



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for May 11, 2008
Released on Wednesday, May 7, 2008**

“Following a Visionary Leader”

Lesson Text: Nehemiah 2:1-8, 11, 17, 18

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 1, 2

Devotional Reading: Psalm 137:1-7; 138:1-5

Nehemiah 2: 2:1-8, 11, 17, 18

1 And it came to pass in the month Ni’san, in the twentieth year of Ar-tax-erx’es 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.

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,

3 And said unto the king, Let the king have 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?

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

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 Ju’dah, unto the city of my fathers’ sepulchres, that I may build it.

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.

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 Ju’dah;

8 And a letter unto A’saph 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.

11 So I came to Je-ru’sa-lem, and was there three days.

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

18 Then (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.

INTRODUCTION

Just as there were three deportations of Judah into captivity, so there were three returns. The first occurred under Zerubbabel and Joshua in the year 538 B.C. The second took place under Ezra in the year 458 B.C., and the third was under the leadership of Nehemiah in 445 B.C. Nehemiah was an official serving under King Artaxerxes. As the king's cupbearer, he was highly trusted by the king.

Nehemiah's constant presence with the king would have allowed him to know many of the administration's secret dealings, and it probably gave him the opportunity to know some of the king's personal affairs. While Nehemiah was faithfully carrying out his duties one day, his brother Hanani stopped in for a visit. He had been to Judah and had come back with a report on the conditions there. But the report was not a good one. The people were suffering, the city walls were destroyed, and the city gates were charred ruins.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Nehemiah, whose name means "the Lord comforts," was a devout Jew who lived in the fifth century BC. That was the period of the Persian Empire. This empire came to prominence when Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC.

Nehemiah served as cupbearer to Artaxerxes I, the Persian king who reigned from 464 to 424 BC an area that is now southwest Iran. Artaxerxes was the son of the biblical Ahasuerus (Ezra 4:6, also known as Xerxes), who was the husband of Esther. Ahasuerus's kingdom stretched "from India even unto Ethiopia" (Esther 1:1). Artaxerxes I came to the throne after his father was assassinated. As cupbearer to Artaxerxes, Nehemiah had direct, personal access to this powerful Persian emperor.

In November or December of 445 BC, Nehemiah learned from Hanani that those who had returned from exile to Jerusalem were in distress. It had been more than 90 years since the first exiles had returned to the holy city, and the place was still a ruin (Nehemiah 1:2, 3). This news, which Nehemiah found surprising, may be a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Yet this was old news by Nehemiah's day. Instead Hanani may have been referring to some more recent catastrophe.

Nevertheless, Nehemiah began praying and considering over a period of four months what he could do to help his fellow countrymen in Judea (Nehemiah 1:4-11). His prayers culminated in asking God to grant him favorable reception by King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 1:11).

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to learn that God caused King Artaxerxes to sympathize with Nehemiah and authorize him to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall despite the obstacles there.

Principle: to be aware that God appoints certain leaders to do His work and expects other believers to follow them.

Application: to help those committed to God to discern who His chosen leaders are and to give them their support.

How to Say It

ARTAXERXES. Are-tuh-zerk-seez.

ASAPH. Ay-saff.

HANANI. Huh-nay-nye.

SANBALLAT. San-bal-ut.

TOBIAH. Toe-bye-uh.

XERXES. *Zerk-seez.*

Sadness Noticed (Nehemiah 2:1–3)

1. What was it that allowed Nehemiah the opportunity to make a major request of King Artaxerxes? (Nehemiah 2:1)

The month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king is March or April of 444 BC. When we compare this date with Nehemiah 1:1, we see that about four months have passed since Nehemiah heard the news about Jerusalem's distress. Thus Nehemiah has a lot of time in which to think, weep, and pray before his encounter with the king (Nehemiah 1:4–11).

What allowed Nehemiah the opportunity to make a major request of King Artaxerxes was his position. Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer which was a very important office. According to one ancient Greek writer, the cupbearer tastes the king's wine for poison and guards the royal apartment. Such a trusted person can become a confidant and informal counselor of a king and so can influence the king's decisions. Like Esther in the book that bears her name, God has placed a Jew at the right place and time in order to help His people.

2. What caused the king to open the conversation that led to Nehemiah's request? (v. 2)

While Nehemiah was carrying out his normal duties for the king, the king observed that he had a sad countenance on this particular day. Since this was unusual for Nehemiah, the king immediately inquired about it. He knew that Nehemiah was not normally sad.

The moment the king inquired about his sad countenance, Nehemiah was immediately afraid. No one was allowed to reveal sadness before the king.

We assume that to appear sad in the presence of the king might have been a cause for punishment. No doubt Nehemiah had not realized that his grief so affected him that it showed on his countenance. After four months, however, his concern had weighed heavily upon him and had now begun to show outwardly. Notice that Nehemiah specifically stated, "Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence" (Neh. 2:1). Until now he had maintained his composure and consistently presented a normal countenance as he carried out his duties.

