



Finer Grounds

Nehemiah

Lesson 3: Nehemiah 2

Have you read through Nehemiah lately? Try to read through the book once a week to continue familiarizing yourself with the text. In last week's lesson, we finished up in Nehemiah 1:11 looking at the phrase "Now I was cupbearer to the king." At first when you read this disconnected phrase after Nehemiah's prayer, it seems like the statement really belongs after the chapter break in chapter 2. However, as I explained before, it works as a transitional statement. Remember, Nehemiah prayed to God that He would grant compassion before this man, the king. As cupbearer to the king Nehemiah has the access and opportunity to the king, and in chapter 2 we see him make his request before King Artaxerxes.

Read Nehemiah 2:1-10

Nehemiah is gets his chance to approach the king approximately 4 months later while serving the king in his royal duties. King Artaxerxes notices Nehemiah's visibly depressed because he has never shown this behavior before. The king immediately asks Nehemiah what's wrong. He attributes his being heartbroken on the fact that his spiritual and ancestral heritage is in ruins. The king asks him what he wants and, in the heat of the moment, Nehemiah's reaction is to pray. Nehemiah simply states "So I prayed to the God of heaven," (2:4). Now at first, this may not seem like a significant statement when you read it. I want you to slow down and re-read this and think about what just happened. Picture this scene in

your head. Now take some time here to ask some questions.

Does Nehemiah actually not know what to do, and is he asking God to provide him with revelation?

What kind of prayer was this?

Does it seem like Nehemiah left the king's presence to pray or did he do it in front of the King?

Did he pray out loud or in his head?

Nehemiah already knows what the right thing to do is. He knows that Jerusalem, God's holy city, must be rebuilt. This prayer is Nehemiah asking God to help him in accomplishing what he already knows has to be done. Verse 4 is an interesting example because we see Nehemiah praying one of those "heat of the moment"



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prayers which are done silently in our heads on the spot.

This prayer is going to serve a purpose both on God’s end and Nehemiah’s end. What will Nehemiah’s prayer accomplish from God’s end?

What will the prayer accomplish on Nehemiah’s end?

God already knows the things we are going to pray before we pray about them, so what is the point of taking our issues and concerns to God? On God’s end, this prayer satisfies God’s desire for His people to reach out to him. God already knows the right thing to do and He already knows Nehemiah is capable of achieving it. Often God chooses not to act on our behalf until we go to Him in prayer (cf. 2 Kings 19:20). He simply wants Nehemiah to reach out for help and acknowledge that he needs God in this. On Nehemiah’s end, this heat-of-the-moment prayer will comfort him and remind him that God is taking care of him and is in control. This prayer also benefits Nehemiah in that it helps him refocus, buy time, and to evaluate the importance of the request he is about to make. We benefit from prayer in the same way, even when it is just a quick, heat-of-the-moment type prayer.

In verses 5-6 Nehemiah humbly makes his request to the king, and the king gives his answer. We see here that the king is pleased with

Nehemiah’s request and grant’s him authority to restore Jerusalem. Pay attention to what the king asks him. “How long will your journey be, and when will you return?” Slow down for a moment. Did King Artaxerxes just set him free? Remember, not all the Jews have returned to the Promised Land. They have been returning slowly in waves since Ezra’s time but many are still scattered. Nehemiah is still in foreign captivity. The king is allowing him to go to the Promised Land and restore it, but he fully expects Nehemiah to return to Susa and serve him as cupbearer. Nehemiah will not get to live out the rest of his life in Jerusalem. Let that sink in. Nehemiah is about to dedicate the next twelve years of his life to a difficult restoration project that he will not directly benefit from much. However, to Nehemiah it’s not about him, it’s about God’s will for all His people.

How often is our service in the church contingent on our personal benefit? Do we only volunteer to teach a children’s Bible class because our own child is in the class? Do we volunteer only if we get to be recognized for our accomplishment?

What if our family has to move and it turns out that the congregation in our new town is struggling, there is no full-time preacher or eldership, and the children’s ministry is basically non-existent? You know your family will have to take initiative and perhaps exhaust yourselves physically, mentally, socially and spiritually. What would you do? Would you step up and help God’s people, or



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would you take a break from church or go join some other man-made religious group you think meets your needs?

In verses 7-8, Nehemiah uses great wisdom to plan for his travels and construction. He is sent to Jerusalem with letters permitting him to pass through foreign lands without any trouble, and also to gain access to timber in the surrounding region. Now we are introduced to Sanballat and Tobiah (2:10). Sanballat the Horonite was governor of Samaria, while Tobiah is presumed to be the governor of Ammon (Holman, 171). Sanballat and Tobiah are upset that someone the king appointed is trying to help the weakened Jews. They didn't want to see their neighbors come to power or have their power usurped. We will hear a little more from them later in the chapter.

