

Nehemiah in Jerusalem

Nehemiah 2

Nehemiah Before the King: *Nehemiah 2:1-8*

Nehemiah's Sadness

Nearly four months passed before Nehemiah spoke to the king concerning his burden. Why he did not share this with the king earlier is unknown. Maybe he waited for the winter months to pass or never had the opportunity. Either way, he continued in his work at the palace. Nehemiah's burden did not keep him from his responsibilities. But, it was too great for him to hide. Upon noticing that Nehemiah was troubled, the king inquired into the problem. Knowing Nehemiah was in good health, Artaxerxes concluded his servant was troubled. This observation came from a king that paid attention to his cupbearer. It is good for leaders to consider the well being of those they lead.

Nehemiah confirmed the king's suspicion. He was not sick but saddened. Suddenly, Nehemiah became fearful. This may have been due to the fact he was standing before a Persian king who held power over life and death (Esther 4:11). To the king, Nehemiah may have come across as gloomy or agitated, his sad countenance raised suspicion since he was normally in good spirits. The cupbearer found himself being questioned by a king that refused to have anyone in his presence whom was not joyful. With this in mind, Nehemiah respectfully shared his burden with Artaxerxes. His sad countenance was due to Jerusalem's poor condition. It was not a trivial matter but one of great importance, even to the king. Jerusalem was a city under his authority and its poor condition reflected badly upon the kingdom. Nehemiah did revert to deception but spoke honestly about his problem (James 4:17).

Nehemiah's Situation

What a wonderful opportunity for Nehemiah. He had the full attention of the king of Persia. Immediately after being questioned he prayed unto the Lord. It was probably a silent prayer from the heart (1 Thessalonians 5:13). He began by asking permission to travel to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the city. This was a bold request, seeing that he held a high and important position in the palace. Nehemiah said nothing of the people or the temple, perhaps knowing the king was only concerned with cities. Like most leaders, Artaxerxes probably cared more about his legacy than the people he ruled over. The king responded favorably to the idea and asked for a timeframe, so he would know when Nehemiah planned to return. Evidently, Nehemiah was

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Importance of the Decree

The decree was issued in the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of the king, which was in 445 B.C. It authorized Nehemiah to rebuild the city and walls of Jerusalem. Because of this Israel was re-established as a nation with Jerusalem the political capital. This edict also marked the beginning of the seventy weeks found in Daniel 9:24.

invaluable at the palace, and trusted to the extent that he was allowed to set the time of his return. Having done his homework Nehemiah was ready with an answer. It is best to be prepared when possible (Proverbs 24:27). After hearing Nehemiah out Artaxerxes, with his Queen by his side, granted him permission to rebuild the walls in Jerusalem.

Encouraged, Nehemiah asked for more. He requested letters of authority that would enable the work to be accomplished. He wanted letters to the governors beyond the river, probably the Euphrates. These letters would eliminate any opposition from those in authority. He also desired a letter to Asaph, whom oversaw the king's forest. With this, Nehemiah would be able to gather the timber needed for the rebuilding. These requests were the result of a well thought out plan. Nehemiah was prepared for the task he desired. Yes the Lord worked on his behalf with the king but Nehemiah's precise planning opened the door for the decision. We must be willing to prepare and work if we expect God to bless (Proverbs 6:6-11).

Nehemiah Before the Land: *Nehemiah 2:9-16*

Nehemiah's Arrival

Nehemiah immediately embarked on his journey to rebuild the city. It is estimated to have taken about three months to travel from Shushan to Jerusalem.¹ Upon meeting the governors over the area, Nehemiah produced his letters of authority. Since they were official government documents, if they were neglected or ignored the punishment would have been great. In case that were not enough, Nehemiah's large escort removed any doubts of his official business. The armed guard provided for his protection reminds us that Nehemiah was a government official. The LORD did not change his career but worked through it in order to bring about His will (Philippians 4:13).

Everyone was not on board with Nehemiah's plan to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. As he would find out, there are always those that oppose God's work. In this case the opposition came from Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. Nehemiah met with these governors but wisely remained quiet concerning his purpose. Knowing the restoration of Jerusalem would threaten their authority in the region, he chose to keep these men out of the loop. They would find out soon enough and their displeasure would be evident. It is important to choose our words wisely (James 3:2). Often, it is best to say nothing at all (Proverbs 10:19). Like all things, the believer should seek to glorify God in what they say (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Nehemiah's Assessment

After arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah remained in the city for three days. Nothing is said concerning his actions. It is likely he rested following the strenuous trip from Shushan (Ezra 8:32). It appears his arrival was kept silent. He prepared himself for the task at hand instead of looking for attention. Let that be a lesson for all that desire to serve the Lord. The value in service is not getting noticed, but accomplishing something for God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). Unfortunately many are more concerned with what others think than actually serving the Lord.

¹ John Butler, "Nehemiah: The Wall Builder," (Iowa: LBC Publications, 1998) p. 52

Unbeknownst to the leaders in Jerusalem, Nehemiah slipped out of the city with a small group to inspect the walls. He exited through the Valley gate and traveled to the dragon well and dung port. There his eyes settled upon the ruinous walls of the once grand city. What went through his mind is unknown, but he must have considered the city's glorious past under the leadership of David and Solomon. To see it in ruins probably increased the burden upon his heart. Moving on, he was forced to dismount because the destruction was so terrible. Eventually he compassed the city then returned to his lodging. Under the starlit sky he had examined the city and found the situation to be as bad as he had heard. With destroyed walls and burnt gates, Jerusalem was in a terrible state. The project may have appeared impossible; however, Nehemiah served a mighty God whom is able to do all things (Mark 10:27). After looking things over, Nehemiah was ready to get started.

