

Nehemiah 02 - Nehemiah Sent to Judah; Nehemiah Views the Wall of Jerusalem

I. Rebuilding of the wall (Neh 1:1—7:73)

(1) Nehemiah returns from Susa to Jerusalem (Neh 1:1—2:20)

(B) Nehemiah's commission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city's walls (2:1-20)

(a) Nehemiah obtains from Artaxerxes permission to leave and supplies for rebuilding effort (2:1-8)

(b) Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem to the displeasure of Sanballat and Tobiah (2:9-11)

(c) Nehemiah secretly inspects the dilapidated wall (2:12-16)

(d) Nehemiah organizes the rebuilding effort (2:17-20)

(i) Nehemiah challenges the people to rebuild the city (2:17)

(ii) The people initially cooperate (2:18)

(iii) Nehemiah answers the intimidation posed by Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem (2:19-20)

Nehemiah 2

(B) Nehemiah's commission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city's walls (2:1-20)

(a) Nehemiah obtains from Artaxerxes permission to leave and supplies for rebuilding effort (2:1-8)

1 And it came about **in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes**, that wine was before him, and I picked up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

1 And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

1 It came about in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, during the month of Nissan, the king was about to drink some wine that I was preparing for him. Now I had never looked troubled in his presence.

1 And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence.

- "...in the month Nisan" - Nisan corresponds with late March/early April
- Persian kings generally issued decrees at the first of every month
- This particular decreed took place on March 5, 444 BC
- "...in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes" - Artaxerxes' father left the throne on Dec 17, 465 BC; Artaxerxes came to the throne in 464 BC
- 20 years from 464 BC = 444 BC
- From the time Daniel received this prophecy, this decree took place 94 years later

2 So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, though you are not ill? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid.

2 So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid.

2 The king asked me, "Why do you look so troubled, since you're not ill? This cannot be anything else but troubles of the heart."

Then I was filled with fear.

2 Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid,

- As Nehemiah was going about his usual duties, the king noticed something different about Nehemiah's countenance. He was sad.

— The king was immediately curious about Nehemiah's state of depression, since this was the first time he had seen his cupbearer dejected

3 And I said to the king, "May the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when **the city**, the site of my fathers' tombs, is desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

3 I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

3 I replied to the king, "May the king live forever. Why shouldn't I be troubled, since the city where my ancestral sepulchers are located lies waste, with its gates burned by fire?"

3 And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?

- Nehemiah was careful in replying. In fact he was even afraid. A servant was never to let his negative emotions show before the king, for it might suggest dissatisfaction with the king. To do so might jeopardize his position or even his life.

— Nehemiah had reason to fear, for being sad in the king's presence was a serious offense in Persia (Cf. Esther 4:2).

- "...the city" - Jerusalem (Cf. v5,8,11)

— Nehemiah had a burden for the city of Jerusalem and its natural fortifications, not for the temple (it had already been rebuilt, Cf. Ezra). The entire book of Nehemiah records this desire and Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, despite great opposition.

— Nehemiah was burdened that the city of Jerusalem had no walls, thus no defense. The decree will be given by Artaxerxes for Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (in those days, if you didn't have walls for defense, you didn't have a city).

Also Nehemiah knew that his request was a bold one. As already stated, a few years earlier this king had stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem and now Nehemiah was going to ask that the order be reversed. The cupbearer was risking his life! But his response was wise, no doubt reflecting the fact that he had been thinking about this opportunity, should it come, for a number of months.

In Nehemiah's response he avoided naming Jerusalem, perhaps so that he would not touch a sensitive political nerve in the king. He appealed to the king's sense of respect—his sense of "rightness" regarding proper respect for the dead. Nehemiah said the city where his ancestors were buried was in ruins and the gates had been burned (Cf. 1:3). This was a sad state of affairs for the Jewish city. Seventy years before (in 515 BC), the temple had been rebuilt. The year was now 445; yet the city itself still needed much rebuilding.

4 Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

4 Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

4 The king answered, "What do you want?"

So I prayed to the God of heaven

4 Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven.

- Artaxerxes' heart responded to Nehemiah's statements. So he asked Nehemiah what the king might do about the situation.

5 Then I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, *I request* that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."

5 I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."

5 and I replied to the king, "If it seems good to you, and if your servant has found favor with you, would you send me to Judah, to the city where my ancestral sepulchers are located, so I can rebuild it?"

5 And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it.

- With Judea being a Persian province, the cupbearer may have reasoned that perhaps the king would now be sensitive to Jerusalem's condition

- Doubtless Nehemiah knew of the recent decree of Ezra 4:21, with the possibility left open for a further decree concerning Jerusalem. He now asked the king to reverse the first decree.

Speaking with courtesy ("If it pleases the king"; Cf. 2:7; this appears elsewhere only in Esther 1:19; 3:9; 5:4,8; 7:3; 8:5; 9:13) and humility (your servant), Nehemiah asked the king to send him to the city in Judah where his ancestors were buried so that he might rebuild the city. Again the cupbearer avoided mentioning Jerusalem specifically.

