

The Path to Restoration

Preparing to Rebuild

Nehemiah 2 – Anticipating God's Great Work

Introduction

Do you see yourself as a temporal earth creature or as an eternal valuable work of creation? The New Testament truth is, Christians are just time travelers passing through this life. And each believer is a piece of the magnificent masterpiece God is creating over the many centuries. Each person can contribute something of value to this world, but no one will ever conquer it all, even though some have tried.

Nehemiah could have thought the plan to rebuild Jerusalem was way beyond his abilities and out of his comfort zone. But when you read through his many prayers, you realize God was working His plan through Nehemiah. The people of Jerusalem were demoralized, broken, and oppressed. So God raises up Nehemiah as a key person to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and encourage the people to trust God.

When it comes to restoration, it's important to know that God is in the business of rebuilding people, not buildings! At first, you might think the wall was the main task, but when you carefully read Nehemiah's story, you realize it's the people that capture God's interest. The whole society needed rebuilding, and the hearts of the people needed to be changed.

So, Nehemiah decides to get involved in God's work. You may think there's nothing you can do to solve the challenges you're facing, and you've lost hope for your situation. Maybe you have you given up? Perhaps you're not quite sure where you fit in? Well, remember this, God has not given up on you! Just hang in there. God has a plan that includes you!

In Chapter 2, we see Nehemiah at work doing his job as a cupbearer to the king. Verse 1 says, "And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, *when* wine *was* before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. Therefore the king said to me, "Why *is* your face sad, since you *are* not sick? This *is* nothing but sorrow of heart." So I became dreadfully afraid," (Neh 2: 1-2 NKJV)

The cupbearer was one of the king's bodyguards. He was the one who tasted the wine and food before the king did - making certain no one would poison the king. It was a position that gave Nehemiah frequent access to the king and made him potentially a person of influence. It was a position of great trust and required a person of impeccable character.

On one particular day, Nehemiah gave wine to the king and then carefully recorded what took place. The date is important because it documents the date given to restore Jerusalem and its walls. Daniel 9:25 says that precisely 173,880 days from this day - March 14, 445 B.C. - Messiah, the prince, would arrive in Israel.

You can make a strong case that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy exactly, to the day, entering Jerusalem on April 6, 32 A.D., precisely 173,880 days from Nehemiah 2:1.

The king observed Nehemiah's countenance on that day and was concerned he might not be feeling well. When the king questions Nehemiah about the sad look, he responds, "This is nothing but sorrow of heart," Nehemiah realized the king had noticed his sadness and took it seriously. That may have made Nehemiah a little nervous because he planned to ask the king for substantial support. A lot was riding on what was going to happen in response to his request. Thankfully, the king seems genuinely interested in Nehemiah's well-being.

The lesson here is not to try to change someone else's heart, but trust the changing to the Lord.

I. A Positive Response

In verse 3, Nehemiah says, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, *lies* waste, and its gates are burned with fire?" (Neh 2:3 NKJV)

Nehemiah explains to the king why he is sad. His home town is a destroyed and disgraced city. The perfect response is an honest response. With remarkable tact and wisdom, Nehemiah shares his concern without specifically mentioning the name of the city.

The king would naturally associate the name "Jerusalem" with a rebellious city. It had resisted the Babylonians and then the Persians. So Nehemiah waits until the king answers before he continues to see where the king's sympathies lay.

Nehemiah wants the best response to his request, so he doesn't reveal the city's name immediately!

II. A Perfect Plan

Verses 4-8 detail Nehemiah's request, "Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), "How long will your journey be? And when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. Furthermore, I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors *of the region* beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which *pertains* to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy." And the king granted *them* to me according to the good hand of my God upon me. (Neh 2:4-8 NKJV)

Right away, Nehemiah knows God has given him favor with the king. The four months of prayer are being answered. Nehemiah knew this was an incredible opportunity and showed great courage and wisdom as he respectfully asks for a leave of absence with the king's blessing. He then asks the king to become a partner in getting the city and its people back to where they should be.

Nehemiah's sympathetic heart, his months of prayer, his courage to involve the king, his faith in God, his big vision, and wise responses all pay off with the king's positive commitment. The king enthusiastically embraces Nehemiah's vision and completely supports him in this venture. During the four months Nehemiah spent in prayer, he talked and listened to God and works out a Spirit-led plan he would implement when God did open the door.

- Nehemiah knew how long he would need to be gone.
- He knew he would need letters of safe passage from the king.
- He knew what kind of materials would be needed.
- He knew what work needed to be done (the gates of the citadel and the city wall).

Nehemiah covered all the bases without ever having seen the condition of Jerusalem! He knew the needs by listening and patiently seeking God.

God always works through a plan, and Nehemiah had that plan. Once the king signed on, Nehemiah asked for an official seal of approval and financing for the project. Nehemiah knew he had the favor of the king. The truth is, Artaxerxes was more interested in the welfare of Nehemiah than in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, which is why he was willing to make a substantial investment.

Nehemiah knew the king had the resources and took a bold step to ask the king for help. The king wanted to help Nehemiah, and Nehemiah wanted to help Jerusalem. The king saw that by helping Jerusalem, he was helping Nehemiah, and he was happy to do so!

In verse 8, Nehemiah says, "And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me:"

III. A Personal Investment

In verse 9, Nehemiah makes the trip to Jerusalem.

"Then I went to the governors *in the region* beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard *of it*, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel." (Neh 2: 9-10 NKJV)

Nehemiah travels the 800 miles from Persia to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and the spirit of the people. The Euphrates River was an important landmark. A

traveler who crossed the river would often take the road that led to Judea and the city of Jerusalem. On the way, Nehemiah spoke to the governors of the regions ruled under the Persians. He came prepared and showed the leaders in Jerusalem the letters proving the king indeed had sent him. He also had captains of the army and horsemen with him and substantial lumber supplies from the king's forest.

