

Nehemiah 2 – God Inspires The Work

Our lesson today is entitled “God Inspires The Work” and is taken from Nehemiah 2. However, I have a problem: the story that is told in chapter 2 doesn't actually begin in chapter 2. In order to place this chapter into the proper context, we need to go back and take a look at chapter 1. It's simply not wise to start in the middle of a story and leave out the beginning.

When the story begins, we find Nehemiah in the king's palace:

Nehemiah 1:1: “The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace,”

Later on in the chapter we learn that Nehemiah was a very important man. He was the king's cupbearer:

Nehemiah 1:11b: “... For I was the king's cupbearer.”

The position of cupbearer was a very important one. It was his job to taste the king's drink before he drank it, to make sure that it was not poisoned and would do the king no harm. Obviously, if you were the king you would want that position to be held by someone that you trusted, because your life depended on him.

Since Nehemiah was the cupbearer, that meant he was important, he was powerful, he had the king's ear, he spent his time in the palace, and he led a comfortable and wealthy life. In other words, Nehemiah had it made. He was far better off than most people in his day.

Yet, as we will see, Nehemiah still cared about the plight of his people. He had not forgotten them:

Nehemiah 1:2: “That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.”

When Nehemiah's fellow Jews came, he asked them how things were going for his people. In other words, Nehemiah *cared*. This is one of the attributes we see in the great heroes of faith. Moses was raised as Pharaoh's son and lived a splendid life of tremendous wealth in one of the greatest nations of his day, and yet he still cared about the life of his fellow Israelites and sought to deliver them from bondage. He could have said “Their suffering isn't my problem” and went on his way, but he didn't. He willingly abandoned the great treasures of Pharaoh's household in order to live a life of suffering and deliver his people. This is what Hebrews 11 has to say about Moses:

Hebrews 11:24: “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter;

25 Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season;

26 Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.”

Moses cared about his people – and he was not the only one. When Haman plotted to kill all the Jews, Esther risked her life to save them. She could have said “Well, it's not my problem; I am the Queen and will be just fine,” but she didn't. Instead she put everything on the line to save her people.

Nehemiah truly cared about the plight of the rest of Israel. Even though he led a comfortable, powerful life, he still cared. Even though he had nothing to gain and everything to lose, he still cared. When he heard about the plight of Jerusalem he was greatly disturbed:

Nehemiah 1:3: “And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

4 And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,”

Nehemiah was so overcome by the distress of his people that he wept and mourned. He was deeply upset. Keep in mind that this affliction wasn't afflicting *him*; Nehemiah himself was living a great life in the king's palace. What upset Nehemiah so greatly was the affliction of *other people*.

Notice also that Nehemiah actually *did something*. When he heard the news he fasted and prayed. He sought God. He wasn't content to do nothing – instead he went straight to the all-powerful God, for whom nothing is impossible. Nehemiah wanted to see this problem fixed, and he knew that there was only one being who could possibly fix it.

But Nehemiah didn't stop there. He also confessed his sins:

Nehemiah 1:6: “Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.

7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.”

Nehemiah did not say “I have been a wonderful human being, but all those other Israelites have been awful.” He confessed that he, too, was a sinner. He did not act as if he was somehow better or superior to everyone else. He humbled himself and cried out for God to forgive both himself and his people. In other words, he interceded on behalf of his nation. He did not try to pretend that Israel had been a wonderful, God-fearing nation; instead he readily acknowledged what they had done.

Nehemiah is not the only hero of faith who did this. Daniel did exactly the same thing:

Daniel 9:2: “In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.

3 And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:

4 And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments;

5 We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have

rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:

6 Neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

7 O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee."

In Daniel's case he was praying that God would have mercy on Israel and free them from captivity; in Nehemiah's case he was praying that God would restore Israel's fortunes. In both situations, though, the attitude is the same: Daniel and Nehemiah both approached God humbly, with fasting and prayer. They both asked God to forgive their own sins and the sins of the people, and they both asked God to have mercy on the nation.

When Nehemiah prayed, he had a specific request:

Nehemiah 1:11: "O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer."

Nehemiah knew that the king had the power to help him or hinder him. If the king showed him favor, then that would be a tremendous help – but if the king opposed him then all would be lost. Everything depended on how the king responded to Nehemiah's request. Therefore Nehemiah cried out to God and asked God to have the king favor what Nehemiah was going to ask.

Now, remember, Nehemiah was living a great life. He had nothing to gain by getting involved in this mess; in fact, he was risking everything. He could have told Israel that the plight of Jerusalem was their problem, not his, but he didn't. Instead he was going to put everything on the line to try to help them – just as Esther once had.

Now we can at last start on chapter 2. Nehemiah finally approaches the king:

Nehemiah 2:1: "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."

The first detail that I'd like to mention is that in Nehemiah 1:1, we are told that he found out about the plight of Israel in the month Chisleu, which corresponds to our November. However, Nehemiah didn't talk to the king until the month Nisan, which corresponds to our March. In other words, Nehemiah didn't rush to talk to the king the very next day.

The passage doesn't explain the delay, but there are a couple possible reasons for it. One possibility is that Nehemiah wasn't the king's only cupbearer, and that he only served the king at certain times of the year. Remember, in ancient times you couldn't just wander into the king's presence whenever you felt like it. You had to be called, and if you came without being called then you could be killed for it:

Esther 4:10: "Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto

Mordecai;

11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or women, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days."

Nehemiah may have simply been waiting for his turn to come. Another possibility is that going to Jerusalem in the winter would have been a terrible idea, since it was the wrong time of year to actually start any building projects or make any long trips. It made far more sense to wait until the spring and do things then.

We also see from this verse that Nehemiah hadn't previously been sad in the king's presence. This is probably not an accident. The book of Esther tells us that no one in sackcloth was allowed before the king:

Esther 4:2: "When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry;
2 And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth."

In other words, you couldn't go before the king while you were in mourning. It was simply not allowed. Nehemiah did, though, and the king noticed – and that is probably why Nehemiah was immediately terrified:

Nehemiah 2:2: "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,"

Remember that in those days, kings had absolute power: if they decided they wanted you dead then they could simply kill you. It was a very bad idea to get on the king's nerves. When the king saw Nehemiah he knew that something was wrong, and now Nehemiah has a problem. However, he handled it very wisely:

Nehemiah 2:3: "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 appealed to the king in a very clever way. Why *shouldn't* he be upset, since his home lied in waste and had been destroyed? Wouldn't that upset anyone? Isn't that just a natural response?

The king wanted to know what Nehemiah has in mind – and so Nehemiah prays:

Nehemiah 2:4: "Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven."

Note that when the moment finally came, Nehemiah didn't trust himself or the king; instead he

looked directly to God. Nehemiah knew that if this is to succeed at all, God would have to bless it – and if God blessed it then all would be well. Nehemiah apparently understood something that modern man has forgotten:

Psalm 127:1: “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.”

If we want our efforts to succeed then we need the help of the Lord – and that is exactly where Nehemiah went for aid. So Nehemiah made his request:

Nehemiah 2:5: “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.”

Nehemiah wants the king to send him to Jerusalem so that he can repair the fallen city. Nehemiah went on to request the resources that he would need to carry out this task:

Nehemiah 2:7: “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;

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 requested safe passage to Jerusalem, along with the resources from the king's forest that he would need to actually accomplish the rebuilding project. The king granted Nehemiah's request – and when that happens, note that Nehemiah immediately gives the credit to God. Nehemiah is quite clear about why his request was granted: it was because the good hand of his God was upon him. Nehemiah took no credit whatsoever.

Now that he had the king's permission and the king's resources, he made his trip to Jerusalem. The king even sent armed guards to protect him on his journey:

Nehemiah 2:9: “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.”

Nehemiah finally arrived:

Nehemiah 2:11: “So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

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.”

There are a couple things here that we tend to miss. First of all, notice that there is no mention of anyone even acknowledging Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem. Here was an important man, coming on a mission from the king himself, and yet his arrival seems to pass by unnoticed. When Nehemiah

does arrive, he does not tell anyone what he is there to do. Nehemiah does not make a big show of himself or brag about his plans. He does not seek fame – in fact, he acts with great humility. He did not announce his plans to anyone:

Nehemiah 2:16: “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.”