6 Then the king said to me, with **the queen** sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.

6 Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.

6 With his queen seated beside him, the king asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you return?" The king thought it was a good idea to send me, so I presented him with a prepared plan.

6 And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

- "...the queen" - his was Damaspia

- The fact that the queen was seated there suggests this was a private gathering, since it was not customary for queens to appear at formal banquets

- Remembering Esther's testimony, she probably influenced Artaxerxes to favor the request of this Jew. The king then asked Nehemiah when he would return. This question indicated that the king would give him permission.

- Nehemiah responded immediately with a specific time frame, again indicating forethought on his part. Possibly a short time, later extended; for he remained in Jerusalem for 12 years (5:14), and then returned to the king for several years (13:6).

7 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me for the governors of *the provinces* beyond the River, so that they will allow me to pass through until I come to

Judah,

7 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of *the provinces* beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah,

7 I also asked the king, "If it seems good to you, order that letters of authorization be given me for the Trans-Euphrates governors, so they will allow me to pass through to Judah,

7 Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah;

- Nehemiah then asked for the biggest favor yet. Knowing he would face opposition from his enemies, he requested letters of permission from the king to allow him to pass through the various provinces in the Trans-Euphrates, the large area west of the Euphrates River

8 and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, so that he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which is by the temple, for the wall of the city, and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted *them* to me because the good hand of my God *was* on me.

8 and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted *them* to me because the good hand of my God *was* on me.

8 along with a letter to Asaph, the royal Commissioner of Forests, so that he will supply me with timber to craft beams for the gatehouses of the Temple, for the city walls, and for the house in which I will be living." The king granted this for me, according to the good hand of my God.

8 And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.

- Nehemiah knew he would need access to timber for rebuilding the gates and the wall and other parts of the city

- "...the citadel" - this was the castle that protected the Temple and overlooked the northwest corner of its courts

— Hananiah was the governor of this castle (Neh 7:2). Hyrcanus I (134–104 BC) built an acropolis here, and still later Herod rebuilt it and named it Antonia

- The fact that Nehemiah knew the name of the man in charge of the king's forest near Jerusalem may indicate that he had done some careful research

(b) Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem to the displeasure of Sanballat and Tobiah (2:9-11)

9 Then I came to the governors *of the provinces* beyond the *Euphrates* River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

9 Then I came to the governors *of the provinces* beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

9 So I went to the Trans-Euphrates governors and gave them the king's letters of authorization. The king also sent army officers and cavalry to accompany me.

9 Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.

- The journey to Jerusalem, even though Nehemiah probably took the shortest route possible, would have taken at least two months

- Ezra's trip, 14 years earlier, took four to five months (Ezra 7:8-9)

- On the way Nehemiah showed the governors of the provinces the king's letters of authorization

- Also the king even provided a military escort for him! Nehemiah's official position called for a military escort (see notes on Ezra 8:22).

- These soldiers remained in Jerusalem for his protection (Neh 4:23)

10 And when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard *about it*, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard *about it*, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

10 But when Sanballat the Horonite and his servant Tobiah the Ammonite heard of this, they were greatly distressed because someone had come to do good for the Israelites.

10 When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.

- But as soon as Nehemiah arrived, he began to face opposition

- When Sanballat the Horonite (perhaps meaning he was from Beth-Horon about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem) and his associate Tobiah, from Ammon, heard that Nehemiah had arrived on the scene to help Israel, they were very displeased. Immediately they began to plan how to stop Nehemiah from achieving his goal.

- Perhaps they were hoping to gain control of Judah. In fact in the Elephantine papyri written in 407 BC, 37 years after this event, Sanballat was called "governor of Samaria." But Nehemiah's motivation remained undaunted. He knew that God had brought him to this moment in Israel's history and he was about to tackle a project that others, for almost 100 years before him, had been unable to complete.

11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days.

11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

11 I arrived in Jerusalem and remained there for three days.

11 So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

(c) Nehemiah secretly inspects the dilapidated wall (2:12-16)

12 And I got up in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem, and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.

12 And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.

12 Then I got up at night, along with a few men with me. I had not confided to any person what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. Furthermore, there was no other animal with me except for the one I was riding.

12 And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon.

- Nehemiah knew there was no way he could share with the people in Jerusalem what God led him to accomplish without first doing some research and planning

— After taking time (three days), presumably to think, pray, and get acquainted with some people there, he took a few men into his confidence, men he could trust

13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Spring and *on* to the Dung Gate, and I was inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which had been consumed by fire.

13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and *on* to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire.

13 So I went out during the night through the Valley Gate toward Dragon's Well, and from there to the Dung Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and burned by fire.

13 And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire.

- Then he made a careful survey of the walls to analyze the problem he faced. He did so at night, apparently to avoid letting others know his plans before they were firmly fixed in his

mind.

— During these night hours he gained perspective and, as outlined in Neh 3, developed an effective plan to accomplish the task he had come to Jerusalem to perform

14 Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass.

14 Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass.

