

Notes on Nehemiah Chapter 2

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II. Nehemiah Returns and Organizes the Work – Chap. 2,3

Step 3 in Useful Service to God: Where Possible, Obtain Permission and Assistance from People in Authority

Verses 1-3

1. How did Nehemiah describe his work (v1)? What did the king observe and say to him?
2. What concern did Nehemiah express in response?

The king asks Nehemiah about his trouble.

The events recorded here occurred in the month Nisan in the 20th year of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was serving wine to the king, as his work required (1:11). Note that “wine” in the Bible does not always mean fermented or intoxicating wine, as the term generally implies today. See Isaiah 16:10; Jeremiah 48:33; Isaiah 65:8; Genesis 40:9-11; Revelation 19:15.

Nehemiah had not in the past been sad or sorrowful in disposition, when he was in the presence of the king. However, on this occasion he appeared to be sad, and the king noticed it and asked the cause. He knew Nehemiah was not physically ill, so he concluded it was sorrow of heart. He was upset in mind. See Proverbs 15:13.

This gave Nehemiah the opportunity he had been praying for to ask the king’s help (1:11). But when the time came, Nehemiah was beset by great fear. Note that serving God is not always easy or without emotional hardship. The record helps us see Nehemiah’s emotions. First, he had great sorrow when he heard of the troubles in Jerusalem. Now he had great fear before the king. Those who please God are not those who manage to avoid facing emotional fears and griefs, but those who conquer them to do God’s will despite the hardships.

The account does not directly state why Nehemiah was fearful, but if we would put ourselves in his place we can see several reasons why we might be fearful. He was about to make a great request of the greatest ruler on the face of the earth. One would not lightly enter such a request. There was the possibility that the king could become so angry he could punish Nehemiah. Or at the least he could deny the request and demand that Nehemiah stay in Shushan and not leave. In any case, the possibilities were so important to Nehemiah that he feared for the result. Waldron also says that it was improper for servants of the king to allow their personal lives to affect their service and demeanor before the king, but Nehemiah’s sorrow had become obvious.

Nehemiah makes his request of the king.

Nehemiah responded first by expressing great respect for the king. He said, “Let the king live forever!” This is similar to the modern expression, “Long live the king!” This was a common expression for praising the king. It showed people valued the king and wanted his service as king to continue (though of course no one physically lives forever in the absolute sense). See 1 Kings 1:31; Daniel 2:4; 5:10; 6:6,21. Wisdom would teach us to speak respectfully to people in positions of power, especially when we have a great request to make of them.

Nehemiah then explained that it was only reasonable for him to be troubled considering the problems in his homeland. The city where his fathers had lived and been buried now lay in waste and its gates consumed by fire (see notes on 1:3,4). This was Nehemiah’s concern, so he used the opportunity to honestly speak to the king about it.

Verses 4-8

3. What did the king ask (v4)?

4. What did Nehemiah do before answering? What response did he make to the king?
(Think: What do we learn about prayer?)

5. When the king asked for details, what further request did Nehemiah make (vv 7,8)?
How did the king respond?

The king listens to Nehemiah' request.

The king was clearly a perceptive, wise king. He knew Nehemiah sought the king's help regarding this matter, so he asked what Nehemiah wanted.

Before answering, Nehemiah offered another prayer to God. Note the importance of prayer in Nehemiah's service to God. He had already prayed many days about this (see 1:4ff). Now he had a receptive response from the king, but he knew he needed greater help than that of the king. So he went to God in prayer. It could not have been a long prayer, and probably was not spoken out loud, since he was in the king's presence and had to give an answer. Yet his prayer shows the need for seeking God's help, especially in important works we seek to do for Him. We should imitate such examples. (1 John 5:14,15; 3:21,22; James 5:16; Matthew 7:7-11; 18:19; 1 Peter 5:7; John 14:13,14; cf. 1 Samuel 1:10-28; 7:5-11; 2 Kings 20:1-7; 2 Chronicles 7:11-14).

Nehemiah made several requests

(1) First, he asked the king for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. This request, of course, was his response to the information he had received in chap. 1 about the serious problems the city faced. We are told that the queen was also present on this occasion.

The king, as would be appropriate before making such a decision, asked for specifics. He wanted to know how long the trip would take and when Nehemiah would return. Note that he assumed Nehemiah would want to return.

We are then expressly told that the king was favorable to Nehemiah's request and granted it. Nehemiah set a time (apparently for when he would leave). He had evidently thought this out well ahead of time, and he had a specific plan to propose.

Nehemiah's plan, however, involved yet more requests of the king.

(2) Next he asked for letters to the governors in the territory that he would pass through, giving him authority to travel to Judah. Since the entire area was subject to the king of Persia, the local governors would be required to cooperate with Nehemiah and not cause him trouble, if he had letters of authority from the king. ("Beyond the river" probably refers to the territories on the other side of the Euphrates – see NKJV footnote.)