In our time we love to make much of ourselves. We want to be famous and well-respected, and we crave the applause of men. Nehemiah, though, had his heart elsewhere. He did not take up this quest in order to find honor; instead he did it out of a love for his people.

As we can see, Nehemiah surveyed the city at night, when most people would be in bed. He did not want anyone to know what his plans were before he had a chance to see the situation for himself. So he carefully surveyed the situation:

Nehemiah 2:13: “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.

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.

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.”

Nehemiah surveyed the city and took a close look at the actual damage and the work that would need to be accomplished. Once he knew what work actually needed to be done, he then talked to the people about the task at hand:

Nehemiah 2:17: “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.”

Nehemiah pointed out the obvious: the city was in bad shape. The city walls had been destroyed and the gates had been burned with fire. In the ancient world that was a serious problem, because it meant that the city was defenseless. The walls and gates of a city were what kept out invading armies and provided protection for the city's inhabitants. Jerusalem was completely exposed and unprotected. Not having a wall would be like a bank not having any locks – it was a terrible situation, and one that was very dangerous for the residents.

One thing that we tend to overlook is that the people who lived in Jerusalem must have already known that. After all, *they lived there!* They knew the sorry plight of their own city, *and yet they did nothing*. We see no sign that any of the rulers or priests of the city were crying out to God and pleading for His help. There is no evidence that any of the city's residents were trying to repair their own sections of the wall. The people who actually lived there were doing *nothing* about the problem.

The reason the wall got rebuilt was because someone from out of town, who didn't live there and who wasn't affected by the problem, risked his job and his very life to travel all the way to Jerusalem and fix the problem. Nehemiah was the catalyst God used to rebuild the wall – because apparently the city's actual residents couldn't be bothered to care.

Only after Nehemiah makes his speech, points out the problem, and explains that he has the king's support and resources, do the people agree that maybe it's time to do something about the problem:

Nehemiah 2:18: "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."

Now, with Nehemiah's leadership and support, the people will rise up and build.

This is not the only time that things worked out this way. The same thing happened when it came to rebuilding the Temple. The book of Ezra tells us that when the people began the rebuilding project, the enemies of God stepped in and managed to stop it. When that happened, the people stopped caring and went their own way – they just gave up. God had to send Haggai the prophet to prod them back into action:

Haggai 1:2: "Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.

3 Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying,

4 Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?

5 Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.

6 Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.

7 Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.

8 Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord.

9 Ye looked for much, and, lo it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

10 Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit."

Since the people had stopped caring about the Temple and cared only about their own lives, God actually cursed them. It took the curse of God and the rebuke of God's prophet in order to prod the nation into actually rebuilding the Temple. When it came time to rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, God had to send someone from a distant land to Jerusalem in order to make it happen, because once again the people who lived there couldn't be bothered to take action.

It seems there are times in history when God uses one man to do great things, because that one man is the only one who actually cares. God spared Noah and his family because Noah – and Noah alone – was righteous in a wicked world. God used Moses to deliver Israel because he cared about the plight of his people. God used Nehemiah to rebuild the wall because Nehemiah actually cared. In each of these cases God found the man whose heart was right, and that is the man God used to accomplish His purposes.

Our time is not so very different. We live at the very end of the Church Age. The book of Revelation tells us that our age is characterized by indifference:

Revelation 3:15: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.

16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see."

God is not a fan of indifference; in fact, He hates it. God despises the indifferent churches of our day, and threatens them with judgment. However, He gives us a promise. If we will change our ways and come to Him, He will come to us:

Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

This verse has been widely misunderstood. In the case of the modern church, Jesus is actually outside the door, trying to get inside. In other words, Jesus is *not* a part of what is going on. Instead He is outside, hoping that someone will open the door and let him in.

If someone does let him in, then Jesus promises to have fellowship *with that person*. The rest of the church might be lukewarm and spiritually dead, but if that person seeks after Jesus then they will find Him, and they will have fellowship with Him. Jesus is seeking people who have a heart after Him – people who refuse to give in to the indifference of their age and who seek after God. That is what we are called to do.