

Sept 27, 2009/ Nehemiah 1-2 (ESV¹)

we're going to look this morning at the first two chapters of the book of Nehemiah ... as the story opens, it's 445 or 446 BC ... about 12-13 years after the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem and 60 years after the rededication of the temple accomplished under the prophecy of Haggai and Zechariah ... Nehemiah is another of the Jewish exiles in Babylon whose families had remained and not been part of any of the expeditions to Jerusalem ... Artaxerxes I (who was Persian Emperor from 465-424 BC) is on the Persian throne ... most Bible scholars think that the immediate historical backdrop to the passage is in **Ezra 4:6-23** ... that passage is a kind of parenthesis in the main storyline of **Ezra 4**, giving a second example of the kind of opposition met by the returned exiles ... the main story there is opposition to the initial attempts to rebuild the temple when the first wave of Jews returned under the authority of the decree of Cyrus in 586 BC ... out of chronological order there, are interjected these details from the time of Artaxerxes ...

Ezr 4:6 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ezr 4:7 In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated.

Ezr 4:8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:

Ezr 4:9 Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites,

Ezr 4:10 and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River.

Ezr 4:11 (This is a copy of the letter that they sent.) "To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now

Ezr 4:12 be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.

Ezr 4:13 Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.

Ezr 4:14 Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king,

Ezr 4:15 in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste.

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Ezr 4:16 We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River."

Ezr 4:17 The king sent an answer: "To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now

Ezr 4:18 the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me.

Ezr 4:19 And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it.

Ezr 4:20 And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid.

Ezr 4:21 Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me.

Ezr 4:22 And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?"

Ezr 4:23 Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.

that is, it seems that the Jews had made an attempt to rebuild the city walls and that the neighbors had trumped up charges against them and had gotten Artaxerxes to issue a stop work order ... notice that force had been used to bring the restoration to a halt ... this then, is the apparent backdrop to Nehemiah ...

Neh 1:1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital,

Neh 1:2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

Neh 1:3 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

this is more than a 140-year-old report of what Nebuchadnezzar did in 586 BC ... the distress here is that the recent attempt to rebuild the wall has not only been stopped, but what had been accomplished had been destroyed by the overzealous local officials ... all this protected (if not ordered by) the proclamation of Artaxerxes ... and that leaves the people of God in a mess ... if there is no security, there can be no commerce or steady agriculture ... no walls, nothing but a very tentative life in fear of whatever marauder might decide to swoop in and take whatever had been worked for ...

Neh 1:4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah had hoped and presumed that all was going well in Jerusalem ... Ezra had been sent back there to teach God's Law and see that it was obeyed ... the temple was functioning ... presumably the Jews had again begun to prosper in the land given to them by God ... and now this report much to the contrary ... Nehemiah doesn't even feel like eating and is driven to pray to the God of the universe ... this is his habitual reaction ... he calls out to God ... and he begins by rehearsing who God is ...

Neh 1:5 And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,

God is both all powerful and completely trustworthy ... and on that basis, Nehemiah dares to ask that God consider the situation of Jerusalem ... he speaks in Susa, to the God of all that is on His heavenly throne, about his fellow countrymen in Jerusalem ... he speaks to God who is awesome/holy and at the same time compassionate and absolutely faithful to His people ...

Neh 1:6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

Neh 1:7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

Nehemiah confesses that while God is righteous and completely trustworthy, men are neither ... in Biblical fashion, Nehemiah includes himself in the prayer ... the nation's guilt is his guilt ... in and of ourselves, none of us is has any claim to right standing with God ... that is true for us, it was true for Nehemiah ...

Neh 1:8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,

Neh 1:9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'

Nehemiah is acutely conscious that just what God promised Moses has come to pass ... his nation's unfaithfulness to God has brought about their exile and scattering among the nations ... but Nehemiah also sees the return to Jerusalem as God's doing, and part of His promise to Moses to restore the people if they would repent ... I will scatter, I will gather ... and in particular that the people would be gathered to Jerusalem, the place where God had allowed them to build a temple to His name ... Nehemiah is conscious of the contrast between what Jerusalem was supposed to be, and its present state ... he may well have been thinking of OT passages like

Psa 48:1 Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain,

Psa 48:2 beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.

so Nehemiah appeals to God for mercy ... and he does so in the same terms that Moses appealed to God for mercy on the people at Sinai, when they made and worshiped the golden calf ... Nehemiah prays

Neh 1:10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power

and by your strong hand.

