

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Nehemiah 1-2: The Resolve of the Governor

Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of new beginnings for the people of God, of restoration after brokenness – a restoration that required *spiritual* rebuilding as well as *physical* rebuilding. Here we come to Nehemiah himself, and his resolve to *pray* and his resolve to *act*.

1. A resolve to pray (1:1-11)

Nehemiah introduces himself (1:1a). In fact, much of what read in the book are his memoirs. He gives us the date of the first entry (1:1b). The *time* is the month of Kislev (late November-early December), the 20th year (of Artaxerxes, it turns out, from 2:1). It's 445 BC, about 14 years after Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem. Nehemiah also tells us the *place* (1:1c) – Susa (now in south-west Iran), which was used as a winter retreat by the Persian kings.

Nehemiah hears some bad news from his brother who's been to Jerusalem (1:2-3). The people are in disgrace and the walls of the city are broken and its gates burned. Verse 4 shows how he responds to the news: by mourning, fasting and praying (similar to Ezra's response to bad news in Ezra 9:3-5). The remainder of the chapter records his prayer. In fact, there are a number of prayers in Nehemiah, some of them very short (see 1:4-11; 2:4; 4:4-5, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Since he prayed over a period of time, we should probably understand that this is a summary of how he prayed. In any case, we can see that it contains a number of important elements.

(a) The God to whom he prays (1:5-6a)

Notice, first, how Nehemiah addresses God (1:5-6a). God is great and awesome and keeps his covenant of love. We've already seen this in Ezra: he's a *sovereign* God (great and awesome) and a *faithful* God (he keeps his covenant of love). Nehemiah's prayer starts with the God who's sovereign and faithful.

Likewise, our prayer flows out of our understanding of who God is; his character is the basis of prayer. We don't pray to a weak God, we pray to a *great* and *awesome* God; we don't pray to a God who couldn't care less about us; we pray to a God who *keeps his covenant of love* with us; we don't pray to a God who is a distant uncle; we pray to a *loving heavenly father*.

(b) The sin in which he shares (1:6b-7)

Then, like Ezra before him, he confesses the sin in which he shares (1:6b-7; see also Ezra 9:6-15). He identifies with the people. He has dirty hands too. Nehemiah knows that when God restores his sinful people, it's not because we deserve it, but because of his grace.

(c) The history to which he appeals (1:8-10)

He reminds God of particular passages (such as Leviticus 26:33; Deuteronomy 12:5; 30:1-5. 30:1-5) which promised God would both punish the people and restore them as well. When he talks, in 1:10, about God redeeming them, he could be referring back to the exodus, or to the people coming home after the exile; either way, Nehemiah is replaying in his prayer the work of salvation God has done for his people.

(d) The favour for which he asks (1:11)

Notice that we've come all the way through the prayer and we haven't had a single request yet! There has been adoration of who God is, confession of sin, a reminder of how God has saved the people, before he makes a request. When he does, it's very specific: he asks God to move the heart of 'this man'. Which man? Nehemiah then tells us in the last sentence of verse 11: 'I was cupbearer to the king.'

The popular image of a cupbearer is of someone who tastes the wine served to the king to make sure it's not poisoned. In fact, the

position probably involved more than that. The cupbearer would often hold an official position, like a secretary of state, or be a cabinet minister. Nehemiah, then, is a major administrator in the Persian empire. And because he's cupbearer, he's able to get close to the king.

Yet his heart is in Judah and Jerusalem, with his people. He feels for them in their situation, and he's concerned about the state of the city. So he resolves to pray... and what a prayer! In our prayers, let's keep our focus on the great God who keeps his covenant, who forgives when we confess sin, who promises us salvation, and who offers us his help.

2. A resolve to act (2:1-20)

It's often been said of some people that they're too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use. That couldn't be said of Nehemiah. He's not just a man of *prayer*, he's a man of *action*. He lifts his eyes to God, but also uses them to look around at what needs to be done. He shares his *heart* with God, but he also uses his *head* to plan, and his *hands* to get things done. Heart, head, and hands working together. There are four things worth focusing on in this chapter.

(a) Arranging the trip (2:1-10)

The first verse gives another date entry (2:1a). It's the month of Nisan now, about four months after he first received the news. So Nehemiah had been praying for quite a while before anything significant happened. He tells us that he was sad in the king's presence, and that the king notices (2:1b-2a). His sadness might have been against etiquette, and Nehemiah says he was afraid, but he does tell the king why (2:2b-3). Artaxerxes asks what he wants, and Nehemiah prays (2:4); it's a great impromptu, on-the-spot prayer (although, of course, we mustn't forget it has four months of praying behind it). He asks if he can return to Jerusalem (2:5). The king wanted to know when Nehemiah would return (2:6). We don't know what Nehemiah answered, but he ended up spending twelve years in Judah! The passage goes on to show how Nehemiah asks for letters to give safe passage, and timber for rebuilding projects (2:7-9). An interesting

dilemma is posed in that Ezra didn't use a military escort (Ezra 8:21-23) whilst Nehemiah does! Am I showing my faith in God's protection by not taking a military escort? Or, am I being stupid by refusing the offer? Am I *trusting* God or *testing* God? Ezra *rejects* an escort as a matter of *faith*; Nehemiah *accepts* an escort as a matter of *wisdom*. Crucially, both examples are found in Scripture: sometimes it's appropriate to trust God to work powerfully; sometimes it's appropriate to use the normal means he's provided. It certainly has an effect, because people hear about it and are disturbed (2:10).

(b) Investigating the need (2:11-16)

On his arrival, he stays for three days and then goes out at night investigating the walls and gates (2:11-12). He doesn't say anything at this point; he needs concrete knowledge of the scale of the problem (2:13-16). He takes note of what needs to be done.

(c) Encouraging the people (2:17-18)

Then, once he has carefully investigated the need, he encourages the people (2:17-18). He's identified the problem, and now he offers a solution. He calls on the people to get involved, so that they are not a reproach to the people around them. And they agree (2:18c).

(d) Encountering the opposition (2:19-20)

Once again, as happened in the book of Ezra, as soon as people start doing the work of God, opposition is never far away (2:19). Their enemies make fun of them, but Nehemiah's response is pointed (2:20). He recognises that the job is big, but that God will prosper them.

•••

Leaders pray... but we all have that privilege of coming into God's presence.

Leaders act... but we all have that responsibility to do what we're called to do.

As a community of God's people, may God help us pray to his own glory, and may God help us act in his own name, and for his sake. Amen.