(3) Nehemiah's third request was for a letter to a man named Asaph, who supervised the forests of the king. Nehemiah wanted this man to be required to provide the timber that would be needed to rebuild the city gates and wall of Jerusalem and a house for Nehemiah himself. We will see that the house was not just for Nehemiah's benefit, but he was very generous in caring for others (see on chap. 5).

The king was favorable and granted all Nehemiah's requests. But Nehemiah gave thanks to God for this favorable result. He had repeatedly made request of God for these blessings, so it was only right that he then give God credit when the blessings were granted. We should remember this too in our prayers to God.

Step #4 in Useful Service: Develop a Plan of Action

Verses 9,10

6. What did Nehemiah do when he had arrived? Who was unhappy and why? (Think: Why would such men be disturbed?)

Nehemiah returns to Judah.

Nehemiah says nothing about the journey from Persia to Judah. However, the third group of Jews at this point returned to Judah under the leadership of Nehemiah.

He immediately proceeds to discuss the activities after his return. He first delivered to the governors of the region the letters that the king had given him. This would show them the authority for his work.

In addition, though the record does not mention Nehemiah's request for such help, the king had sent captains and horsemen in the army with him.

The beginning of opposition

As in the book of Ezra, when God's people begin to work effectively for Him, you can be sure there will be opposition. These verses introduce the villains of the story. They are Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. Later accounts include Geshem the Arabian (see 2:19; 4:1). These men were greatly upset that someone had come to help the Israelites with their problems.

We may wonder why anyone would oppose efforts to help the Jews. The answer, of course, is that these men were all enemies of the Jews. Nehemiah 4:2 tells us that Sanballat was with the army of Samaria. This meant he was part of the mixed breed of Samaritans who had been brought into the land by the Assyrians after they removed the northern tribes of Israel into captivity. As such, they were not real Israelites and had no inheritance in Israel (2:20). Their worship to God was a perversion, which professed to serve God but included idol worship. See notes on Ezra 4:1-3 to see how the first group of returning exiles had forbidden these false worshipers to participate with them in building the temple.

Tobiah was an Ammonite. The Ammonites were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot. They lived near the desert east of the Jordan River. Geshem was an Arab. The Arabians have not been mentioned much in the Old Testament and appear to have traveled from place to place without settling in any one area. By this time, however, at least some of these people must have lived in or near the area of Jerusalem. So they were not happy to see the Jews prosper.

All three of these men apparently had some local authority. The fact they are mentioned immediately after Nehemiah reported to the governors may imply they were among the governors. Otherwise, they soon heard the news from Nehemiah's meeting with the governors. We will see the problems they caused as the story progressed and how Nehemiah and the Jews dealt with them.

Verses 11,12

7. What did Nehemiah do after three days? When did he do it?

Nehemiah observes the wall.

Having arrived in Jerusalem, Nehemiah waited three days. Then he went out at night to view the wall. He took a few men with him, but he had not yet told anyone of his intentions. He did not even take an animal except the one he rode on.

A principle of good leadership is that, before one begins he must develop a plan. He must know exactly what work needs to be done. What needs exist, and what problems can be expected? Then one must determine where to start and how to proceed.

Too often people jump into a project without having thought it through. They are disorganized, have no plan, and have set no priorities. This often leads to discouragement and failure. Nehemiah began by inspecting the situation so he could formulate a plan.

Verses 13-15

8. What did he learn about the condition of the wall? (Think: Why was this important?)

A summary of the areas Nehemiah viewed.

He went out by night through the Valley Gate then to the Serpent Well (Jackal's Well – ASV). Then he went to the Refuse or Dung Gate. From there he went to the Fountain Gate then to the King's pool. Exactly where all these points were in the wall, I do not know.

But as he went, he viewed the condition of the wall and the gates. We are told little except that, at the King's pool there was no room for the animal to pass. Presumably this is told to indicate that the rubble was so bad it was impassable for his animal.

Then he returned to the Valley Gate by which he had begun.

Step #5 in Useful Service: Motivate People to Work

Verses 16-18

9. Whom did he tell regarding his purpose? What did he propose to do?

10. What did he say to motivate the people? How did they respond?

11. Application: What lessons can we learn about the church today?

Nehemiah describes the problem to the Jewish leaders.

The other officials of the Jews knew nothing about Nehemiah's plan. He had told them nothing of his purpose nor of his investigation of the wall. At this point, however, he met with them and explained to them his plan.

First he challenged them by describing the problem they faced. He talked about the distress they faced because the city was still laid waste (specifically referring to the wall), and the gates had been burned (see on 1:3). The people, of course, knew this. But sometimes people live with a situation so long they fail to see the seriousness of the problem. They had done little or nothing about it for years, so Nehemiah had to begin by motivating them to see how bad things were so they would want to do something about it.

He urged them to build the wall so they would no longer be a reproach. The wall was a source of protection, but to be without the wall was also a reminder to them and everyone else that they were a defeated, fallen, and defenseless nation. The city had been destroyed because of their sin. To restore the wall would indicate a restoration of their favor with God and of their commitment as a nation to work for Him.

