authority of the king. Pressure from local officials had stopped the work once before (Ezra 4), and Nehemiah didn’t want history to repeat itself. He asked Artaxerxes to appoint him governor of Judah and to give him the authority he needed to rebuild the city walls. He told the king when he expected to return, but we don’t know what that date was. According to Nehemiah 5:14, Nehemiah spent twelve years as governor. He went back to Persia briefly to report to the king, but then returned to Jerusalem to correct the abuses that appeared during his absence (13:6–7).

But Nehemiah asked for even more. He needed letters of introduction that would guarantee safe travel and hospitality between Susa and Jerusalem. He also requested letters of authority that would provide the materials needed for the construction of buildings and walls. (Nehemiah had done his research well. He even knew the name of the keeper of the king’s forest!) Artaxerxes gave him what he asked, but it was the good hand of God that made the king so cooperative (see 2:18; and Ezra 7:6, 9, 28).

When Jesus sent His disciples out to minister, He first gave them the authority they needed to do the job; and He promised to meet their every need (Matt. 10:1–15). As we go forth to serve

the Lord, we have behind us all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18); so we don't have to be afraid. The important thing is that we go where He sends us and that we do the work He has called us to do.

Nehemiah is a good example of how believers should relate to unsaved officials as they seek to do the work of God. Nehemiah respected the king and sought to work within the lines of authority that existed in the empire. He didn't say, "I have a commission from the Lord to go to Jerusalem, and I'm going whether you like it or not!" When it comes to matters of conscience, we must always obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29); but even then, we must show respect for authority (see Rom. 13 and 1 Peter 2:11–25). Daniel and his friends took the same approach as did Nehemiah, and God honored them as well (Dan. 1).

The king's response is evidence of the sovereignty of God in the affairs of nations. We expect God to be able to work through a dedicated believer like Nehemiah, but we forget that God can also work through unbelievers to accomplish His will. He used Pharaoh to display His power in Egypt (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:17) and Cyrus to deliver His people from Babylon (Isa. 44:28; 45:1; Ezra 1:1–2). Caesar issued the decree that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1–7), and two different Roman centurions—Claudius Lysias and Julius—saved Paul's life (Acts 21:26–40; 23:25–30; 27:1, 42–44). While it may be helpful to have believing officials like Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah, we must remember that God is not required to use only believers.

Moses and Nehemiah made similar decisions of faith and similar sacrifices (Heb. 11:24–26). As the representative of the deliverer of the Jews, would he be welcomed by the Gentile officials? Nehemiah performed no signs or wonders, nor did he deliver any prophecies; but he faithfully did his work and prepared a city for the coming Messiah (Dan. 9:24–27).

3. He had the faith to challenge others (Neh. 2:11–18a)

Traveling (Neh. 2:9–10). No description is given of the trip from Susa to Jerusalem, a journey of at least two months' time. As a testimony to the faithfulness of God, Ezra had refused military protection for his journey (Ezra 8:21–23); but since Nehemiah was a governor on official business, he had a military escort. Nehemiah had just as much faith as Ezra; but as the king's officer, he could not travel without his retinue. For one thing, he would not oppose the will of the king; and he could not force his faith upon others.

When the official caravan arrived, it was bound to attract attention, particularly among those who hated the Jews and wanted to keep them from fortifying their city. Three special enemies are named: Sanballat, from Beth Horan, about twelve miles from Jerusalem; Tobiah, an Ammonite; and Geshem, an Arabian (Neh. 2:19), also called "Gashmu" (6:6). Sanballat was Nehemiah's chief enemy, and the fact that he had some kind of official position in Samaria only made him that much more dangerous (4:1–3).

Being an Ammonite, Tobiah was an avowed enemy of the Jews (Deut. 23:3–4). He was related by marriage to some of Nehemiah's co-laborers and had many friends among the Jews (Neh. 6:17–19). In fact, he was "near of kin" ("allied") to Eliashib the priest (13:4–7). If Sanballat was in charge of the army, then Tobiah was director of the intelligence division of their operation. It was he who gathered "inside information" from his Jewish friends and passed it along to Sanballat and Geshem. Nehemiah would soon discover that his biggest problem was not the enemy on the outside but the compromisers on the inside, a problem the church still faces today.

Investigating (Neh. 2:11–16). After his long difficult journey, Nehemiah took time to rest; for leaders must take care of themselves if they are going to be able to serve the Lord (Mark 6:31).

