

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 9/8/10 & 9/15/10

Series: "Facing the Past, Moving Ahead for God's Honor: Nehemiah"

Current study: Nehemiah 2—Two part study

As we return to our study in Nehemiah, it will be helpful to put the actions of Nehemiah in the perspective of redemptive history. God did not give us the book of Nehemiah merely to give us a role model. This book is intended to do more than say, "Live like Nehemiah did." Granted, we can learn from his life, but those lessons are secondary to the book's more fundamental purpose.

#### *Setting the Stage for the Book of Nehemiah:*

The God of the Bible has a plan, a redemptive plan. He is forming a people for Himself. The Bible is the record of how He's doing it. He's working in *history*.

- 2000 B.C.—He chose Abraham and entered into a covenant relationship with him and his descendants [as recorded in Genesis].
- 1400 B.C.—He formed the descendants of Abraham's son, Isaac, and grandson, Jacob, into a nation called Israel. He entered into a special covenant relationship with Israel at Mount Sinai [as recorded in the Pentateuch].
- Israel disobeyed God and violated their covenant responsibilities [as recorded in the Historical Books over and over again].
- God sent prophets to predict the following:
  1. God was going to judge His wayward people by sending them into exile [as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others predicted].
  2. God would restore a remnant [as Isaiah stated in 6:13; and as Jeremiah illustrated by buying a field at the very time Jerusalem was under siege, in Jeremiah 32].
  3. Ultimately, God would work through this remnant to bring lasting hope to the world. Through this remnant He would send the Anointed One, the Messiah [as indicated in Isaiah 11].

What do we learn about God from these actions? Three key insights...

1. God is a Promise-Maker.
2. God is a Promise-Keeper.
3. God wants His people to live in light of His promises.

\*\*Which is what Nehemiah did.

#### *The World in Nehemiah's Day*

Here's what was happening...

- Nehemiah was living in exile in the citadel of Susa (1:1). He had a good job and enjoyed a decent standard of living in the king's service.
- At the same time, 445 B.C., Jerusalem was in shambles. A remnant of Jews had returned home, but most settled down in their new homes in captivity. The walls and gates in Jerusalem which Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed in 586 B.C. were still in shambles.
- Consequently, God's reputation was being marred.

## *Highlights from Nehemiah 1*

In chapter one two things happen...

- Nehemiah found out about the horrid condition of Jerusalem (1-3).
- Nehemiah mourned, fasted, and prayed about the problem (4-11). First, he confessed the sin of his people to God. And then He brought a request to God.

Q: What was his request in verse 8? He asked God to “remember...”

Q: What specific request did he mention in verse 11? For favor with the king.

That's how chapter 1 ends, with Nehemiah on his knees in prayer. In chapter 2 we see him get off his knees and take action based on his prayer.

Note: Prayer is not to be an excuse for inactivity. Sometimes when asked what they have done about their problems, people will respond, “Well, I’ve prayed about it.” Nehemiah prayed. Then he took action (and he prayed all the while he was taking action, as we’ll see!).

In chapter 2 God answered Nehemiah’s prayer...

## *Nehemiah 2: God’s Answer to Nehemiah’s Prayer*

### I. God gave Nehemiah an audience with the king (1-9).

Q: When did it occur? Verse 1 [March/April 444 B.C.]

Q: The answer to the prayer will occur later in chapter two, but notice. What was Nehemiah doing when God answered his prayer? See verse 1—he was doing his job. He was the king’s cupbearer. Prayer does not lead to passive inactivity. Nehemiah asked God to give him favor with the king (1:11), but then he kept on living.

Waiting on God doesn’t mean we do nothing.

Discuss: What does it mean?

Q: What did the king notice about Nehemiah that day? Verse 1—he was sad, no doubt preoccupied with the news about his homeland.

And Nehemiah’s countenance led to the following conversation with King Artaxerxes. In their conversation, the king asked three questions...

#### **A. Question #1: “Why?” (1-3)**

Q: Why does the king ask this question?

Q: What conclusion does he draw from Nehemiah’s countenance?

Notice a couple of things in connection with this request.

1. *When asked the question, Nehemiah was doing his job (1).*

2. *When asked the question, Nehemiah responded as follows (2-3).*

•He was fearful. Why so? [see NIV footnote]

•He was respectful. In what way?

•He did not waste the God-given opportunity.

At the end of verse 3 Nehemiah takes a risk. He gets right to the point and states what’s on his mind. He doesn’t beat around the bush. He sees this conversation as a God-given opportunity, and he’s not going to waste it! Remember, he’s been praying a very specific prayer—that God would grant him success that very day in his conversation with the king.

Note: Too often, we miss the God-given opportunities God places before us. Can you think of any examples?

**B. Question #2: “What?” (4-5)**

The king asked, “What is it you want?” Talk about a blank check offer! There’s an open door you could drive a Mack truck through! But notice how Nehemiah responded to this open door...

*1. In response, Nehemiah talked to God first.*

Q: What does the phrase, “Then I prayed to the God of heaven,” indicate about Nehemiah? And how do you pray when you’re in the middle of a conversation with the king?

*2. Then he addressed the king.*

Q: What strikes you about Nehemiah’s response to the king? He’s polite and respectful, but he gets right to the point, no beating around the bush. How’d he get that way? He’s been praying and preparing for this very moment, and once it comes, he’s ready (remember, according to 1:4 he’d been praying and fasting for “many days”).

