

## **Nehemiah: To Jerusalem**

**Nehemiah 1:11b–2:8**

By **Dr. Derek Thomas**

*The Lord's Day Evening  
July 27, 2008*

Now last Sunday evening we began (as we had finished the book of Ezra and moved into the book of Nehemiah)... we began to examine this first chapter. We are in the year 445 BC, and the Persian King Artaxerxes is in his palace in Susa. His cupbearer, the man in charge of insuring that his wine isn't poisoned and his food isn't poisoned, is Nehemiah. And Nehemiah, as you recall, has had a visit from a man by the name of Hanani, a brother. He may be a literal brother, a genetic brother. He may just be a brother in the Lord, but many commentators, because of something that is said elsewhere in chapter 7 of Nehemiah, think that this may well be his literal brother. And he and some others have come and brought news of events that have transpired since the close of Ezra and the beginning of Nehemiah. In that span — a decade or so or a little more, between the end of Ezra and the beginning of Nehemiah — something has happened that Scripture doesn't record. But the walls of Jerusalem...(the temple of course had been rebuilt and finished back in 516 BC, so it's been up and running for 70-80 years)...but the walls had not been rebuilt. The walls were still razed to the ground from the time of the sacking of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. For 150 years, the walls of the city had been in ruins.

But evidently news has come that the walls are in some state of disrepair and damage that has shocked Nehemiah. Now, the fact that they were damaged from the time of Nebuchadnezzar would not be a shock to him. They'd have been there for 150 years. So something has happened. And it looks as though the walls had begun to be rebuilt, but that Artaxerxes had issued a decree to stop it, to prevent it — perhaps because of the obvious. Why would they be building walls? Who were they defending the city against? The Persians, perhaps! And perhaps this was seen by Artaxerxes, and in some ways understandably, as a none too subtle attempt at a kind of military coup.

Nehemiah is the cupbearer. There are only certain things that he could do. It is not a nine-to-five job, you understand. Whenever the king ate — and it could be early in the morning or it could be at midnight — Nehemiah was expected to be there. I don't think there was a day off. He was a servant. Now, we saw last week

that in order to be the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes...it is staggering that Artaxerxes would choose, not a member of his own ethnic identity, but a Jew; a member of a race of people that he has conquered, and who would have every right to attempt to bring this king down. It tells us of the immense integrity, the character of Nehemiah that he had been chosen for this task.

Well, at the end of chapter 1 of Nehemiah we saw how Nehemiah had begun a vigil of prayer, and we are given a summary of that prayer. The prayer, as we'll see in a minute, lasted for upwards of at least three and possibly five months, depending on whether the dates are at the beginning or end of the month. It could be as much as five months. The prayer ended by asking God (verse 11),

“Let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name (1:11), and give success to Your servant today....”

Now a couple of things to notice before we read the rest of the chapter and go to chapter 2. Two things: one, Nehemiah was asking in this prayer that God would do something today. And the next day he would pray “today.” And the next day he would pray “today.” And on and on it went, asking each day that God would intervene. Nehemiah had to learn some patience, then, in how God answers prayer.

But notice that Nehemiah is asking in this prayer that God would not only do something about the situation in Jerusalem, but that He would use Nehemiah to do it: “Give success to Your servant today.” That's an amazing thing to pray. How in the world was Nehemiah going to get to Jerusalem? Even if he was gifted, even if he was qualified, even if he was the best man for the job — and perhaps Hanani and the others had said that he was — how would those circumstances ever be brought about that a servant to the Persian king would find himself a thousand miles away on a task that actually took twelve years? Perhaps Nehemiah didn't know the answer to that himself. Perhaps this is one of those prayers that I've certainly uttered, and I'm pretty sure you may also have uttered: “Lord, I'm not even sure what I'm asking for here, and I'm not even sure how You're going to answer this prayer, but this is what I want. This is how I see it. And You are sovereign.”

Well, let's pick up the prayer at the end of verse 11, and before we do so let's look to God in prayer now and ask for His blessing.

*Father, we thank You for the Scriptures, and thank You especially that every word of it You have given: You breathed it out. And we pray again, as we read the Scriptures tonight and as we study it together, that by Your Spirit You would instruct our hearts; that we might this evening not only be hearers of the word, but that truly we might be doers of it also. And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

At the end of verse 11, chapter 1:

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my father's graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father's graves, that I may rebuild it." And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

Amen. May God add His blessing to that reading of His holy, inerrant word.

