

## GOD ANSWERED NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

### Nehemiah and King Artaxerxes

Four months passed, no doubt along with many prayers. Nehemiah was present before the king as his cupbearer. In the Persian court the cupbearer was a senior official, responsible for tasting the king's wine (lest he be poisoned!), and for guarding the royal apartments. Nehemiah was sad because of the news he had heard (his great prayer and his trust in God had not erased his grief). Artaxerxes asked him why he was sad, and Nehemiah was terrified (2:2), and rightly so. Cupbearers of Persian kings did not burden their kings with their private problems! Nevertheless he bravely replied:

May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire? (2:3)

Notice how wise Nehemiah was in describing his sorrow in words that the king could understand.<sup>56</sup> Many people of that time would understand the desire to repair ancestral places. And notice that Nehemiah did not specifically mention the walls, nor the fact that Artaxerxes himself was partially responsible for the trouble (Ezra 4:7–24)! The king asked Nehemiah what he wanted, and Nehemiah quickly 'prayed to the God of heaven' (1:4). Nehemiah combined diplomacy with the king with dependence on God—not an easy combination! He was indeed as wise as a serpent while being innocent as a dove (Matthew 10:16).

These quick prayers are often called 'arrow prayers', prayed briefly in the midst of other activities. They show our constant dependence on God, and show that we can pray short prayers as well as long prayers. They are prayers to pray when there is no time to pray. Of course Nehemiah's 'arrow prayer' came out of his extended period of prayer, and his great prayer in Chapter 1. Our 'arrow prayers' will be sharpened by more extended and thoughtful prayers which are based on the words and works of God. We will see more of these brief prayers later in Nehemiah, for example in Chapters 4; 5; 6 and 13. God answered his 'arrow prayer', and his lengthy prayers of Chapter 1, by giving him the right words, and by shaping the thoughts and words of King Artaxerxes.

Then Nehemiah asked the king:

<sup>56</sup> Queen Esther did the same in Esther 8:3.

send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it. (2:5)

And God miraculously answered his prayer! For, as we read in Proverbs:

In the LORD'S hand the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him. (Proverbs 21:1)

Artaxerxes the great king of Persia was not on earth to serve his servant Nehemiah, but he still gave him what he asked for. And Artaxerxes was not a servant of the one true and living God, the LORD, but he did his will. God rules all that he has made, and works everything for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

So Artaxerxes agreed to send him back to Jerusalem, and also provided letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates to provide safe conduct for the journey (Trans-Euphrates, or 'Beyond the River', referred to that part of the Persian Empire west of the river Euphrates, including the holy land and Jerusalem). He also provided timber for the gates of the citadel, for the city wall, and for Nehemiah's residence. Nehemiah went to Jerusalem with generous gifts, as had the earlier groups of returning exiles from Babylon (Ezra 1; 7). The king also provided some of his army to protect Nehemiah on the journey (2:9). Nehemiah also was to become governor of the area of Judah (or Yehud, as it was known) within the large Persian province of Trans-Euphrates. He served there from 445 BC to 433 BC, and then again in 432 BC. As Raymond Brown writes, 'A trusted wine servant in a pagan palace becomes God's instrument for Israel's renewal'.<sup>57</sup>

Whereas Ezra had refused the protection of the king's troops for his journey, because he trusted in God's gracious hand (Ezra 8:22–23), Nehemiah accepted the king's provision: 'And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests' (2:8). Both experienced God's gracious protection—Ezra directly, and Nehemiah through the troops provided by the king.

## LESSONS FOR US TODAY

I hope that Nehemiah is an inspiration to you, a good example to follow like the other good examples described for us in Hebrews 11. Although he lived many years ago, and

<sup>57</sup> Brown, *Nehemiah*, p. 17.

although not many of us are cupbearers to great kings, and although he lived before the coming of Christ, we can still identify with him. His character is so clearly presented to us, even in this first section of this book which bears his name. God has told us about Nehemiah, so that we will understand how God works in the world, how God preserves his people, and how God wants us to live. [Hebrews 11](#) teaches us to look at Old Testament people as examples of enduring faith. And [2 Timothy 3:16–17](#) teaches us that the Scriptures are provided by God ‘for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’.

Heroes from the past are out of fashion at the present time. We look to our contemporary world, and we tend to look for celebrities, rather than heroes. But celebrities are celebrities because of their outward appearance or circumstances. If we want to think God’s thoughts after him, then we have to know that:

The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart. ([1 Samuel 16:7](#))

There are more lessons to learn from Nehemiah in this book. But what are the challenges from what we have seen so far?

Are we people with a passion for the welfare of the people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ?

Nehemiah, living in Susa, was desolated because of the tragic circumstances of the people of God back in Jerusalem. The tendency in our society is to think that if we are OK, and our close friends are OK, then that is what really matters. And even those who have a keen interest in what is happening in other countries sometimes fail to find out what is happening to fellow believers in Christ in those countries.

We may dismiss or despair of the Church and its weaknesses, but fail to grieve for it, and fail to love it. The Church of Christ should be on our heart, because it is on God’s heart.

Are we people of prayer?

As we have seen, Nehemiah was a man of prayer. When he heard the bad news about Jerusalem, he spent many hours in deep and passionate prayer and fasting. He then

summarised all these prayers in a great prayer, which provides a model for our prayers. Then he prayed his 'arrow prayers' at the moments of opportunity. These prayers opened up an opportunity of service, in which Nehemiah became part of the answer to his own prayer. We should learn how to pray from Nehemiah.

Are we people whose passions, prayers and actions are formed by a desire to serve God, and instructed by the Bible?

It is clear from Nehemiah's passions, prayers, and actions, that he was well taught from the Bible. He saw what was happening around him in the light of the Bible, and he interpreted history in the context of God's big plans as revealed in the Bible. Nehemiah lived by the promises of God, and claimed those promises in his prayers. He was an integrated person, with a purity of heart that resulted from wanting one thing: the glory of God. He walked in God's words.

Are we people who see opportunities, even in difficult circumstances?

Nehemiah was in Susa, a long way from Jerusalem. He was cupbearer to the king. This gave him access to the king, but Persian kings were not in the habit of changing their circumstances for the benefit of their servants! The people of God were in a mess, and even though some had returned to Jerusalem, they were still vulnerable to their enemies. But, for Nehemiah, this was not a time to give up, but a time to grieve, pray, trust, ask and act! In the words of DT Niles, as we have already seen, 'Hope lies amidst the ruins of our expectations'. And, in my words, 'Hope lies in the promises of God'.

God has provided the book of Nehemiah, as with every part of the Old Testament, to encourage us: 'so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope' ([Romans 15:4](#)). May the God of Nehemiah encourage us through Nehemiah, that we may have hope in 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort' ([2 Corinthians 1:3](#)).