But at the governor's station, Nehemiah meets up with two enemies of Jerusalem. They were deeply disturbed that Nehemiah had come to encourage the people and rebuild the city walls. They didn't want Jerusalem rebuilt and were glad it was weak and vulnerable. Notice the opposition came not at the heart stage, or the vision stage, not at the prayer stage, nor the planning stage, but when progress was being made on the work phase. Some people never step out for the Lord because they're afraid opposition will come.

The New Testament truth is tough times will come if step out in faith to accomplish the vision God has inspired.

IV. A Private Investigation

In verse 11, Nehemiah makes a private tour of Jerusalem and the city walls. "So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem; nor was there any animal with me, except the one on which I rode. And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but *there was* no room for the animal under me to pass. So I went up in the night by the valley, and viewed the wall; then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work." (Neh 2:11-16 NKJV)

After being in Jerusalem for three days, Nehemiah still didn't tell anyone why he was there and what God had put on his heart. Nehemiah carefully studied the broken down walls and the burned gates. For the first time, He saw with his own eyes what had been reported to him and what God had called him to repair. Seeing first-hand the extent of the damage and the fear, poverty, and the broken-down walls and what all that meant in people's lives really impacted Nehemiah.

Even though Nehemiah had the right heart and was ready to act, he needed to take an honest look at the challenge. Proverbs 25:28 says, "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls." There are many people whose lives are like a city with broken walls. They live in a constant state of fear and spiritual poverty and insecurity. We cannot hide our eyes from these broken down places; God wants to change them, and He is willing to take the first steps to help us.

Nehemiah takes time to count the cost before starting the work. Before his vision can become a reality, he wants to see exactly what needs to be done and what it will cost - in terms of time, effort, money, and leadership.

V. A Public Challenge

Finally, Nehemiah is prepared to go public with his plan. After making his assessment, Nehemiah is ready to meet with Jerusalem's leaders and present them with a challenge.

In verse 17, he says, "Then I said to them, "You see the distress that we *are* in, how Jerusalem *lies* waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach." And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. So they said, "Let us rise up and build." Then they set their hands to *this* good work."

(Neh 2:17-18 NKJV)

The citizens and leaders of Jerusalem were not expecting anyone to rebuild their walls. They had come to accept that it was an impossible job. Nehemiah knew he couldn't do the job alone, and he needed the support of the city leaders. To accomplish a God-sized vision requires a lot of people to get involved. People are essential to accomplishing any goal, and you must have their help. Wisely, Nehemiah asks them to notice the obvious: "You see the distress."

Sometimes, the obvious is the hardest thing to see. Nehemiah didn't come as the savior to fix all their problems. He owns the situation right along with them. He asks for their partnership. "Come and let *us* build the wall of Jerusalem." Nehemiah figured if God could move upon the heart of a pagan king to partner in this work, He certainly could move upon the hearts of His own people to join in! Nehemiah wasn't there to do it for them, but to partner with them in the job of restoring Jerusalem and its people.

Nehemiah points out to them the end result, "that we may no longer be a reproach." For God, this wasn't really about bricks and mortar; it was about removing a condition of shame, fear, poverty, and insecurity among His people. The hard work involving bricks and mortar would be worth it because it would have a real spiritual impact on both individuals and the community.

Nehemiah stirs their confidence by telling them what God had already done. Nehemiah didn't offer rewards, incentives, or vacations on the Sea of Galilee for those who got the job done. He simply said, "Let us rise up and build." The response of the leaders of Jerusalem was, "Ok, Nehemiah, we're with you!" and then they set their hands to do this good work.

But look at verse 19. Opposition quickly arises in response to the work of God. "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard *of it*, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, "What *is* this thing

that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?" (Neh 2:19 NKJV)

Opposition to the work God wants to accomplish is a reality many Christians fail to account for and why they give up before finishing the project. Opposition is always difficult. But when it comes from brothers, it's usually mixed with the pain of betrayal as well.

The Bible makes it clear we have enemies and opponents. God enlists people to accomplish his plan but so does the Devil! Sanballat and Tobiah scornfully attack Nehemiah and his plan. They wanted Nehemiah to feel mocked, stupid, and foolish. But Nehemiah knew the king was a partner in this work.

Often, those who are spiritual enemies against us don't really know what they are talking about.

Conclusion

In verse 20, Nehemiah answers his opponents. "So I answered them, and said to them, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we, His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem." (Neh 2:20 NKJV)

Nehemiah ignored their scorn. His bold, straightforward words proved he was not put on the defensive by their mocking, scornful attack. Nehemiah refused to them give a point-by-point reply. He didn't show them the document proving the king's support. If he had, Sanballat and Tobiah would probably have just claimed it was a forgery or have come up with another objection. Nehemiah knew that no matter what evidence you present, there are some people you will never convince.

Nehemiah's response is, "It doesn't matter if you are against us. God's work will succeed." Nehemiah didn't put the work on hold while a crisis response team figured out the best way to answer Sanballat and Tobiah. He had a work to do, and he was going to do it. If your enemies get you to stop what you should be doing and give all your attention to them, then your enemies have won. There is a touch of holy boldness in Nehemiah's response when he says, "We are His servants . . . we will arise and build!"

Nehemiah then speaks a prophetic word to his enemies. He says, "You have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem." We can say the same to our spiritual enemies, "You have no heritage or right or memorial in me because I belong to God." The opposition may not immediately give up, but God will strengthen your faith, and your success is guaranteed.

Why? Because we are more than conquerors through Christ!