



The Book of Nehemiah

Nehemiah's Preparations to Answer the Call to Build

Nehemiah 2:1-20

- I. NEHEMIAH BEFORE THE KING (Nehemiah 2:1-8)
 - A. The Fulfillment of Nehemiah's Obligations (Nehemiah 2:1)
 1. The timing of Nehemiah's work
 - a. In the month Nisan
 - (1) Nehemiah received the initial report of the conditions in Jerusalem in the month Chisleu.
 - (2) Regardless of whether the sacred or the secular calendar was in view, four months had passed since Nehemiah received the report.
 - b. In the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king
 - (1) The book of Nehemiah opened in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes and this chapter assures us that we are still in the same time frame, only four months later.
 - (2) It should be noted that, as it is with many of the titles of kings, there are multiple Artaxerxes' mentioned in scripture.
 - a) One was against the work of God (Ezra 4:7-24).
 - b) One was supportive of the work of God (Ezra 7:1; Ezra 8:1; Nehemiah 2:1).
 2. The nature of Nehemiah's work
 - a. Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer (Nehemiah 1:11) and, as such, his role was to take up the wine and give it to the king. Therefore, he would have worked in direct contact with the king.
 - b. This would have been an extremely important role for the king as historically this individual was responsible for testing the wine to ensure it was not poisoned.
 - c. The fact is, that Nehemiah would have been chosen for such an important position based on his high degree of character.
 3. The apprehensiveness of Nehemiah's work
 - a. Nehemiah served in the presence of the most powerful man on earth. Any extremes of behaviour on Nehemiah's part could be viewed as indications of conspiracy or threat against the king.
 - b. Nehemiah understood the gravity of his position and work and sought to be even keeled before the king. This is verified by his testimony, "I had not been beforetime sad in his presence."
 - (1) Obviously, Nehemiah had been sad before, but never had he allowed his countenance to reflect sadness before the king.
 - (2) Clearly, he strove to serve the king with a positive and right heart (see 1 Timothy 6:1).



- c. Nehemiah's present condition was going to present both he and the king with challenges they had never had to overcome.
 - (1) Four months passed (compare Nehemiah 1:1 with Nehemiah 2:1) but Nehemiah still had sorrow of heart over Judah's condition.
 - a) He was grieved that the work was left undone.
 - b) He recalled what God did through Cyrus and how God had intended for the people to rebuild after returning from captivity.
 - (2) This sadness was so overwhelming that Nehemiah anticipated an inability to hide his anguish from the king.
 - (3) What Nehemiah did not know was how the king would respond to his change in behaviour.
- 4. The lesson of Nehemiah's work
 - a. Nehemiah had a burden on his heart, but he did not fully understand the depths of this burden and of his personal responsibility in the burden.
 - b. As such, he carried on his activities before the king and sought to do so with best spirit possible.
 - c. It is not until the New Testament that we learn directly of these doctrines and how the Lord admonishes man to work for a master as though he is working directly for the Lord (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:13-20). Nehemiah may not have had these truths available to him in written form, but he embodied them in his work.

B. The Interaction with the King (Nehemiah 2:2-4)

- 1. The initial interaction (Nehemiah 2:2-3)
 - a. The king's observation (Nehemiah 2:2)
 - (1) He saw that Nehemiah's countenance reflected sadness.
 - (2) He perceived that it was not the result of sickness.
 - (3) He deduced instead that it was "sorrow of heart."
 - b. Nehemiah's response (Nehemiah 2:2-3)
 - (1) His internal response—"Then I was very sore afraid," (Nehemiah 2:2); Note: It is possible that he was afraid of displeasing the king with a sad countenance, but based on the context it would seem he was afraid because he was about to make a large request of the king.
 - (2) His verbal response (Nehemiah 2:3)
 - a) He began by easing the king's fears—"Let the king live for ever."
 - i) This shows great character on the part of Nehemiah.
 - ii) He knew the king's first thoughts would involve how Nehemiah's behaviour reflected something wrong with the king or the kingdom.
 - iii) The first thing to do was to put that to rest.