He also took time to get “the lay of the land” without arousing the concern of the enemy. A good leader doesn’t rush into his work but patiently gathers the facts firsthand and then plans his strategy (Prov. 18:13). We must be “wise as serpents” because the enemy is always watching and waiting to attack.

Leaders are often awake when others are asleep, and working when others are resting. Nehemiah didn’t want the enemy to know what he was doing, so he investigated the ruins by night. By keeping his counsel to himself, Nehemiah prevented Tobiah’s friends from getting information they could pass along to Sanballat. A wise leader knows when to plan, when to speak, and when to work.

As he surveyed the situation, he moved from west to south to east, concentrating on the southern section of the city. It was just as his brother had reported: The walls were broken down and the gates were burned (Neh. 2:13; 1:3). Leaders must not live in a dream world. They must face facts honestly and accept the bad news as well as the good news. Nehemiah saw more at night than the residents saw in the daylight, for he saw the potential as well as the problems. That’s what makes a leader!

Challenging (Neh. 2:17–20). Nehemiah’s appeal was positive; he focused on the glory and greatness of the Lord. He had been in the city only a few days, but he spoke of “we” and “us” and not “you” and “them.” As he did in his prayer (1:6–7), he identified with the people and their needs. The city was a reproach to the Lord (1:3; 4:4; 5:9), but the hand of the Lord was with them; and He would enable them to do the work. God had already proved His power by working in the heart of the king, and the king had promised to meet the needs. It was Nehemiah’s personal burden for Jerusalem and his experience with the Lord that convinced the Jews that the time was right to build.

It is to the credit of the Jewish nobles that they accepted the challenge immediately and said, “Let us rise up and build!” They were not so accustomed to their situation that they took it for granted and decided that nothing could be changed. Nor did they remind Nehemiah that the Jews had once tried to repair the walls and were stopped (Ezra 4). “We tried that once and it didn’t work. Why try again?”

Christian leaders today face these same two obstacles as they seek to lead God’s people into new conquests for the Lord. How often we hear, “We’re content the way things are; don’t rock the boat by trying to change things.” Or, “We tried that before and it didn’t work!”

It is worth noting that God sent the Jews a *leader from the outside*. Nehemiah came into the community with a new perspective on the problems and a new vision for the work. Too often in a local church, new members have a hard time “breaking into the system” because the veterans are afraid of new ideas that might lead to change. Since most of their leadership comes up through the ranks, parachurch ministries must also beware of the “closed corporation” attitude. New workers from outside the organization might open the windows and let in some fresh air.

The good hand of God was upon the leader, and the followers “strengthened their hands” for the work (Neh. 2:8, 18). It takes both the hands of leadership and the hands of partnership to accomplish the work of the Lord. Leaders can’t do the job by themselves, and workers can’t accomplish much without leadership. Vincent de Paul said, “If in order to succeed in an enterprise, I were obliged to choose between fifty deer commanded by a lion, and fifty lions commanded by a deer, I should consider myself more certain of success with the first group than with the second.”

Someone has defined *leadership* as “the art of getting people to do what they ought to do because they want to do it.” If that definition is true, then Nehemiah certainly was a leader! Most of the people united behind him and risked their lives to get the work done.

Nehemiah was not only able to challenge his own people, but he was also able to stand up against the enemy and deal effectively with their opposition. Just as soon as God’s people step out by faith to do His will, the enemy shows up and tries to discourage them. Sanballat and Tobiah heard about the enterprise (v. 10) and enlisted Geshem to join them in opposing the Jews. In chapters 4–7, Nehemiah will describe the different weapons the enemy used and how the Lord enabled him to defeat them.

They started off with ridicule, a device somebody has called “the weapon of those who have no other.” They laughed at the Jews and belittled both their resources and their plans. They even suggested that the Jews were rebelling against the king. That weapon had worked once before (see Ezra 4).

Whether in the area of science, exploration, invention, business, government, or Christian ministry, just about everyone who has ever accomplished anything has faced ridicule. Our Lord was ridiculed during His life and mocked while He was hanging on the cross. He was “despised and rejected of men” (Isa. 53:3). On the Day of Pentecost, some of the Jews in the crowd said that the Christians were drunk (Acts 2:13). The Greek philosophers called Paul a “babbling” (17:18, NIV), and Festus told Paul he was out of his mind (26:24).

Nehemiah could have dealt with their ridicule in several ways. He might have ignored it, and sometimes that’s the wisest thing to do (Prov. 26:4). But at the beginning of an enterprise, it’s important that leaders encourage their people and let them know that God has everything in control. Had Nehemiah ignored these three men who were important in the community, he might have weakened his own position among the Jews. After all, he was the official governor, and he was doing official business.

Or, Nehemiah might have debated with the three enemy leaders and tried to convince them that their position was false. But that approach would only have given “official promotion” to the three men along with opportunity for them to say more. Why should Nehemiah give the enemy opportunity to make speeches against the God whom he served?

Of course, Nehemiah would not ask them to join the project and work with the Jews, although Sanballat and his friends would have welcomed the invitation (Neh. 6:1–4). In his reply, Nehemiah made three things clear: Rebuilding the wall was God’s work; the Jews were God’s servants; and Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had no part in the matter. Sometimes leaders have to negotiate, but there are times when leaders must draw a line and defend it. Unfortunately, not everybody in Jerusalem agreed with their leader; for some of them cooperated with Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem and added to Nehemiah’s burdens.

The stage is now set and the drama is about to begin.

But before we join the workers on the wall, let’s ask ourselves whether we are the kind of leaders and followers God wants us to be. Like Nehemiah, do we have a burden in our hearts for the work God has called us to do? (2:12) Are we willing to sacrifice to see His will accomplished? Are we patient in gathering facts and in planning our work? Do we enlist the help of others or try to do everything ourselves? Do we motivate people on the basis of the spiritual—what God is doing—or simply on the basis of the personal? Are they following us or the Lord as He leads us?

As followers, do we listen to what our leaders say as they share their burdens? Do we cling to the past or desire to see God do something new? Do we put our hands and necks to the work? (v.

18; 3:5) Are we cooperating in any way with the enemy and thus weakening the work? Have we found the job God wants us to complete?

Anyone can go through life as a destroyer; God has called His people to be builders. What an example Nehemiah is to us! Trace his “so” statements and see how God used him: “So I prayed” (2:4); “So I came to Jerusalem” (v. 11); “So they strengthened their hands for this good work” (v. 18); “So built we the wall” (4:6); “So we labored in the work” (v. 21); “So the wall was finished” (6:15).

Were it not for the dedication and determination that came from his faith in a great God, Nehemiah would never have accepted the challenge or finished the work. He had never seen the verse, but what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:58 was what kept him going: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (NKJV).

No matter how difficult the task, or how strong the opposition, BE DETERMINED! As Dr. V. Raymond Edman used to say, “It is always too soon to quit.”

Getz, G. A. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 675-678) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

B. NEHEMIAH’S PRAYER ANSWERED (2:1–8)

1. NEHEMIAH’S OPPORTUNITY AND RESPONSE (2:1–4a)

2:1–4a. Four months went by before Nehemiah’s opportunity came—from Kislev (1:1, November–December) to **Nisan** (March–April). Nisan was still in Artaxerxes’ **20th year** (cf. 1:1) because the regnal year started in Tishri (September–October). As Nehemiah was going about his usual duties **the king** noticed something different about Nehemiah’s countenance. He was **sad**. **The king** was immediately curious about Nehemiah’s state of depression, since this was the first time he had seen his cupbearer dejected. **The king asked** a pointed question, **Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill?**

Nehemiah was careful in replying. In fact he was even **afraid**. A servant was never to let his negative emotions show before the king, for it might suggest dissatisfaction with the king. To do so might jeopardize his position or even his life. Also Nehemiah knew that his request was a bold one. As already stated, a few years earlier this king had stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem and now Nehemiah was going to ask that the order be reversed. The cupbearer was risking his life! But his response was wise, no doubt reflecting the fact that he had been thinking about this opportunity, should it come, for a number of months.

In Nehemiah’s response he avoided naming Jerusalem, perhaps so that he would not touch a sensitive “political nerve” in **the king**. He appealed to the king’s sense of respect—his sense of “rightness” regarding proper respect for the dead. Nehemiah said **the city where** his ancestors were **buried** was **in ruins** and the **gates** had been burned (cf. 1:3). This was a sad state of affairs for the Jewish city. Seventy-one years before (in 515 B.C.), the temple had been rebuilt. The year was now 444; yet the city itself still needed much rebuilding.

Artaxerxes’ heart responded to Nehemiah’s statements. So he asked Nehemiah what **the king** might do about the situation. With Judea being a Persian province, the cupbearer may have reasoned that perhaps the king would now be sensitive to Jerusalem’s condition.

2. NEHEMIAH'S REQUEST TO THE KING (2:4b–8a)

2:4b–6. Obviously Nehemiah had prepared for this moment he had **prayed** for. Besides seeking God's help in prayer, he utilized all the human resources available, including his intellectual capabilities, his past experiences, his accumulated wisdom, his role and position in life, and people with whom he came in contact (in this instance, the king of Persia).

Between the king's question (v. 4a) and Nehemiah's answer (v. 5), the cupbearer "breathed" a brief prayer **to the God of heaven** (cf. 1:4–5). This short prayer—whatever its unvoiced words—was built on his praying for four months. No doubt he asked for wisdom in stating his request properly and for a favorable reply from **the king**.

Speaking with courtesy (**If it pleases the king**; cf. 2:7; this appears elsewhere only in Es. 1:19; 3:9; 5:4, 8; 7:3; 8:5; 9:13) and humility (**your servant**), Nehemiah asked the king to **send him to the city in Judah where** his ancestors were **buried so that** he might **rebuild** the city. Again the cupbearer avoided mentioning Jerusalem specifically (see comments on "the city" in Neh. 2:3). The fact that **the queen** was seated there suggests this was a private gathering, since it was not customary for queens to appear at formal banquets.

The king then **asked** Nehemiah when he would return. This question indicated that the king would give him permission. Nehemiah responded immediately with a specific **time** frame, again indicating forethought on his part.

2:7–8a. Nehemiah then asked for the biggest favor yet. Knowing he would face opposition from his enemies, he requested **letters** of permission from **the king** to allow him to pass through the various provinces in the **Trans-Euphrates**, the large area west of the Euphrates River. Nehemiah also asked that the king write **a letter to Asaph**, the man in charge **of the king's forest**. Nehemiah knew he would need access to **timber** for rebuilding **the gates** and the **wall** and other parts of **the city**. **The citadel** (cf. 7:2) was a fortification to protect **the temple**. The fact that Nehemiah knew the name of the man in charge of the king's forest near Jerusalem may indicate that he had done some careful research.

Artaxerxes' permission to rebuild the city of Jerusalem is the decree Daniel had prophesied 95 years earlier in 539 B.C. This decree was issued on March 5, 444 B.C. (see comments on Dan. 9:25).

3. NEHEMIAH'S TRIBUTE TO GOD (2:8)

2:8b. Though Nehemiah had worked diligently to prepare himself for the time when he would have opportunity to share his burden with the king, and though he demonstrated unusual wisdom in responding to the king's questions, he knew that ultimately his success depended on God's help. So he wrote that the king's granting of his **requests** was **because** God's **gracious hand ... was upon** him (cf. v. 18; Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31).

C. Nehemiah's preparation for the work (2:9–20)

1. HIS ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM (2:9–10)

2:9–10. The journey to Jerusalem, even though Nehemiah probably took the shortest route possible, would have taken at least two months (see comments on 6:15). Ezra's trip, 14 years earlier, took four to five months (Ezra 7:8–9). On the way Nehemiah showed **the governors** of the provinces **the king's letters** of authorization. **Also** the **king** even provided a military escort

for him! But as soon as Nehemiah arrived, he began to face opposition. **When Sanballat the Horonite** (perhaps meaning he was from Beth-Horon about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem) and his associate **Tobiah**, from Ammon, **heard** that Nehemiah had arrived on the scene to help Israel, they were **very** displeased. Immediately they began to plan how to stop Nehemiah from achieving his goal. Perhaps they were hoping to gain control of Judah. In fact in the Elephantine papyri written in 407 B.C., 37 years after this event, Sanballat was called “governor of Samaria.” But Nehemiah’s motivation remained undaunted. He knew that God had brought him to this moment in Israel’s history and he was about to tackle a project that others, for almost 100 years before him, had been unable to complete.

2. HIS SURVEY OF THE WALLS (2:11–16)

2:11–16. Nehemiah knew there was no way he could share with the people in **Jerusalem** what **God** led him to accomplish without first doing some research and planning. After taking time (**three days**), presumably to think, pray, and get acquainted with some people there, he took **a few men** into his confidence, men he could trust.

Then he made a careful survey of **the walls** to analyze the problem he faced. He did so at **night**, apparently to avoid letting others know his plans before they were firmly fixed in his mind. During these night hours he gained perspective and, as outlined in chapter 3, developed an effective plan to accomplish the task he had come to **Jerusalem** to perform. In his nighttime inspection he rode his horse or mule (**mount**, 2:14) from **the Valley Gate** in the southwest wall east to **the Jackal Well**, the site of which is unknown, **and to the Dung Gate** in the southeast part of the city. Possibly this is the same as the Potsherd Gate (Jer. 19:2). **The Fountain Gate** was north of the Dung Gate on the eastern wall. **The King’s Pool** may be the same as the Pool of Siloam which was near the King’s Garden (Neh. 3:15), or the King’s Pool may have been south of the Pool of Siloam. Apparently, the rubble there kept him from proceeding on his mount, **so he went up the valley** (probably the Kidron Valley east of the city). Either he went all round the entire wall or, more likely, he retraced his steps from the eastern wall. He went back into the city at his starting place, **the Valley Gate**. (See the map “Jerusalem in the Time of Nehemiah,” near 3:1.)