14 I proceeded to the Fountain Gate, and then to the King's Pool, but there wasn't sufficient clearance for the animal I was riding to pass.

14 Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass.

- In his nighttime inspection he rode his horse or mule from the Valley Gate in the southwest wall east to the Jackal Well, the site of which is unknown, and to the Dung Gate in the southeast part of the city. Possibly this is the same as the Potsherd Gate (Jer 19:2).

- The Fountain Gate was north of the Dung Gate on the eastern wall. The King's Pool may be the same as the Pool of Siloam which was near the King's Garden (Neh 3:15), or the King's Pool may have been south of the Pool of Siloam.

15 So I was going up at night by the ravine and inspecting the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.

15 So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.

15 I traveled the valley by night to inspect the wall, returning through the Valley Gate.

15 Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned.

- Apparently the rubble there kept him from proceeding on his mount so he went up the valley (probably the Kidron Valley east of the city). Either he went all round the entire wall or, more likely, he retraced his steps from the eastern wall. He went back into the city at his starting place, the Valley Gate.

16 However, the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the rest who were doing the work.

16 The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.

16 The local officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done—I informed neither the Judeans, nor the priests, nor the nobles, nor the officials, nor any of the rest who would be doing the work.

16 And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

- After Nehemiah had completed his secret survey and was satisfied that he had developed a workable plan, the time had come to reveal to the Jews why he was in Jerusalem

(d) Nehemiah organizes the rebuilding effort (2:17-20)

(i) Nehemiah challenges the people to rebuild the city (2:17)

17 Then I said to **them**, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates have been burned by fire. Come, let's rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a disgrace."

17 Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach."

17 Later I told them, "You all are watching the predicament we're in, how Jerusalem lies desolate, with its gates burned by fire. Let's rebuild the Jerusalem wall so we're no longer a disgrace."

17 Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.

- "...them" - "Jews [i.e., common people], priests, nobles, officials," in v16

- First he challenged them to notice their deplorable circumstances, which had brought them trouble and disgrace (Cf. 1:3). Then he challenged them to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and followed his challenge with a personal testimony as to how God's gracious hand (Cf. 2:8) had granted him favor before King Artaxerxes.

(ii) The people initially cooperate (2:18)

18 And I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let's arise and build." So they put their hands to the good *work*.

18 I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good *work*.

18 Then I told them how good my God had been to me, and about what the king had told me. They replied, "Let's get out there and build!" So they encouraged themselves to do good.

18 Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build.

- So they strengthened their hands for this good work. When Nehemiah gave his challenge, the people's negative feelings became positive. Despair turned to hope. They responded and began the rebuilding process.

— This was August 1, 444 BC, and the wall was finished 52 days later, September 21 (Cf. 6:15)

(iii) Nehemiah answers the intimidation posed by Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem (2:19-20)

19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard *about it*, they mocked us and despised us, and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"

19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard *it*, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"

19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, his servant Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they jeered at us and despised us when they said, "What is this thing that you're doing? You're rebelling against the king, aren't you?"

19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?

- Apparently word spread quickly regarding the Jews' response to Nehemiah's challenge

— As soon as their enemies heard the news they stepped up their efforts to hinder the process. They used every demoralizing technique they knew, beginning with ridicule and the suggestion that they were rebels.

— Joining Sanballat and Tobiah (Cf. v10) was Geshem (Cf. 6:1-2,6) the Arab

20 So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will make us successful; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no part, right, or memorial in Jerusalem."

20 So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."

20 In reply to them, I said, "The God of Heaven will prosper us. That's why we're preparing to build. But as far as you're concerned, there exists no ancestral heritage, no legal right, nor any historic claim in Jerusalem.

20 Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.

- Nehemiah was ready for their insidious attack. He affirmed that the God of heaven (Cf. 1:4-5; 2:4) would enable them to succeed.
- The Jews, God's servants, would rebuild, but the three opponents had no share or claim (present) or historic (past) right to the city
- Once again Nehemiah brought the task—both in the eyes of Judah and his enemies—into clear focus
- Their dependence was not to be on their abilities, human resources, or personal genius. Their hope was in the God of heaven! Nehemiah exhibited many characteristics necessary for effective leadership.

Donald K. Campbell lists 21 such factors:

1. He established a reasonable and attainable goal.
2. He had a sense of mission.
3. He was willing to get involved.
4. He rearranged his priorities in order to accomplish his goal.
5. He patiently waited for God's timing.
6. He showed respect to his superior.
7. He prayed at crucial times.
8. He made his request with tact and graciousness.
9. He was well prepared and thought of his needs in advance.
10. He went through proper channels.
11. He took time (three days) to rest, pray, and plan.
12. He investigated the situation firsthand.
13. He informed others only after he knew the size of the problem.
14. He identified himself as one with the people.
15. He set before them a reasonable and attainable goal.
16. He assured them God was in the project.
17. He displayed self-confidence in facing obstacles.
18. He displayed God's confidence in facing obstacles.
19. He did not argue with opponents.
20. He was not discouraged by opposition.
21. He courageously used the authority of his position.