Application: We often struggle in one of two ways. First, some of us don’t want to extend the effort to pray and seek God fervently, day after day. We don’t prepare ourselves for action. But then secondly, some of us never take action even when God places the opportunity right in our laps.

**C. Question #3: “How long?” (6-9)**

Q: What’s the two part question the king asks this time? Verse 6

Q: Who else is listening in on this discussion according to verse 6? The queen

Q: What was the king’s response? Nehemiah says, “It pleased the king to send me (6).”

And I love the next phrase, “So I set a time.” When God answers a prayer by opening a door of opportunity, it’s time to take action! That’s what Nehemiah did. He took three steps in verses 6-8.

*1. Nehemiah made arrangements for the trip (6-7).*

Q: What were the arrangements? According to verse 6?

According to verse 7?

*2. Nehemiah made arrangements for the construction project (8).*

Q: How so?

*3. Nehemiah gave all the credit to God (8b).*

Q: Why did Nehemiah say his plan succeeded? Is that the way we view our lives?

Application: When it comes to solving problems, we can learn a lot from Nehemiah. In problem-solving, should we pray about the problem? Yes. Should we plan and use our brains to develop an approach to rectify the problem? Yes. Should we take practical steps to resolve the problem? Yes.

But in the end, when challenges are met and problems are solved, who gets the credit? The One without whom all our praying and planning would make absolutely no difference!

In verse 9 we see God's answer to Nehemiah's prayer. What happened there?

The next scene is so typical. When God opens a door, He also often allows the following...

## II. God allowed opposition to stir (10).

### **A. We're introduced to Sanballat and Tobiah.**

Q: What are we told about these men?

Q: Why were they upset? In part because they're about to lose some of their "turf." Jerusalem may be in shambles, but it's "their baby." And though changes may need to occur, they don't want somebody else calling the shots.

### **B. We'll be seeing them again shortly.**

For now a couple of observations are in order...

1. *When you do God's will, don't expect everyone to applaud.*

2. *People who aren't living for God won't appreciate the fact that you are.*

Who often won't be pleased when they see God working in and through our lives? You might be surprised. It's not just the irreligious, but another group—the people who have just enough religion to be dangerous.

Sanballat and Tobiah were pseudo-religious, as we'll see shortly. But they became a royal pain in Nehemiah's side throughout the project.

Discuss: Can God prevent opposition? Sure He can. Why then does He allow people to oppose His people and His work?

## III. God enabled Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem (11-20).

Q: What's the first thing Nehemiah did once he returned? After three days [to recover from "jet lag"?!] he...

### **A. He made a first-hand assessment of the problem (11-16).**

Q: When?

1. *He made his inspection at night (11-12).*

Q: The text says he took men with him, but told no one about his intent? Why not?

2. *He inspected the walls and gates (13-16).*

Note here Nehemiah's detailed mention of the gates and places he saw in Jerusalem. What places does he mention? Valley Gate, Jackal Wall, Dung Gate, Fountain Gate, King's Pool.

Q: Why does Nehemiah include the list of these names and places for us in the text? He's doing his homework. Doing the work of God requires more than good intent. It takes planning and effort.

Furthermore, he wants us to know how *bad* conditions were before he started his project. It was so bad he had to get off his mount to access certain portions of the wall!

### **B. He mobilized God's people for action (17-18).**

How? This is beautiful...

1. *He forced them to face their problems (17a).*

Q: What did he tell them? “You see the trouble we’re in.”

The acceptance of the status quo is one of the great barriers to change. Until we “see the trouble,” we won’t see our need to do something about it.

2. *He gave a clear challenge that things could be different (17b).*

Q: What motivating reason did Nehemiah offer for building this wall? See the end of verse 17.

3. *He told them what God had already done (18a).*

Q: Why do you think Nehemiah told them this? One of the greatest encouragements to trust God in present challenges is to review His faithful working in past challenges.

4. *They started building (18b)!*

No project ever gets finished without starting! “So they began,” the text reads. It was a great day! But not everyone was happy, and that brings us to Nehemiah’s third action…

### C. He responded to opposition (19-20).

1. *We meet the critics (19).*

Q: Who were they? Note a new name appears, Geshem.

- They were locals. They’d been living here since some time after the Babylonian overthrow in 586 B.C.

Note: The battle for ownership of the city of Jerusalem has roots that go way back. Even here there’s Arab/Jewish tension.

- They mocked and ridiculed.

How do you think they did it?

- They questioned Nehemiah’s motive and integrity.

I see this in their questions. “Are you rebelling against the king?” Why would they even ask that question? They’re trying to “smear” his reputation.

2. *We see Nehemiah’s response (20).*

Note how he attempted to diffuse the attack of the critics…

- He looked up.

Q: What’s the first thing he said? He put the focus on the “God of heaven.” This was *His* project.

- He looked back.

Nehemiah’s words are to the point, “You have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.” Why not?

- He refused to compromise.

Nehemiah refuses to allow the critics of God to have any part in the work of God. We’ll see this refusal to compromise again and again as the story unfolds.

#### Application: We can learn some valuable lessons...

1. When we ask God to do something, we need to be ready to take action.
2. When we’re doing God’s will, we mustn’t let the critics intimidate us.
3. When dealing with problems, we must do so in constant dependence upon God.

Discuss: How does the book of Nehemiah point us to Christ?