

May 10, 2009

Making a Difference

To encourage us to work together for the common good

Key Bible reference: Nehemiah 1-2

Key Verse: Nehemiah 2.17

Biblical Background

Most of the Book of Nehemiah is an autobiography, a first-person memoir in which Nehemiah recalls how he came to power as governor in Jerusalem and the problems he faced and solved by prayer and hard work. This memoir is similar in style to other memorial inscriptions from the Persian period. We could think of Nehemiah's memoirs as a kind of obituary, setting forth the way he wanted to be remembered (Nehemiah 13:14, 31b).

From the text of Ezra and Nehemiah, it appears that the missions of these two heroes of Jerusalem's restoration overlapped. In Nehemiah 7:73b-9:37, where the public reading of Ezra's law is described, both the scribe and the governor are said to be present and participating. However, Ezra never mentions Nehemiah in his book; and Nehemiah himself never mentions Ezra. In fact, the apocryphal book First Esdras contains most of the material found in 2 Chronicles 35:1-Ezra 10:44, plus the account of the reading of the law from Nehemiah 7:73b-8:12; but it does not mention Nehemiah at all.

This fact suggests that Nehemiah's memoirs circulated separately and that an editor combined them with the story of Ezra. This editor, believing Nehemiah and Ezra to have been contemporaries, put them together in his version of Nehemiah 7-8. The reading of the law described there probably took place, as First

Esdras records, early in Ezra's mission and prior to Nehemiah coming. Remember that teaching and circulating the law was a primary part of Ezra's commission from Artaxerxes [ahr-tuh-ZUHRK-seez] (Ezra 7:12-26). Most probably, the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah were entirely separate.

Nehemiah 1. Nehemiah began his memoir by recalling how he had learned of the sorry state of Jerusalem's defenses. But it should not have been news to Nehemiah that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins. The walls had been breached by the Babylonians in 587/86 B.C. and had been mere heaps of rubble ever since. A brief attempt at rebuilding in the first year of Artaxerxes had prompted the officials of "the province Beyond the River" to fire off a letter expressing their concern that the restoration of Jerusalem's defenses was the first step in an attempted rebellion (Ezra 4:6-16). Not surprisingly, Artaxerxes had given his officials permission to halt the rebuilding, which Ezra 4:23 says they did by force and power. Perhaps it was news of this more recent destruction, carried out against the attempted restoration of the walls, that prompted Nehemiah to prayer and to action.

Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9:4-19 may be compared with this prayer of Nehemiah. Like Daniel (and like Ezra), Nehemiah prayed for his people, identifying with their needs for forgiveness and deliverance. For Nehemiah, the

covenant connection with Deuteronomy is particularly important. Nehemiah trusts God to act in accordance with God's promises and to reestablish the people of Israel in Jerusalem, "the place at which I have chosen to establish my name" (Nehemiah 1:8-9; compare Deuteronomy 30:1-5).

Nehemiah 2:1-3. After a time of prayer and fasting, Nehemiah prepared to approach Artaxerxes with his request. As Artaxerxes' cupbearer, Nehemiah came into close contact with the king daily. We should not think of Nehemiah as a menial servant; the office of cupbearer to the king was an honored position. Since the cupbearer examined all that the king ate and drank, confirming that it was free from poison, the king appointed a loyal, trusted friend to the position. Nehemiah had prayed, "Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!" (namely, Artaxerxes; Nehemiah 1:11b). God answered his prayer in a way Nehemiah had not expected. Because Nehemiah and the king were close, Artaxerxes could tell that something was troubling his cupbearer. So, before Nehemiah even had the chance to make his request, Artaxerxes asked his friend what was wrong.

Nehemiah tells us, "I was very much afraid" (2:2c). We can well understand why. Not only did Artaxerxes have the power of life and death over Nehemiah, he had already acted to put a stop to earlier attempts at rebuilding Jerusalem's walls (Ezra 4:17-22). However, Nehemiah boldly followed through on his God-given opportunity: "I said to the king, 'May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?'" (2:3).

Verses 4-8. Perhaps to Nehemiah's astonishment, Artaxerxes answered with an open invitation: "What do you request?" (2:4). Breathing a quick prayer to God, Nehemiah requested permission to go back to Jerusalem and to rebuild it. The king granted his request, asking only that Nehemiah let him know how much time he would need. This action of Artaxerxes, as much as anything in this story, confirms for us the high regard in which the Persian monarch held Nehemiah and the importance of his post in Artaxerxes' court.

Nehemiah confirmed his competence and forethought by asking Artaxerxes for letters granting him both free passage and access to the materials he would need for this project (2:7-8). The reference to "the gates of the temple fortress" (2:8) reminds us that the Temple was independently fortified (Ezra 9:9), although the Temple gates were in ruins—perhaps destroyed in the campaign to halt Jerusalem's rebuilding early in Artaxerxes' reign.

Verses 9-16. Not only did Artaxerxes give Nehemiah the letters and materials he requested, the king also provided a military escort—a fortunate precaution, as Nehemiah early on ran afoul of the powers in the region. From extra-biblical as well as biblical evidence, we know that Sanballat [san-BAL-at] (2:10, 19) was the governor of the province of Samaria, to the north of Judah. Tobiah [toh-BI-uh] the Ammonite official (2:10, 19) was apparently the governor of Ammon, in the area across the Jordan River to the east of Judah. The third enemy of Nehemiah, mentioned in Nehemiah 2:19, was Geshem [GESH-uhm], whose people controlled the territory south of Judah. We will have more to say about these people in the next lesson; for now, note that Nehemiah was coming into hostile territory. The last thing any

of these leaders wanted was for a rejuvenated Judah to threaten their preeminence.

Having arrived safely in his province, Nehemiah waited until dark to ride around Jerusalem and to assess the damage. He told no one of his intention to rebuild these fallen walls and took with him only a small personal guard. In this way, Nehemiah made sure that no one could interfere with his task, preventing him from even making a beginning on the walls. Nehemiah, it seems, was determined not to make the same mistakes that his predecessors had made. Beginning their work without adequate preparation, they had not been ready to deal with the opposition they encountered. From the first, however, Nehemiah anticipated opposition and was prepared for it.

Nehemiah was a practical reformer; a good diplomat; and a careful, canny planner. None of this, however, runs counter to his being a person of faith. Repeatedly, the Scriptures urge us to trust in God. However, trusting in God does not mean that we abandon all caution or that we cease to plan ahead. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus warns his followers, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Similarly, in Luke 14:25-33, Jesus urges those who would follow him first of all to plan ahead and to count the cost, like a builder beginning work on a tower or a king preparing for war. Careful, constructive planning is an important first step if we really want to make a difference in our world.

Verses 17-20. Once he understood clearly what needed to be done, Nehemiah set about winning the allegiance and support of "the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work" (2:16). He set

the problem before them clearly and succinctly and gave them a simple, straightforward plan of action. Nehemiah also assured them of the king's support. With this guarantee of material and political help, the people responded with enthusiasm: "Then they said, 'Let us start building!' So they committed themselves to the common good" (2:18bc).

Prayer

O God, we thank you for persons who have made a difference in our lives. Show us how we can make a difference, and give us the will and the wisdom to live in such a way that we will show your love to others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.