Likewise, Jesus' church often faces difficult situations. Sometimes we have internal problems. Sometimes we are just few in number or have few members that are mature and committed. Sometimes we face doctrinal strife, immorality among the members, or just general ignorance and indifference. Sometimes the problem is just that there are so many lost souls around us in need of hearing the truth. In any case, the members need to be motivated to work, and one way to do so is to describe to them honestly the problems they face.

He tells them of the advantages they have and urges them to work.

He then told the people of the good that had already been accomplished. God had blessed Nehemiah so the king had given permission for the work. Note that Nehemiah continues to give God the credit. In order for the work to prosper, the people needed the provisions the king offered as well as the authority to do the work. Nehemiah had already obtained this.

Note that Nehemiah motivated the people by telling the good as well as the bad. He told of the work that needed to be done, but he also gave them reason to believe they could do it. We need to do the same in motivating ourselves to work for God. Yes, we often face great problems. But let us not be discouraged but trust in God to provide what we need to accomplish His work. He can give the victory if we will use what He provides.

The people responded with a will to work. They said, "Let us rise up and build!" They then strengthened their hands for the work. That is, they made the necessary preparations. They did not just talk about it, but they immediately proceeded to do what was needed to accomplish the job. This is exactly the attitude that God's people need today.

Note that sometimes people are able to do a work for the Lord and would be willing to do so, if they simply have good leadership to challenge them. This job had been waiting for years to be done. When the challenge was presented, they responded. What was lacking was dedicated leadership. We should also remember this need today.

Step #6 in Useful Service: Resist Opposition

Verses 19,20

12. How did the opponents attempt to hinder the work? How did Nehemiah respond?

13 Special Assignment: What lessons can we learn from this chapter about useful service to God?

First attempt at opposition: Ridicule, mockery, and intimidation

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had been unfavorable to the Jew's project since they first heard of it (v10). These verses reveal the beginning of their active efforts to frustrate the work.

As with most enemies, their first attempt was to discourage the work by speaking against it. They laughed at the people and expressed their hatred and spite. Then they implied that the action constituted rebellion against the king. This would have been a serious charge, if true. We remember that such a charge had caused a halt in the work on the temple in Ezra 4.

Likewise today, when we attempt to seriously restore the Lord's church according to His standard, people often ridicule us and tell us we cannot possibly succeed. They express hatred, hoping that simply their expressions of disapproval will discourage us to the point we give up the attempt. They call us Campbellites, antis, Bible-beaters, orphan-haters, etc. They accuse us of believing in water salvation, salvation by works, not following the spirit of Jesus, judging others, etc.

Note that these statements, both in Nehemiah's case and in our case today, are made without proof. Often no attempt is made whatever to prove them. There was no evidence the people were rebelling against the king. On the contrary, they had express authority from the king to do exactly as they were doing. Likewise, we have Bible authority for our teaching and practice. But people hope that just the accusations will be enough to discourage God's people till we quit. Or at least they hope to discredit us and prejudice others against us, so they will not join with us but will join the opposition against us. People do not like to be ridiculed, and often such tactics lead at least some people to refuse to work for God.

See Matthew 5:10-12; 13:21; 27:27-31,39-44; Luke 6:22,23; John 15:20; 16:33; Acts 14:22; Romans 5:3; 8:17-39; 2 Corinthians 1:4-10; 4:17; 7:4; 2 Timothy 3:12; Hebrews 10:32-36; 1 Peter 2:19-23; 3:14-18; 4:1,15-19; 5:10

Nehemiah's response to the ridicule

Such ridicule and spite needs to be responded to, at least at first (cf. chap. 6) and at least to the people of God, so they will not be discouraged by it.

Nehemiah responded that God would prosper the Jews in their work, so they would proceed with the work trusting in Him. People may ridicule and say it cannot be done, but if we are on God's side, He will provide what we need.

Then Nehemiah argued that these enemies had no portion, right, or memorial in Jerusalem. In short, this was not their job. They had no right to be involved in it anyway, so why should the people pay any attention to them? They were not really Jews, but were people of other nations. Their service to God was a perversion, so the Jews would not allow them to participate in the

work even if they had wanted to do so. See notes on Ezra 4:3,4 (cf. Neh. 4:2). In essence, Nehemiah was saying it was “none of their business.”

We must always remember whom we work for, whom we seek to please, and who is the source of our strength. If we work for people or to please people, such as these enemies, then it might make sense to quit if they are displeased by our work. But if they are not the ones we seek to please, if they ultimately have no power over us, and if they are not involved in the work anyway, why should we care what they think or say? Why should their opinions alter our work?

Too often we are unduly influenced by people who have no right to influence us. They will not ultimately be our judges. They will not determine our reward. They cannot ultimately bless or punish us. We are working for Someone far greater and more important, Who can give us a true reward. We must ignore those feeble humans who oppose us and determine instead to please the One who is our Master, Judge, and source of our eternal reward. Acts 5:29; Heb. 13:5,6.

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