3. What prevented Nehemiah's fear from overwhelming him in talking to the king? (vs. 3-4)

Nehemiah was a man who prayed consistently (cf. 1:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). His fear did not paralyze him to the point of inertia. Instead, he was able to offer the king an explanation of how he was feeling which showed Nehemiah's courage. Now that the opportunity was at hand, Nehemiah was glad to offer an explanation.

Nehemiah was not at all unhappy with Artaxerxes. His unhappiness was a natural response to the destruction of his homeland and its capital city, Jerusalem. He described it as the place where his ancestors rested in their tombs. This place that was so dear to his heart lay in ruins with its gates in ashes. This would cause anyone sadness. Nehemiah's plan was to ask permission to return home and help with the bleak situation.

Opportunity Seized (Nehemiah 2:4–8)

4. How did the king respond to Nehemiah? (vs. 4-6)

Artaxerxes responds by offering a royal favor to help Nehemiah. This is exactly what Nehemiah has been praying for (Nehemiah 1:11). Now it appears that God is granting an answer to his prayer. Before Nehemiah makes his request, he prays.

Even though he may have been thinking about this moment for several months, he still recognized the importance of God's leading in how he would answer. Before daring to respond, therefore, he prayed. It could not have been a long prayer, because the king was sitting there, looking right at him, waiting for an answer. After praying, Nehemiah addressed the king.

It was important however, that Nehemiah follow the proper etiquette for addressing the king, especially when he was going to present the kind of request he had in mind. That is why he began with "If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight." He had prayed much, though, so he was ready to present his actual request immediately. He spoke directly to the heart of need. He wanted to return to Judah and the city of his fathers' tombs for the purpose of rebuilding it.

The king, in the presence of the queen, asked Nehemiah how long he thought he would need to be gone and when he would return. After Nehemiah saw the king was granting him permission to leave, he gave the king a set time on when he would return.

5. Why should we take risks for God? Or is it ever proper to think of service for God as risky? Explain.

Did Nehemiah take a risk in asking the king to allow him to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem? Did Jonathan take a risk when only he and his armor bearer went to fight against an entire Philistine garrison in 1 Samuel 14? To be willing to lose one's life in the service of God is to truly find life (see Luke 17:33).

Men and women of the Bible risked all they had on numerous occasions. As a result, great things were accomplished. These people put their faith and trust in God in a very real way, and they were rewarded. When we step out on faith, we are able to see God's working more clearly; this encourages further steps of faith. From an eternal perspective, to step out on faith not risky at all since God is in control. From that viewpoint, to fail to step out on faith is the real risk!

6. What added things did Nehemiah ask for above his initial request, and why were these things important? (vs. 7-8)

Nehemiah goes on to request *letters* permitting him to travel through the empire. Such papers will provide the royal permission needed to travel through regions of other *governors*.

Nehemiah knows he will need construction material. So he asks for *timber* to be provided by a certain *Asaph*, the official in charge of *the king's western forest*. Asaph is a Jewish name, so it might be that he, like Nehemiah, was a Jew who had achieved a high ranking in the empire. He would have been sympathetic to Nehemiah's cause, but he would need permission from the king to provide the needed lumber.

Nehemiah specified three projects for which he needed this material. First, he needed beams for the fortress to be built near the temple. This was for the purpose of protecting the temple, their holy place of worship. Second, he needed material for the city wall. Third, he needed it for the house he would occupy while in Jerusalem. Miraculously, the king granted his entire request. Nehemiah gave all the credit to the fact that God was blessing him in his endeavors.

Task Initiated (Nehemiah 2:11, 17, 18)

The intervening verses (vs. 9-10) tell us not only that Nehemiah had the necessary letters but also that he was accompanied by some of the army and cavalry of the king. This was quite a display of the king's authority and is an indication that Artaxerxes was well aware of the tendencies of the various rulers to act independently. As we might expect, the enemies of the Jews were not at all happy about the situation. Sanballat and Tobiah are mentioned. To them, Nehemiah posed a threat.

7. How long did Nehemiah wait after arriving at Jerusalem before surveying the extent of the problem? (v. 11)

The text does not describe what certainly is an arduous journey of nearly 1,100 miles from Shushan to *Jerusalem*. Naturally, Nehemiah's first priority is to get some rest upon arrival. It is unwise to undertake a great task when one is exhausted.

But no doubt Nehemiah already is planning what he will do.

There must have been some traditional importance associated with waiting this amount of time, for we read the same thing about Ezra's arrival many years earlier (Ezra 8:32). Nehemiah probably used this time for rest, prayer, and maybe getting acquainted with some of the people in order to determine who could help in the work. It was not until after this time that he selected a few trusted men to do a secret nighttime survey with him to assess the damage (Neh. 2:12).

8. Why and when is it important to take rest? What have been your experiences (good and bad) in this regard?

Before Nehemiah began the task of rebuilding the walls, he spent three days resting. God instituted a day of rest for the Israelites to remember both Him and the time when they had been slaves and had no day of rest (see Deuteronomy 5:14, 15).