3. HIS CHALLENGE TO THE PEOPLE (2:17–20)

2:17–18. After Nehemiah had completed his secret survey and was satisfied that he had developed a workable plan, the time had come to reveal to the Jews why he was **in Jerusalem**. **Them** refers to the people mentioned in verse 16: “Jews [i.e., common people], priests ... nobles ... officials.” First, he challenged them to notice their deplorable circumstances, which had brought them **trouble** and **disgrace** (cf. 1:3). Then he challenged them to **rebuild the wall of Jerusalem** and followed his challenge with a personal testimony as to how God’s **gracious hand** (cf. 2:8) had granted him favor before **King** Artaxerxes.

When Nehemiah gave his challenge, the people’s negative feelings became positive. Despair turned to hope. They responded and began the **rebuilding** process.

2:19–20. Apparently, word spread quickly regarding the Jews’ response to Nehemiah’s challenge. As soon as their enemies heard the news they stepped up their efforts to hinder the process. They used every demoralizing technique they knew, beginning with ridicule (*bûz* means “to despise or regard with contempt”) and the suggestion that they were rebels. Joining **Sanballat** and **Tobiah** (cf. v. 10) was **Geshem** (cf. 6:1–2, 6) **the Arab**.

But Nehemiah was ready for their insidious attack. He affirmed that **the God of heaven** (cf. 1:4–5; 2:4) would enable them to succeed. The Jews, God’s **servants**, would rebuild, but the three opponents had **no share** or **claim** (present) **or historic right** (past) to the city.

Once again Nehemiah brought the task—both in the eyes of Judah and his enemies—into clear focus. Their dependence was not to be on their abilities, human resources, or personal genius. Their hope was in the God of heaven!

Nehemiah exhibited many characteristics necessary for effective leadership. Donald K. Campbell lists 21 such factors (*Nehemiah: Man in Charge*, p. 23):

1. He established a reasonable and attainable goal.
2. He had a sense of mission.
3. He was willing to get involved.
4. He rearranged his priorities in order to accomplish his goal.
5. He patiently waited for God’s timing.
6. He showed respect to his superior.
7. He prayed at crucial times.
8. He made his request with tact and graciousness.
9. He was well prepared and thought of his needs in advance.
10. He went through proper channels.
11. He took time (three days) to rest, pray, and plan.
12. He investigated the situation firsthand.
13. He informed others only after he knew the size of the problem.
14. He identified himself as one with the people.
15. He set before them a reasonable and attainable goal.
16. He assured them God was in the project.
17. He displayed self-confidence in facing obstacles.
18. He displayed God’s confidence in facing obstacles.
19. He did not argue with opponents.
20. He was not discouraged by opposition.
21. He courageously used the authority of his position.

Mathews, K. A. (1998). The Historical Books. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (p. 185). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Nehemiah’s Preparations (2:1–20). After four months of prayer and preparation, Nehemiah was ready to answer the king’s inquiries about his sad demeanor. Nehemiah feared the king’s response, but with God’s help he courageously petitioned the king for the authority to rebuild Jerusalem’s defenses. The Lord favored the cupbearer so that the king granted his petition by giving him letters of authority and royal protection. Sanballat’s and Tobiah’s displeasure was an early omen of trouble (4:1–2; 6:1–7). Sanballat is named in the Elephantine papyri (407 B.C.) as “governor of Samaria.” The Elephantine papyri are Aramaic documents of the fifth century B.C. recovered from a Jewish military colony stationed at modern Aswan at the southern border of Egypt.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah quietly reviewed the condition of the city in preparing to meet with the Jewish leaders. The people accepted the challenge of rebuilding the walls. Sanballat and Tobiah, joined by Geshem the Arab, scoffed at them, accusing them of sedition. The same tactic had been effective against Zerubbabel (Ezra 4:4). Nehemiah answered by asserting that the true authority for his actions came from God.

**The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Ne 2:1-20). Grand Rapids, MI:
Zondervan.**

© 2021 Lee Ann Penick