Nehemiah Before the People: *Nehemiah 2:17-20*

Nehemiah's Challenge

Nehemiah gathered all the information needed then met with the elders. He approached them with respect, even though he was the one with the King's permission. For Nehemiah it was not a power struggle, his goal was to rebuild the city not control it. He remained faithful to his commission. Once they were gathered, Nehemiah summed up the situation. He told them nothing new but challenged them to recognize the pitiful condition of their city. Not only was Jerusalem vulnerable, but it was also an embarrassment. Evidently the people became satisfied living in despair. Instead of being ashamed, they became complacent. Nehemiah did his best to awaken them to the situation. The people had to see the need before they could get involved. It is similar to sin. Until one recognizes how terrible sin is, they will never seek God's forgiveness (Romans 3; 1 John 5:17).

Nehemiah proceeded to encourage the people to rebuild their city. If they dedicated themselves the city would no longer be a reproach, a disgrace. Knowing the end result, he hoped, would stir their hearts to get involved. It was made clear he was not on a self-gratifying endeavor but acting under God's guidance. The Lord had been good to him, calling, providing, and protecting (Psalm 84:11). If we have anything that is good, it is by God's grace (James 1:17). Proof of God's goodness was seen in the actions of the king. Nehemiah arrived with authority to rebuild the city, meaning the work could be done without any government persecution. Actually, Nehemiah's presence was proof that the Persian king encouraged them to build. The Jews were not called upon to follow blindly but were given the facts and challenged to go forward, trusting God to bless. With everything laid out in front of them, the people responded enthusiastically. They were ready to rebuild. God, through Nehemiah, stirred them to action. Sometimes we need to be challenged concerning our service to God. What we do when challenged is up to us.

*"To have doors opened which we are too lazy, too cowardly, too much afraid of self-denial, to enter, is the tragedy and the crime of many a life."
Alexander MacLaren*

Nehemiah's Courage

The adversaries would not sit idly by while the Jews worked to rebuild. Serving God has never been easy, no matter what generation one lives in. The persecution began with ridicule, with the people being laughed at and despised (Proverbs 29:20). With words they were made to feel inadequate (Proverbs 12:6). The enemy considered their work foolish, claiming the goal could never be reached.

Fear also came to mind because they were told the work was treasonous. They conveniently ignored the decree given by Artaxerxes. Of course, all this was done to hinder the work on the walls. The devil still works in this fashion, attacking the things of God with scorn and ridicule hoping to embarrass believers into quitting. When serving the Lord, we must be prepared for ridicule and willing to continue when scorned.

Undaunted, Nehemiah dealt with the adversaries. He refused to run, hide, or cower down at their feet. He did not even attempt to answer their charges, which were unfounded (Proverbs 23:9) Rather, Nehemiah looked to God to bless their efforts. Strong faith will overcome any slanderous accusation (Philippians 4:13). With bold words, he made it clear the enemies had no part in the work. They had no right in the city or authority over the people. No matter what was said, they had no memorial in Jerusalem, no stake in the city. Instead of appeasing the worldly crowd, Nehemiah rejected them from partaking. Their advice was not sought nor the assistance desired. The Jews separated from those that were against God's work. Today, with our social Christianity, many would attack Nehemiah for being inconsiderate and unfriendly. In truth he protected the people and city from dangerous men that did not love God but desired power. He separated from those that despised the LORD and His ways. He practiced separation because of his love for the LORD (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Questions for Consideration

What can we learn from Nehemiah's planning while waiting?

How did Nehemiah approach the king?

What did Nehemiah ask for, and why was it necessary?

Why do you think Nehemiah prayed before speaking to the king?

Why was it important for Nehemiah to have the king's authority?

What did Nehemiah discover while traveling around the city?

In what way(s) was Jerusalem a reproach?

Why were Israel's enemies upset?

How can ridicule discourage work?

How did Nehemiah deal with those that mocked them?

Points to Ponder

How to deal with delay?

Delay often causes discouragement. Apparently Nehemiah refused to give up while waiting to speak with the king. He thought things through, prepared a plan, and was ready with an answer. Delay is not the end, so be patient and prepare the best you can.

When should you pray?

Whenever and wherever. When before the king, Nehemiah prayed. It was a silent and spontaneous prayer. Perhaps he asked for the correct words to say or courage to speak. He was not interested in pleasing or impressing men, he hoped God would hear and help.

How should you approach God's work?

With all diligence. When Nehemiah went around the city he took an inventory of the walls, planning for the work that was ahead. Along the way he confronted the facts instead of ignoring reality. The difficulties, which were part of the work, were addressed not avoided.

Are you serving the Lord?

For many years the inhabitants of Jerusalem sat idly by as their city remained in ruins, but that was going to change. Instead of grumbling, complaining or criticizing, they got involved. They dedicated themselves to the Lord's work. With dedication comes diligence.

Can you overcome ridicule?

Yes, just like Nehemiah. When scorned and despised instead of being discouraged he looked to God. In doing so, he was reminded of God's greatness and care. The LORD, whom had provided, would allow them to prosper. Ignore the ridicule and find strength in the LORD.