The human body needs rest in order to recover, heal, and grow. Exhaustion is dangerous, for our spiritual defenses are weaker at that time. Satan chose a time of physical exhaustion for Jesus to tempt Him in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). An exhausted person does not have the energy to begin a project well, let alone complete one.

A well-rested person, on the other hand, has the strength of body and the clarity of mind to take on the Lord's task. To be sure, a sluggard is condemned (see Proverbs 6:9-11; compare Mark 14:37, 38). Yet God's servants need their rest in order to accomplish His work. The modern "24/7" idea of activity is a recipe for disaster.

9. How extensive was Nehemiah's survey of the damage? (vs. 13-15, not in lesson text)

Nehemiah's survey was thorough (Neh. 2:13-15), including various gates and portions of wall. The text tells us that Nehemiah purposely did not tell the officials of the city or any of the religious rulers where he had gone or what he was planning to do (vs. 16). He knew that his planning needed to be comprehensive and complete before he presented his plan.

10. To whom and how did Nehemiah finally present his plan, and what was the response? (vs. 17-18)

After much careful consideration, Nehemiah was ready to present his plan to others. The ones he presented it to were the Jewish leaders mentioned at the end of verse 16, because they were the ones who would have been concerned about the city in the same way that Nehemiah was. He challenged them to look around and realize anew what the conditions around the city were like.

The word “waste” (in verse 17) means “parched and ruined,” referring to that which has been destroyed. This was the overall condition of the city and the gates. Nehemiah’s challenge was a straightforward call to get busy building the wall of Jerusalem. His reason was that the ruined conditions reflected badly upon them and their relationship with God. He said they were a disgrace, a cause for shame. Judah’s national and spiritual heritage was being given a negative reputation. It was their honor that was at stake.

In order to help them accept this challenge, Nehemiah gave personal testimony of how God had been with him, directing him (v. 18). He probably recounted for them the series of events that had occurred since the time he had heard from Hanani and had begun praying earnestly about the situation. He especially wanted them to hear how the Lord had worked in the king’s heart, causing him to let Nehemiah go, provide a military escort for him, and order the local people to help him with the needed building materials. God was leading this work.

When the people heard this and recognized the hand of God at work, their response was a readiness to get on with the task.

CONCLUSION

Nehemiah comes across as an ideal leader of God’s people. First, Nehemiah was concerned for others. Though he himself was a worldly success, having risen to an important office in the service of the Persian state, he remained concerned about his countrymen who were less well off. When he heard of the distress of his people in distant Jerusalem, he began to look for an opportunity to help. The New Testament likewise calls us to help others (see 1 John 3:17; etc.).

Second, Nehemiah was willing to step out on faith. By showing concern for his people before the Persian king, Nehemiah jeopardized his own rank and privileges. The New Testament calls us to do likewise (see Mark 10:29, 30).

Third, Nehemiah was willing to make sacrifices. Nehemiah voluntarily stepped down from his position in the royal court and traveled an enormous distance to serve God’s people. The New Testament does not call every Christian to travel to a foreign land, but we are to live lives of sacrifice (Mark 12:43, 44; Acts 2:45).

Fourth, Nehemiah was a man of prayer. As a godly Jew, he was concerned about the fact that the holy city of Jerusalem, symbol of God’s presence among His people, was in disarray. When his opportunity before King Artaxerxes presented itself, he first sent up an arrow prayer to God. But months of prayer by Nehemiah had prepared the way for his request before the king. And Nehemiah clearly saw that the unfolding opportunity was from the hand of God. Great Christian leaders are people of prayer, even when they are also people of action (Acts 20:36).

Fifth, Nehemiah took time to plan things out. He waited months for just the right time before making a request to the king about rebuilding. When he made the request, he knew just what he needed to ask for because he had thought things through. When he arrived in Jerusalem, he took time to think and plan before speaking to others about his dreams. Planning ahead is not a failure to walk by faith, as Nehemiah’s example shows us. Paul’s work reveals him to be a man of planning (2 Corinthians 8:16–9:5).

Sixth, Nehemiah knew how to motivate others. He had no power by himself to build the wall of Jerusalem. He needed help and cooperation. But without manipulation he skillfully mobilized the people behind his plan. The fact that the community of faith joined him was confirmation that God had in fact raised up Nehemiah for this purpose. Today as then, God does not call all of His people to be super-duper motivational leaders as Nehemiah was. But we all can be good followers. Whether a leader or a follower, the prelude to action is personal holiness (1 Peter 1:13–16).

Prayer

Lord, thank You for godly leaders like Nehemiah who have the vision to see the tasks You would have them do and the courage to carry them out. Help us to have the same kind of passion that Nehemiah had. May we have also Nehemiah's zeal and wisdom to accomplish what You would have us do. In Jesus' name we ask this, amen.

Thought to Remember

God still honors courage.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON – Finishing the task. Study Nehemiah 4:1-6:19 in anticipation of next week's lesson.

Have a blessed Mother's Day!