Moses's words were

Deu 9:27 Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness or their sin,

Deu 9:28 lest the land from which you brought us say, "Because the LORD was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness."

Deu 9:29 For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm.'

in both Nehemiah's prayer and in Moses' prayer, it is the honor of God that is primary ... the real scandal of Jerusalem standing in disarray is the dishonor it brings to God ... Nehemiah prays for success as he purposes to do what he can to change the sad situation ...

Neh 1:11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." Now I was cupbearer to the king.

we find out for the first time that Nehemiah has a trusted position at the Persian court ... he's the guy who chooses the king's drink and tastes it before him to verify that it is not poisoned ... such fellows had to be ones the king could rely on completely ... and Nehemiah was such a person ... Nehemiah prays for success "today" in the sight of "this man" ...

Neh 2:1 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.

this is 4 months after Nehemiah first heard from his brother ... servants were not to show unhappiness before an ancient king ... the expectation was that they discharge their duties cheerfully ... in fact, to do otherwise could be considered disloyalty and be reason for losing their positions or even their lives ... Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem has placed his life in jeopardy ...

Neh 2:2 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.

Neh 2:3 I said to the king, "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?"

remember that it is this king that not too long before had issued the stop work order for the Jerusalem wall ... Nehemiah doesn't start by naming Jerusalem ... he begins by appealing to the king on a personal basis ... the king knows his character and work, and trusts him and apparently has affection for him ... the place to begin is there, not with an immediate request for a reversal of a royal decision ...

Neh 2:4 Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

before speaking to the king, Nehemiah instinctively speaks to Sovereign of the Universe ... then he speaks to the earthly king ...

Neh 2:5 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 fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."

when Nehemiah gets to his request for Jerusalem, it is important that the decree Artaxerxes had made gave him some room to reverse himself ...

Ezr 4:21 Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and *that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me.*

Neh 2:6 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.

Neh 2:7 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,

Neh 2:8 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.

note two things about these verses ... first, it is clear that Nehemiah had thought this whole thing out very clearly ... he knew that he would have at most one chance to make his request, and when the time came, he was ready ... second, Nehemiah knew that though he was standing before the most important king on earth, firstly and primarily he was standing before the King of the Universe ... it was God's doing that his requests were granted ... it was God's hand that protected him and moved Artaxerxes to act on behalf of Jerusalem ... **And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.**

Neh 2:9 Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

Neh 2:10 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

Sanballat is thought to have been the governor of Samaria at this time ... Nehemiah was appointed governor of Judah ... the motivation of these local guys is purely political ... they don't care about the wellbeing of the Jewish people or the Jewish faith ... they are worried about their power in the region being diminished ...

Neh 2:11 So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days.

Neh 2:12 Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode.

Nehemiah didn't let anyone in on his plans until he knew firsthand what the physical obstacles were going to be ... there was no point in facing the protestations of "it can't be done" until he knew particulars of the situation ... so he measures the problem without letting either friends or foes know his intentions ... BTW, apparently the correct tense of "put" here is present ... God keeps on putting into Nehemiah's heart ...

Neh 2:13 I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by

fire.

Neh 2:14 Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass.

Neh 2:15 Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

Neh 2:16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

Neh 2:17 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision."

when Nehemiah has a complete picture of the situation, he calls the leaders together and puts before them the burden he has for the restoration of Jerusalem ... their situation is a disgrace to the God they serve ... this is supposed to be the capital city of God's people and the home of His temple ... it's time to make it again more than a poorly protected frontier outpost ... the basis on which Nehemiah can encourage these folks that the task is doable is the evidence of God's hand in the whole thing ... how else could he have won the reversal of the royal decree and been granted the necessary authority and materials to do the job?

...

Neh 2:18 And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

Neh 2:19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"

these guys have no cards to play, but that doesn't stop them from trying to bluff the Jews into abandoning their God-ordained task ... Nehemiah's response is a wonderful one ... true enough he's standing with rubble all around him, some of it left from the Babylonian destruction, some from the more recent destruction of the recent attempt to rebuild the wall ... but in reliance upon God, he can see the project done, the city healthy and living up to its calling as God's city ... because of their indifference to God's honor, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, on the other hand, have no place in the city that Nehemiah sees by faith ...

Neh 2:20 Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."