Well, as we were saying, Nehemiah has been keeping this vigil of prayer. The summary of it is given in chapter 1—this prayer that looks to God and that extols God's majesty, that confesses the sins of the people of Israel, that asks God to remember His promises. And it's the sort of prayer that says in effect, 'Lord, You know, if You don't remember Your promises to Your people whom You have redeemed, You're going to look silly.' [I'm not just making that up!] Read the prayer. That's what Nehemiah is saying. He's turning God's promises back to Him and saying, 'Look, if You don't keep these promises it's going to look bad for You.'

I remember reading something in Thomas Brooks, the Puritan, and he was quoting one of the church fathers — Basil,<sup>1</sup> I think — who said in effect this: that we ought to pray in such a manner that we make God ashamed if He doesn't answer; throwing back God's promises to Him saying, 'Lord, You promised. Now fulfill Your promise. Otherwise, it's going to look bad for You, and it's going to

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Brooks. *The Secret Key of Heaven*. "Those that would be masters of their requests, must, like the importunate widow, press God so far as to put him to an holy blush, as I may say with reverence: they must with an holy impudence, as Basil speaks, make God ashamed to look them in the face, if he should deny the importunity of their souls."

look bad to all those around You, because they're going to say this God of the Jews, this God of Jerusalem, He doesn't keep His word.'

Well, five months — at least for three, and possibly five — Nehemiah has been praying this prayer, until suddenly in the month of Nisan (somewhere between the month of March and April of the following year, 444 BC) events come together in the providence of God. How would God answer this prayer of Nehemiah's? How in the world is it going to be possible for a servant, effectively a slave, to be released from his duties to the most powerful man in the world to be sent on a task that looks to all intents and purposes as though it's an act of insurrection? To defend the walls of Jerusalem against who, unless it's the Persians? How is God going to answer that prayer? Watch! And learn...the amazing providence of our God, yours and mine.

### **I. Nehemiah had to learn patience as he waited upon the Lord.**

The first thing I want us to see is that Nehemiah had to learn patience as he waited upon the Lord. You know the Psalms often say "I waited upon the Lord...I waited upon the Lord..." and for Nehemiah, when he prayed this prayer night and day saying "today," he was learning to wait.

You know, sometimes prayer can be an excuse for not doing something. Sometimes prayers are an excuse for not doing something. When the moral obligation is perfectly obvious, but we say, "Well, let's pray a little more" because we just don't want to do it, we fool ourselves that we're in some kind of quasi-spiritual mode of existence, waiting on God to say something to us and move us in some way, when what we need to do is perfectly obvious and plain. Sometimes prayer can be thought of as insufficient. Do you remember Naomi? You know, she had prayed after she had lost her husband and her two sons. She had prayed, you remember, that Ruth would find a husband. She'd also prayed that Orpah would find a husband...but she had prayed that these two daughters-in-law of hers would find husbands. And see, when Ruth came back, you remember, with news that she had met this man, a kinsman redeemer by the name of Boaz, and you could see the wheels spinning in Naomi's mind? She could not wait to try and run ahead of God's providence and find in her own hands and manipulation the answer to her prayer...sending Ruth, you remember, by midnight, perfumed, to where Boaz was lying, and to place herself, you know, underneath the edge of his blanket. (She had lost her mind!) But she was trying to answer her own prayer.

I'm not sure how much Nehemiah understood the way in which God would answer this prayer. It may be that he had planned it to some degree, that when the opportunity presents itself he would suddenly look sad. It begins by saying there was wine before him. Perhaps we're meant to understand that the king was in a relatively good mood. We're told in a parenthetical remark in verse 6 that the

queen was sitting beside him, and this could be a reference to the queen herself or it could be a reference to the queen mother. And it could be a reference to the chief of the king's harem. [And you may understand therefore why he would be in a particularly good mood. We won't go into it.] Perhaps he was waiting for that opportunity...you know: 'When the king is in a really good mood, I'll do something. I'll try and do what I can to try to provoke the king to ask me this question, and I'll have the answer.' Maybe. Maybe we're meant to see that.

And maybe not. Maybe not. Because at the end of verse 2, what actually transpires is the king says to him, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." The word *sadness* in Hebrew is a word that sounds exactly like the word *evil*, and the king isn't just saying "Why are you sad?" But the king may well have been saying "You're plotting something. There's some evil intent in your heart"—which helps us understand why at the end of verse 2 Nehemiah is "very much afraid."

Now you understand what's going on. There was a book of etiquette about how cupbearers should behave in the king's presence, and Rule No. 1 was "You never look sad." You don't want somebody who's in charge of your wine to make sure it isn't poisoned looking sad. You want somebody who looks happy. You want somebody who gives you an air of confidence that what you're about to drink isn't going to kill you. There are historical incidents of cupbearers who were summarily executed for doing less than this.

