

A Study of the Book of Nehemiah

Prayer, Action, and God's Sovereignty (*Nehemiah 2:1-8*)

"When you go through a trial, the sovereignty of God is the pillow upon which you lay your head."
~ Charles Spurgeon

I. Overview

Four months have passed since Nehemiah heard the horrific news concerning his homeland. However, rather than throwing up his arms in despair and in hopelessness, Nehemiah turns to the Lord. Forty-eight weeks of fervent prayer and research, this Persian cupbearer makes a very calculated step to approach King Artaxerxes. This scene displays a beautiful picture of human responsibility and God's sovereignty working in tandem to bring about God's glory.

II. The Request of Nehemiah (2:1-8)

A. Appearance before the King (2:1-4)

v. 1- "Nisan" was equivalent to the month of April and the beginning of the Persian and Jewish year. It had been four months since Nehemiah had heard the news concerning Jerusalem (1:11).

The ancient historian, Herodotus, indicates that the Persian kings would host an annual feast that would display their generosity. During this event, the King was expected to grant the requests of those in attendance (9:110). Thus, one wonders if Nehemiah waited to make his request until this special event (see Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 178).

v. 2 - The Persian court required staff who were pleasant and cheerful. Failure to do so was a serious offense. The last phrase only further supports this understanding.

Such a gloomy countenance could be interpreted as evidence that one was plotting against the king. Certainly, the king's probing suggests that he is suspicious of Nehemiah.

"This made me very fearful." - This phrase only occurs in one other location in the Old Testament. It is used of Abram in his response to encountering the Lord in a vision (Gen 15:1). This fear is intense and expresses concern for one's life.

v. 3 - As noted by one commentator, "Nehemiah, like Esther, had the wisdom to present the matter first as news of a personal blow, not as a political issue" (Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 80).

Ancestral reverence was highly valued in Middle Eastern culture. Thus, Nehemiah appeals to Artaxerxes' heart as he discusses the graves of his ancestors lying in desolation—a topic he will mention twice in this brief interaction with Artaxerxes (vv. 3 and 5).
v. 4 - The King's second question serves as a turning point in the conversation.

“the God of heaven” - This phrase recalls Nehemiah's initial prayer in 1:4-5.

B. Requests given to the King (vv. 5-8)

Nehemiah asks three things from the King.

1. *Nehemiah asks for a leave of absence to go and rebuild the city (vv. 5-6).*

v. 5 - The request to return to Judah to rebuild the walls is exactly what King Artaxerxes had officially prohibited several years earlier. In Ezra 4, the Persian official in Samaria, Rehum, reported to Artaxerxes that the Jews were rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:12-13). Upon receiving this news, King Artaxerxes halted any work in the Jewish capital (Ezra 4:17-20).

Observe that Nehemiah never mentions the name “Jerusalem” or the city walls in his request. It is not until verse 8 that Nehemiah mentions the city walls.

v. 6 - The presence of the queen may indicate that this was a private meeting as normally she was absent at formal banquets.

Note how Artaxerxes values his cupbearer. Despite Nehemiah's deep affection for Jerusalem, he had given his best to serve this Persian king.

2. *Nehemiah asks for endorsement letters (v. 7).*

“Trans-Euphrates” - This was a Persian title of the province entailing Judah and Samaria.

Nehemiah was politically astute. Having done his homework, he knew that the local governors of Trans-Euphrates would not look fondly on a rebuilding program of Jerusalem. After all, it was the governor of Samaria, Rehum, who had halted the building of the walls previously. This local leader may have also been the one who destroyed the walls after Artaxerxes' edict in Ezra 4.

3. *Nehemiah asks for a donation (v. 8a).*

Boldly, Nehemiah requests that the King personally allocate his own resources to assist Nehemiah! Observe that Nehemiah was not only cognizant of the location of this forest near Jerusalem, but he also knew the man in charge of that forest. Once again, Nehemiah had done his homework.

The timber is requested for three projects: (1) gates for the fortress next to the Temple, (2) the city walls, and (3) his own home.

B. Conclusion (v. 8b)

“the good hand of my God was upon me” - This phrase also occurs in Ezra 7:6. Both men recognized the miraculous provision of God. No human explanation is viable. As aptly observed by one commentator: “what appears at one level to be the bountiful grant of the Persian king turns out to be merely a channel through which the bounty of the King of kings reaches his people” (Williamson, 93).

“No plan of God’s can be thwarted; when He acts, no one can reverse it; no one can hold back His hand or bring Him to account for His actions. God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, and works out every event to bring about the accomplishment of His will. Such a bare unqualified statement of the sovereignty of God would terrify us if that were all we knew about God. But God is not only sovereign, He is perfect in love and infinite in wisdom” (Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*, 67).

III. Intersect

A. Faith is not a permit to forego careful thinking and planning.

Luke 14:28-30 -

B. Changing a heart is God’s line of work. As noted by Chuck Swindoll, “No matter how important the person, God is the one who decides the direction a heart will bend.” Thus, pray . . . and pray often!

Proverbs 21:1 -

C. Failure to step out in faith eliminates the incredible opportunity to be used by the Lord.

Psalm 5:11-12 -

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

In *Victorious Christian Service: Studies in the Book of Nehemiah*, Alan Redpath writes, "There is no battle anywhere in the spiritual sense until the Christian pitches in. There is no concern in the mind of Satan about the church at all until he sees a selfless Christian seeking only the glory of God, determined to challenge the Satanic grip upon men's hearts and lives in the name of the Lord. Does your service for God cause Satan any worry at all?" (p. 38).

The question is valid. To word this question another way: Is there an area in which you are seeking to serve the Lord which is resulting in opposition? This opposition is often used by Satan to deter us from serving the Lord. Take some time this week turning this opposition over to the Lord. Allow Him to fight your battle. Will you commit to giving the Lord control of this area, or will you allow Satan to win the battle?

"Waiting has four purposes. It practices the patience of faith. It gives time for preparation for the coming gift. It makes the blessing the sweeter when it arrives. And it shows the sovereignty of God – to give just when and just as He pleases." ~ James Vaghan