- b) He moved to the explanation of his sorrow—“why should not my countenance be sad”.
 - i) The city (where his fathers were buried) lieth waste.
 - ii) The gates were consumed with fire.
 - 2. The informed interaction (Nehemiah 2:4)
 - a. The king’s inquiry—“For what dost thou make request?”
 - (1) The king could have merely been satisfied that the sorrow had nothing to do with him or with his kingdom.
 - (2) However, he cared enough for Nehemiah that Nehemiah’s burden became his and he desired to help.
 - b. Nehemiah’s response—“So I prayed to the God of heaven.”
 - (1) Nehemiah had been burdened about these things for the last four months. There is no doubt he had some prepared comments should this opportunity present itself; however, before he answered the king’s question, he prayed.
 - (2) We know nothing of what Nehemiah prayed, but the fact that he prayed speaks volumes of Nehemiah.
 - a) First, it is likely he prayed to be sure his response was submitted to the will of God. He had thought on these things, but he did not want to assume that his thoughts were God’s thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9). Prayer often brings men’s desires in wishes more in line with those of the Lord (1 John 5:14).
 - b) Second, by all appearances this was a silent prayer lasting only a moment. It would seem odd for Nehemiah to bow his head, close his eyes, and spend minutes in prayer while being in the middle of a conversation with the king. In fact, it is unlikely the king perceived a pause from Nehemiah. This would only be possible in the life of a man who had a faithful prayer life that continued throughout the day (see Romans 12:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:17).
- C. The Requests Presented to the King (Nehemiah 2:5-8)
- 1. The initial request (Nehemiah 2:5-6)
 - a. Nehemiah’s request (Nehemiah 2:5)
 - (1) The respect in the request—“If it please the king,”
 - a) Nehemiah was respectful of the king’s authority.
 - b) He did not arrogantly make demands, but humbly requested permission.
 - c) Had the king responded in the negative, Nehemiah would have had a choice to make concerning his obedience, but he gave the king a chance to align with God on the matter. There is great wisdom in this.
 - (2) The hope in his request—“if thy servant have found favour in thy sight”



- a) Nehemiah clearly had an expectation that he had indeed found favour in the king's sight.
- b) This expectation would have likely been based on his faithful service to the king.
- (3) The nature of his request
 - a) The king's part—"that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres"
 - b) Nehemiah's part—"that I may build it"
- b. The king's response (Nehemiah 2:6)
 - (1) The authority in the response
 - a) The king said unto me
 - b) The queen also sitting by him
 - (2) The accountability in the response
 - a) For how long shall thy journey be?
 - b) When wilt thou return?
 - (3) The approval in the response
 - a) From the king to Nehemiah's request—"it pleased the king to send me"
 - b) From Nehemiah to the king's condition—"I set a time."
 - c) From God to Nehemiah's prayer; It should not be forgotten that Nehemiah prayed for this in Nehemiah 1:5-11 and again in Nehemiah 2:4.
- 2. The additional request (Nehemiah 2:7-8)
 - a. Nehemiah's request (Nehemiah 2:7-8)
 - (1) The respect in his request—"If it please the king," (Nehemiah 2:7)
 - (2) The nature of his request (Nehemiah 2:7-8)
 - a) Letters to the governors (Nehemiah 2:7)
 - i) Nehemiah requested that letters of approval be written to the governors beyond the river and given to him. These letters were probably written in a more general sense as in *to whom it may concern*.
 - ii) His hope was that the governors, based upon the letters, would convey him over until he reached the land of Judah.
 - b) A letter unto Asaph (Nehemiah 2:8)
 - i) Nehemiah requested that a letter be written to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, on his behalf.
 - ii) He desired timber to make beams for:
 - (a) The palace gates which appertained to the house
 - (b) The wall of the city
 - (c) The house that he would enter into
 - (3) The experience of his request; Nehemiah knew by experience that opposition would arise and that when it did much time was needed to go through all the hoops to get approval (Ezra 4:1-24).
 - b. The king's response—"the king granted me" (Nehemiah 2:8)
 - c. The Lord's favour—"according to the good hand of my God upon me" (Nehemiah 2:8)