Read Nehemiah 2:11-16

We see Nehemiah secretly going around the city and inspecting.

Nehemiah sneaks out at night to research and evaluate the situation in Jerusalem. In verse 16 it says that none of the Jewish officials knew what he was doing. Why might it be beneficial for Nehemiah not to tell anyone about his research before addressing the people?

Nehemiah displays true leadership qualities here. Not only is he avoiding interference from working with "too many cooks in the kitchen," but he is also making sure he properly understands the problem and already has a plan to solve it before he presents it to the Jewish leaders.

We see this scenario occurring regularly today in the church. In meeting with your church, how often do you hear complaints that are not well thought out? Does the person who complains also have a solution or are they just the squeaky wheel?

When there is an obvious problem try to do some prep work beforehand like Nehemiah does. Yes, it takes extra effort to evaluate and brainstorm, but it is a greater use of everyone's time if you already have a good understanding of the problem and how to resolve it.

Read Nehemiah 2:17-20

In verse 17, after his three days are up, Nehemiah finally goes to the officials and makes them aware of the bad situation they are in.

Looking closely at 2:17, what is his motivation to rebuild the wall?

The answer can be found right in the text. "So that we will no longer be a reproach." It is important here to understand what is meant by "a reproach." The idea of a reproach is to be "disgraceful or scornful" (TWOT, 325). The city



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of Jerusalem and the temple (which is supposed to be a representation of God’s presence on earth and the seat of power for his people), was in ruins.

How do you suppose it looked to the surrounding nations if God’s “chosen people” are living in this state of ruin and shame? What does that communicate to the rest of the world about the God they serve?

It is a disgrace both for God’s people and for Him. You can see why this is such a strong motivation to rebuild.

In verse 18 Nehemiah shares two confidence boosters with the Jews. He tells them “How the hand of my God has been favorable to me” and “the king’s words which he has spoken to me.”

From the context of what we know in chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, what is Nehemiah referring to in the first part of his statement?

Specifically, how has the hand of God been favorable to Nehemiah?

What has God done for Nehemiah which allowed him to receive the king’s approval and blessing?

Nehemiah stated it plainly at the end of chapter one; he was the royal cupbearer. His position as cupbearer allowed him to have frequent, intimate access to the king. Now a cupbearer may not seem like a person who has a glamorous job. Yet, through God’s providence, Nehemiah used his position to approach someone who actually had the power to do something about the situation in Jerusalem. Nehemiah credits God as having His hand in his life to make all this possible. Although you won’t find this word in the text, God has answered Nehemiah’s prayer through providence. Think about how God worked providentially in Joseph’s life in (cf. Genesis 37-50). Without intervening supernaturally, God molded the natural circumstances in Joseph’s life to ultimately accomplish God’s will. “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.” (Genesis 50:20). God worked the same way through Esther’s life (cf. Esther 4:14).

In the accounts of Joseph, Esther and Nehemiah we see similarities. There is some similarity with how these people deal with distress and hardship. They seek God through prayer and fasting. God intervenes providentially.



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How does God answer the prayers of Joseph, Esther and Nehemiah?

Does God answer our prayers in the same way?

Can you think of a time in your life where God's providence may have occurred?

Nehemiah's position as cupbearer may not seem like the greatest job (i.e. tasting the king's wine to make sure it's not poisoned), but God used him in his circumstances to carry out His purpose. Telling the Jews about God's providential care was enough to motivate the Jews to get to work on rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. It is same for us today. We may reflect on ourselves and what we do as a wife, a mother, a cook, or other jobs and we may see at as unglamorous at times. The same goes for what we do for the God's church. Sure, preaching may seem much more important than filling the communion trays or vacuuming the church building, but God can use everyone's position, talents and circumstances to help further His Kingdom.

Immediately we see Sanballat, Tobiah and another official (Geshem the Arab) causing trouble by persecuting Nehemiah and his efforts (2:19). These rulers saw the refortification of

Jerusalem as a threat. They mocked Nehemiah and the Jews harshly. They tried to intimidate them by threatening to accuse them of rebellion against King Artaxerxes.

Today there is a lot of religious tension occurring in our country. It is hard to get momentum when it seems like so many are against God. What are some ways you are facing verbal persecution or intimidation?

Are you responding as Nehemiah does?

Nehemiah is bold and does not give up his stand on restoration (2:20). He knew God had been favorable to him and answered his prayers through the appointment of King Artaxerxes. Why would God abandon him now? With this mindset, Nehemiah can continue to motivate and encourage the Jews to continue rebuilding no matter what threats mortal men may make towards them.

Works cited

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