You see, I don't know whether Nehemiah realized that in order for God to answer this prayer he would be brought into the very edge of almost disaster; that God would put him in the most difficult circumstance imaginable in order to answer the prayer that Nehemiah has been praying. You can understand why Nehemiah has had to learn to be patient. Whether he had thought through and perhaps in a small measure instigated and precipitated the event, or, as I rather think, he didn't intend to look sad. The statement at the end of verse 1, "Now I had not been sad in his presence...." [And I know that some of you have the NIV and it says, 'I hadn't been sad *before* in his presence,' implying that he now was intending to look sad, but that's a mistranslation.] "Now I had not been sad in his presence." He didn't intend to be sad, but the king saw it because he couldn't help it...because the events in Jerusalem had so weighed him down that in the end his concern for the kingdom of God and the purposes of God were now beginning to show. And he suddenly finds himself in this extraordinarily difficult, tense, situation where his life is in danger.

## **II. Nehemiah prays by instinct because he is given to prayer.**

So the second thing that we see here is just the sheer instinct that Nehemiah has for prayer. When the king asks him in verse 4, "What are you requesting?" he's answered the king saying, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be

sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" and the king has said, 'Now what exactly are you saying? What exactly are you asking for?' And it's a tense moment. It's an incredibly tense moment.

What does Nehemiah do? "I prayed to the God of heaven." He has an instinct for prayer. Now, do you understand what's happening here? He's standing before the king. He may have a cup in his hand...he's about to hand it to the king, he's looking sad; the king has accused him perhaps of evil intent. And he says to the king, 'Can you wait a minute while I have a little prayer time?' and he bows his head and he begins in Hebrew to utter this prayer that you find... No! That's not what happened. There was no, I think, conscious moment between the king's asking and Nehemiah's answering. If Nehemiah had hesitated in answering the question it wouldn't have looked well for him.

So this is a prayer, but it's an arrow-like prayer. It's the kind of prayer you utter when you're on I-55 and somebody in an SUV has just cut you off! And you've got to swerve, you've got to do something, you've got a millisecond to do it, and you just throw up this prayer, "Lord, help me! Save me!" You haven't time for the Lord's Prayer here. You haven't time for Ezra's prayer in chapter 9. This is a few words: "Lord, help me now. Give me grace now. Thank You, Lord. Be near to me. I need You now like I've never needed You before." Perhaps even that's too many words.

You see, we think, you and I, that if we found ourselves in this circumstance that's what we would do. We would pray like that, consciously. "So I prayed to the Lord." But, my friends, we need to understand that the only reason Nehemiah had an instinct of prayer in a critical moment is because he had a life of prayer. It's because he was always praying. This statement about his instinct for prayer in chapter 2 and verse 4 is only true because in chapter 1 we have seen that for five months Nehemiah was a man of prayer. He was always praying...he was always praying.

Now let me turn that around. You see, if you're not always praying, if you don't have the pattern of disciplined prayer you cannot guarantee that in a moment of crisis your instinct is going to be one of prayer.

### **Application.**

Now let me say a couple of things by way of application, and the first is obvious:

Short prayers can be effective prayers. That's not an excuse for not having a disciplined life of prayer, you understand, but short prayers can be effective prayers. This is not the prayer of Abraham. This is not the prayer of Moses in the Bible. This is not Daniel's prayer. This is not one of Paul's prayers. We don't even

know what the prayer was, for all we can conjecture is that it couldn't have lasted for more than half a second, but it was a prayer that took flight...it had wings. It flew right into heaven into the ears of Almighty God and solicited an immediate response. Angels took that prayer, cleansed by the blood of Jesus, the Jesus foretold in the old covenant. And immediately — immediately! — a messenger was sent to answer that prayer

It says something about the necessity of prayer. Doesn't this underline that in everything by prayer and supplication we are to make our requests known unto God? In everything? In everything! You've been asked a question; you've got to answer this question in the right way, and you send up this arrow-like prayer. Maybe it's your boss asking you something, and you don't want to look...you know...stupid. And you send up this arrow-like prayer. For Nehemiah, his life is in danger. His very life is in danger, but he dare not answer, he dare not utter a word unless he is conscious that the Lord is with him.

You see, it shows.... You know we were thinking this morning of Mary and the alabaster flask of spikenard, that it showed her heart. It showed her heart. This shows Nehemiah's heart. If you want to know what Nehemiah's heart looks like, it looks like this. He was a man of prayer and he had an instinct of prayer because he had a life of prayer.

“Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged;  
Take it to the Lord in prayer.”

My friends, if we learn nothing else tonight, let's try and learn that lesson, that God would imprint in our hearts the very instinct of prayer. But the only way that that's going to happen is that He also gives us a burden for a life of prayer. Are you praying, friend? Are you praying? Do you speak to God? Do you talk to Him? Do you commune with Him?

You know, some of us talk to ourselves. You know, you walk along the corridor — I was doing it tonight. It was actually being recorded! I'd forgotten I had the thing on, and I'm walking down the corridor and I'm talking away to myself, and Jeremy can tell you what's on it. [You have to erase what I said!] I don't think it was anything bad. But that's the way we should live — talking to God every day, every moment of the day, no matter what we're doing...in our work, in surgery, driving a car, in the shopping mall, getting groceries, opportunities that present themselves where you have to speak — maybe to give a witness, a testimony, to be nice, to speak for Jesus: “Lord, help me now.” I can't say, “Wait a minute, stop the clock! I need ten minutes out here.” No. “Right now, I need Your help right here, right now.” Are you praying?

But the third thing — and it's a beautiful thing that we see of Nehemiah here — is

his carefulness to give God all the glory. You know, as we were seeing in Ezra, and we see it here in Nehemiah, this story of course is being written after the fact. It's been written so it appears to be from Nehemiah's diary, his memoirs. He's thinking back, reflecting on that moment. It's a moment you never forget. He was standing before King Artaxerxes. And do you know what he said? The audacity of what he said? What did he say?

He wants first of all "...letters to be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River." So that when he gets beyond the river and into Judah, and the satraps, the underlings of King Artaxerxes that he would have to report to as an official of King Artaxerxes. You see, he wants everything. He doesn't just want to be sent to Jerusalem; he wants to be sent to Jerusalem as the governor of King Artaxerxes. Did you notice...[I love this! I've been reading this all week!]...the audacity of Nehemiah to say that he wants letters not only for the governors, but also for Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest? He's going to need wood to build the twelve gates of the city. He's going to need lots of wood — gates for the fortress of the temple. The temple had been built, but the walls surrounding the temple hadn't been built. "And..." [and you've got to smile...you've got to smile here] "for the house that I shall occupy." I love that! You know, "in for a penny, in for a pound!" You know, "I'm on a roll now, so I might as well ask for everything." [*Laughter*] "I know my life's in danger, but I'm going to be your representative. I need a house. I need the governor's house. We need to build it. And I need letters to the keeper of the king's forest." [Isn't that a beautiful title, by the way? I'd love to have that title: The Keeper of the King's Forest!]

What audaciousness! What courage, in some ways; what bravery; what audacity. But when he's writing his memoirs and he's thinking back and he's recording this — and God is in this and it becomes part of Holy Scripture — do you notice how he puts it? "The king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me." It was all of God. It was all of God. 'I could have been killed. It could have all been over in a moment, in a heartbeat. And you know, it was fifty percent me and fifty percent God [as a good Arminian would say]'. But Nehemiah says, no, it was all the hand of my God. God was in it.

Some of you have found yourselves in incredibly difficult circumstances, providences that are so intricate that it would take you an hour or two to relate.

God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.  
Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill,  
He treasures up His bright designs  
And works His sovereign will.



God was in it. You want to tell me what happened in your life, and you say, 'Look. At the end of the day — actually, at the beginning of the day, in the middle of the day, and the end of the day — it was all God. God did that. The Lord did it.'

Yes, Nehemiah was the one who spoke. Nehemiah was the one who prayed. But you know, when he comes to write the story, "It was the good hand of God that was upon me." That's how you live, my friends. That's how you live. That's how you go about facing this week: in the sure and absolute certainty that no matter what circumstance you find yourselves in, God's hand is there. And in this instance, it was the "good hand of God." And the providence was good, and the providence was sweet; but sometimes the providence isn't good, and sometimes the providence isn't sweet. It works together for my good, but the providence itself is bitter.

But still it is from my Lord. Still it is from my blessed Jesus. And teach *me...teach me the perspective that Nehemiah has to see everything in the light of the absolute sovereignty of my Lord who loves me and cares for me.*

He was a *Shorter Catechism* man:

"What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

And Nehemiah does both. He'll talk about joy — we'll come to that in a few weeks. But he was careful to give God all the glory.

Do you know, my friends? If you don't do that it turns you into the equivalent of a wrinkled prune. If you're not careful to give God all the glory, it turns you in upon yourself and you become something that isn't attractive and isn't pleasant.

Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank You now for the Scriptures, and thank You for this man Nehemiah, but we want to thank You. We want to thank You for every evidence in our own lives of Your mighty hand at work weaving, planning, contributing, preventing, bringing to pass Your perfect will. Help us to be such Christians as give You all the glory, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

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