II. NEHEMIAH BEFORE THE WALL (Nehemiah 2:9-16)

A. Nehemiah's Journey to Israel (Nehemiah 2:9-10)

1. His interaction with the governors (Nehemiah 2:9)
 - a. As Nehemiah came to the governors beyond the river, he gave them the king's letters.
 - b. His authority was validated by the captains of the army and horsemen sent by the king.
2. His introduction to the opposition (Nehemiah 2:10)
 - a. Their identities
 - (1) Sanballat, the Horonite—Sanballat was from the land of Horon and possibly one of the Beth-horons (see Joshua 10:10-11; Joshua 16:3, 5; Joshua 18:13-14; Joshua 21:22; 1 Samuel 13:18; 1 Kings 9:17; 1 Chronicles 6:68; etc.).
 - (2) Tobiah, the servant, the Ammonite; Note: The Ammonites descended from Lot's incestuous relationship (Genesis 19:38). In spite of this, God protected their land (Deuteronomy 2:19) and used them to bring judgment upon Israel (Judges 10:7).
 - b. Their enlightenment—"heard of it"
 - c. Their reaction—"it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel"

B. Nehemiah's Arrival in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:11)

1. Nehemiah's arrival—"So I came to Jerusalem"; Note: We are not told how long the trip took Nehemiah, but, as a means of comparison, the journey from Shushan to Judah could take up four months (see Ezra 7:9).
2. Nehemiah's delay—"and was there three days"; Note: After being conveyed by the governors and protected by the king's captains, Nehemiah reached Jerusalem and "was there" for three days.
 - a. Strategically, it seems that Nehemiah took three days to rest.
 - b. In type, three days was a common timeframe of distance between two points (see Genesis 30:36; Genesis 40:13; Genesis 42:17; Exodus 3:18; etc.) and maybe Nehemiah was allowing three days to distance his heart from the pagan land of Shushan.

C. Nehemiah's Survey of the Work (Nehemiah 2:12-16)

1. The secrecy of his survey (Nehemiah 2:12, 16)
 - a. Nehemiah arose in the night and with only "some few men."
 - b. He did this before he had "told any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem" and with the help of only one beast.
 - c. He had not told the Jews, priests, nobles, rulers, or the workers.
2. The parameters of his survey (Nehemiah 2:13-15); Nehemiah made a circle around the city leaving from the gate of the valley and returning by the same. He had to see for himself the wall's broken-down condition.



III. NEHEMIAH BEFORE THE PEOPLE (Nehemiah 2:17-20)

A. Nehemiah Before His Own (Nehemiah 2:17-18)

1. Nehemiah's communication (Nehemiah 2:17-18)
 - a. The audience of his communication—"them" (Nehemiah 2:17); This speaks of the people listed in Nehemiah 2:16. Although Nehemiah had just arrived in Jerusalem, he was likely already respected and known as a leader from the days of Zerubbabel.
 - b. The concern of his communication (Nehemiah 2:17)
 - (1) Ye see the distress that we are in.
 - (2) Ye see how Jerusalem lieth waste.
 - (3) Ye see the gates thereof are burned with fire.
 - c. The charge of his communication (Nehemiah 2:17)
 - (1) Let us build up the wall of Jerusalem
 - (2) That we be no more a reproach
 - d. The comfort of his communication (Nehemiah 2:18)
 - (1) He "told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me." This most likely would have included Nehemiah testifying to God's provision and answered prayers.
 - (2) He told them "also the king's words" which were fully supportive of the rebuilding of Jerusalem.
2. The people's communication (Nehemiah 2:18)
 - a. Their words—"Let us rise up and build."
 - b. Their actions—"they strengthened their hands for this good work."

B. Nehemiah Before His Foes (Nehemiah 2:19-20)

1. Their communication (Nehemiah 2:19)
 - a. Their identities (Note: Consider the increase of their numbers.)
 - (1) Sanballat, the Horonite
 - (2) Tobiah, the servant, the Ammonite
 - (3) Geshem, the Arabian
 - b. Their enlightenment—"heard it"
 - c. Their reaction (Note: Consider the increase of their hatred.)
 - (1) They laughed us to scorn.
 - (2) They despised us.
 - (3) They questioned.
 - a) What is this thing that ye do?
 - b) Will ye rebel against the king?
2. Nehemiah's communication (Nehemiah 2:20)
 - a. The source of Nehemiah's hope—"The God of heaven, he will prosper us"
 - b. The answer of Nehemiah's people—"we his servants will arise and build"
 - c. The exclusion of Nehemiah's foes—"ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem."