

The Preparing Cupbearer

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[0:00] Last week we finished Nehemiah chapter 1 by looking at the longest recorded prayer by Nehemiah.

! Nehemiah prayed because he was distraught by the conditions of Jerusalem.! Nehemiah next acknowledged that both he and the people had sinned against God.

Verse 1-7 said, We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which you commanded your servant Moses.

Nehemiah next remembered God's promises. Through Moses, God promised judgment if the Israelites disobeyed, but he promised restoration if the nation repented.

We saw that in verses 8 and 9 of chapter 1. 1-8 and 9 said, Nehemiah saw in the promise of judgment, just as he saw in the promise of restoration, that God keeps his word.

[1:41] As he was praying, Nehemiah began to realize God's plan to use him to lead the restoration effort. By the time we got to verse 11, we saw Nehemiah asking God for favor in the sight of this man, as he called him.

Verse 11 says, O Lord, I pray, please let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who desire to fear your name.

And let your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. You'll remember from last week that this man in this prayer is King Artaxerxes, who is the king that Nehemiah served as the cupbearer.

After focusing so much on the greatness of God in his prayer, the king's greatness faded into nothing more than this man. Throughout the first two lessons, we've talked about how Nehemiah shows us the importance of doing three things.

He shows us to pray, he shows us to plan, and he shows us to persevere. We've already seen how Nehemiah was the praying cupbearer. Tonight, we're going to cover verses 1 through 10 of chapter 2.

[2:53] And in those verses, we're going to see that Nehemiah was also the preparing cupbearer. Nehemiah's preparations show us the value of taking time to plan. When Nehemiah had prayed for the relief of his countrymen, he didn't sit still and say, Let God now do the work because I have nothing else to do.

Instead, he set himself to do what he could to resolve the problem. And our prayers need to be followed with our serious actions, else we mock God by expecting him to do everything.

Let's go ahead and read the first 10 verses of chapter 2, and then we'll dig into them in more detail. They say, And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king.

Now I had never been sad in his presence before. Therefore the king said to me, Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.

So I became dreadfully afraid, and said to the king, May the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my father's tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?

[4:10] Then the king said to me, What do you request? 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, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father's tombs, that I may rebuild it.

Then the king said to me, The queen also sitting beside him, How long will your journey be? And when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a time.

Furthermore, I said to the king, If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the river, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah.

And a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel, which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy.

And the king granted them to me, according to the good hand of my God upon me. Then I went to the governors in the region beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters.

[5:19] Now the king had set captains of the army and horsemen with me. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.

So, we're going to break the passage tonight into five sections. And in verse 1, in the first part of verse 2, we see the perplexed ruler.

So once again, we see the perplexed ruler. The first part of chapter, the first part of verse 2 in chapter 2 and all of verse 1 say this, The month of Nisan spans our parts of March and April.

So four months had passed since Nehemiah received news from Jerusalem. He'd been praying and planning during those four months so that he would be ready when the opportunity arose.

And his sorrow over the conditions in Judah and Jerusalem was proven great by the fact that he was sad before the king. Being sad before the king was very risky, but he was so overcome by sorrow that Nehemiah was unable to conceal his sadness from his face.

[6:53] We can see that he had tried to be cheerful before the king because the king said that he had never been sad in his presence before. So that tells us just how much that Nehemiah worked to try to conceal his sadness, but his sorrow was too great to be hidden.

His sadness is also evidenced by the great burden that he had for God's work of correcting the problems in Judah and Jerusalem. It was too great to conceal continually.

Such a burden is necessary if somebody is to serve God well. Few people today have a strong burden for God's work, and that's one of the reasons why so many churches do so little for God.

We learn some things about the king here, too. We can see that he had a keen discerning eye regarding Nehemiah's sadness. He not only noticed his sad countenance, but he discerned correctly what it was.

He knew that it was sadness rather than sickness. So the king's inquiry about the sadness showed perception, and it also showed a surprising bit of compassion.

[7:58] In that day, it was unusual to get sympathy from royalty, and it was very uncommon for kings to really look that way toward their subjects. We even see today that too often high officials are too concerned about themselves to be genuinely concerned about the troubles of others.

But we can tell from this that Artaxerxes seems to be genuinely concerned. And Nehemiah's answer to the question is the second section of the lesson.

In verses 2b and 3, we see the petrified reply. Once again, that's the petrified reply. Those verses say, So I became dreadfully afraid and said to the king, May the king live forever.

Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my father's tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire? Let's think a little bit about why Nehemiah became so afraid.

Persian rulers especially didn't like their subordinates to be gloomy in their presence. The king always wanted his subjects to be happy because happiness reflected the well-being brought about by the king's administrative prowess.

[9:18] So in other words, if you were sad, the king might think you were insulting him by saying he wasn't doing his job well enough to make you happy. So Nehemiah feared that either his countenance, his explanation, or his request would anger the king and might lead to his death.

It's kind of appropriate that the answer starts in 2b because Nehemiah was afraid that the answer would decide whether he was to be or not to be. That one wasn't in the notes.

That was thrown in for free, as Tom would say. That was free to us, right? Yes. Has it been recorded? Unfortunately, yes. But Nehemiah wanted to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls, and it was this same king who earlier had stopped the work on rebuilding the walls.

Nehemiah's plan meant asking him to reverse his own policy. In each of the first two lessons, we've mentioned how Artaxerxes had stopped a previous attempt to rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

Let's take a moment and look at that in more detail. So turn back one book in your Bible and look at Ezra chapter 4. We'll actually look at verses 11 through 16 first in Ezra chapter 4.

[10:39] Ezra 4, 11 through 16 record the letter to King Artaxerxes about the previous rebuilding effort. Here are what those verses say. This is a copy of the letter that they sent him to King

Artaxerxes from your servants, the men of the region beyond the river, and so forth.

Let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem and are building the rebellious and evil city and are finishing its walls and repairing its foundations.

Let it be known to the king that if this city is built and the walls completed, they will not pay tax, tribute, or custom, and the king's treasury will be diminished.

Now because we receive support from the palace, it was not proper for us to see the king's dishonor. Therefore we have sent and inform the king that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers, and you will find in the book of the records and know that this city is a rebellious city, harmful to kings and provinces, and that they have incited sedition within the city in former times, for which cause this city was destroyed.

We inform the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, the result will be that you will no longer have dominion beyond the river. Were they really concerned about the king's best interest there?

[12:07] Of course they were. They do a pretty good job, though, of getting their point across because the people who convinced the king to stop the previous rebuilding effort appealed to the king's pride and also to the king's pocketbook to get their own way.

They said he would no longer have dominion over the city, and they warned him that the city wouldn't pay tribute to him anymore. Continuing on in Ezra chapter 4, we see that their reply worked and their ploy worked.

Look at the king's response in verses 17 through 22 of Ezra 4. Starting with verse 17, it says, The king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, to the rest of the companions who dwell in Samaria, and to the remainder beyond the river, peace, and so forth.

I kind of like that. He didn't waste time on the greeting. He was getting right into what he wanted to say. Verse 18 says, The letter which you sent to us has been clearly read before me, and I gave the command, and a search has been made, and it was found that this city in former times has revolted against kings, and rebellion and sedition have been fostered in it.

There have also been mighty kings over Jerusalem who have ruled over all the region beyond the river, and tax, tribute, and custom were paid to them. In other words, were paid to them and not me.

[13:32] Now give the command to make these men cease, that this city may not be built until the command is given by me. Take heed now that you do not fail to do this.

Why should damage increase to the hurt of the kings? Reading these letters, we get even more of a sense why Nehemiah was so afraid. In effect, Nehemiah was asking the king to admit that he had made a mistake earlier.

Going back to Nehemiah 2.3, look at Nehemiah's response one more time. Nehemiah said, May the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my father's tombs, lies waste and its gates are burned with fire?

The first thing we see from Nehemiah's reply is loyalty to the king. The story doesn't make a great point about Nehemiah's loyalty, but Nehemiah's whole demeanor, as well as his success, presupposes it.

When the king asked why Nehemiah's face looked so sad, and he replied with the expected court greeting, we get the sense that it wasn't hypocrisy or even formality. Nehemiah genuinely seems to have had the king's best interest at heart.

[14:48] The second thing we see about Nehemiah's reply is tact. When the king asked why he was sad, Nehemiah answered with a disarming question. It would have been tempting to say, you want to know why I'm sad?

I'll tell you why I'm sad. Thirteen years ago, you made a mistake, and you told the people to stop building the wall. And so, he could just tell them that as soon as you heard from the governors of the region, and they appealed to you to have the work stopped, you stopped it, so it's all your fault. And you did that without even waiting to hear the other side of the story. So, he could have also told them that he just needs to see that those governors were simply jealous and were afraid that a revitalized Jerusalem would be detrimental to their interest.

But instead of this, he says, why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my father's tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire? So, this question, instead of making Artaxerxes defensive, actually won him over to Nehemiah's side.

The king understood that Nehemiah had reason to be sad, and he wanted to help him. Nehemiah presented his desire as a personal matter, rather than a political one.

[16:02] He knew that what he wanted would require the reversal of Artaxerxes' former public policy, and he understood that any request to fortify a city would be suspicious. He didn't treat this as a political issue at all.

He treated it as a matter of personal grief, which the king, who was certainly proud of his own city, and who also had his own ancestors, would understand. Although Nehemiah asked for permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, notice that he no longer mentioned Jerusalem, or he nowhere mentioned Jerusalem by name.

He referred to it as the place of my father's tombs. Dale Carnegie once said, if you want to gather honey, don't kick over the beehive. And so Nehemiah was very careful to ask for what he wanted, but he wasn't unnecessarily kicking the beehive either.

And that's a good lesson for us, too. You need to make your request direct, that you don't always need to be so direct that you might turn the person off by it. Nehemiah had a good answer ready for the king, and that's commendable.

It shows the diligent preparation that had accompanied his praying. So we've talked about the perplexed ruler, and we've looked in detail at the petrified response.

[17:17] In verses 4-6, we see the prayerful request. The prayerful request. Then the king said to me, What do you request?

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, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father's tombs, that I may rebuild it.

Then the king said to me, the queen also sitting beside him, How long will your journey be, and when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a time.

The king asked Nehemiah what he wanted, and so Nehemiah realized after months of prayer that the decisive moment had arrived, and he's ready to speak. Between the king's question and Nehemiah's answer, we see that Nehemiah breathed the brief prayer to God.

This short prayer, whatever its words, was built on his praying for four months. No doubt he asked for wisdom in stating his request properly, and no doubt he asked for a favorable reply from the king.

[18:27] We can notice a few things about this prayer. First, the prayer was spontaneous. So the prayer was spontaneous. As we saw in chapter one, Nehemiah was a man given to much prayer, and because of that, he could pray instantly in any circumstance.

The prayer also was short, and this is a good reminder for us that prayers don't have to be long to be profitable. Short prayers, but effective prayers, are found throughout scripture.

And finally, the prayer was silent. We don't have to pray out loud in order to legitimize our prayers. Praying out loud often helps us gather our thoughts and keep our attention when praying, but silent praying can be just as effective, because when the heart is right, a silent prayer gets God's attention just as easily as an audible prayer.

Nehemiah was well prepared to answer the king's question about the request. He'd studied the problem well and had sought God in prayer both earlier and right at the moment when he made the request of the king, so he was ready to make a very wise request when asked by the king to do so. The delay in answering the prayer gave Nehemiah time to adequately prepare for the answering of his prayer. And so we learned that in the time that we saw in chapter 1 to now, he'd used that time to do just that.

[19:54] He'd prepared so that he was ready to give the king a proper answer when he finally was asked. People who pray but don't prepare are not earnest in their prayers.

And the first words of Nehemiah's answer illustrate how well Nehemiah had prepared. By prefacing his request with the statement, if it pleases the king, Nehemiah preserved Artaxerxes' superiority.

The king didn't feel threatened because Nehemiah was inviting him to make the decision.

Nehemiah was suggesting that the king take the initiative. His whole attitude showed Artaxerxes that Nehemiah was loyal to the king.

Once he'd drawn the king in, though, he spoke boldly, asking for permission to leave the king's palace to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. Again, Nehemiah mentioned his father's tombs.

Though this wasn't his principal concern, it must have been something he thought would be important to the king. In responding to Nehemiah's request, the king might have had Nehemiah executed on the spot, or he might have dismissed Nehemiah with a laugh.

[21:04] But his questions implied that the request was already granted. The king demands only that Nehemiah commit to a date when he'll return to Susa. Nehemiah. We see more evidence of Nehemiah's careful planning in the next section of the lesson.

In verses 7 and 8, Nehemiah asked for the practical resources. The practical resources. Here are verses 7 and 8 again.

Nehemiah goes on, furthermore, I said to the king, if it pleases the king, once again he's letting the king make the final decision, if it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the river, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy. And the king granted them to me, according to the good hand of my God upon me. The fact that Nehemiah responded quickly to the king's request for specific details indicates just how much he'd been planning the trip.

Nehemiah had a single fixed goal. He wanted to rebuild Jerusalem, and Nehemiah had worked out how he was going to achieve it. If he hadn't thought the matter through carefully, his conversation with the king might have ended with permission for him to go to Jerusalem, but he would have been stopped by the governors of the region.

[22:42] If he'd asked for letters of passage, and therefore been able to get to his destination, but hadn't secured the necessary materials, he would have arrived without anything to build with.

So you can see he thought the whole thing out, and when he finally got the opportunity, he very concisely said what he wanted. A few months earlier, when Nehemiah realized that God intended him to be part of the answer to his own prayers, he began anticipating his needs, and he knew of only one person who had the resources he needed to rebuild the city, and that, of course, was King Artaxerxes himself.

Nehemiah was also aware of the obstacles that might prevent the successful completion of his assignment. He knew that before he could begin rebuilding the city, he must have safe passage through the different provinces.

He also was aware of the dislike of the different governors for the Jews, and he knew that they and their subordinate officials would try to interrupt his journey and hinder his work unless he had authoritative credentials.

So he needed the king's seal for that. Having done his homework well, Nehemiah is aware of his needs. He therefore lists his request, and once again he says, if it pleases the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the river, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah.

[24:08] Obtaining this kind of authorization from Artaxerxes' good business policy, because it shows proper foresight, the credentials would place his work squarely under the protection of the king himself.

The end of verse 8 tells us that the king granted Nehemiah's request. Verse 6 told us that the king was pleased to grant Nehemiah's request to go to Jerusalem. Because the king also granted Nehemiah's request for the practical resources, we can safely assume that the king was pleased to give the resources too.

We already have discussed how Persian kings rule, Artaxerxes did only what he wanted to do. But still, Artaxerxes' pleasure at doing what Nehemiah asked is nothing short of amazing.

God was working in the heart of the king. Based upon verse 9, the king granted Nehemiah even more than Nehemiah requested. Verse 9 says, Then I went to the governors in the region beyond the river and gave them the king's letters.

Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. Nowhere did we see Nehemiah ask for an armed escort, but the king gave him one. The king also set Nehemiah on the same level as the other governors.

[25:28] When we get to chapter 5, we'll see from verse 14 of chapter 5 that the king made Nehemiah governor of Judah. So he not only gave him an armed escort, he made him equal to the other governors that he would have to pass through.

Just pause for a minute and consider everything that Nehemiah had received from the king. The granting of the request included giving Nehemiah permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, appointing Nehemiah as governor of the province of Judah, providing all of the supplies which Nehemiah requested, and of course allowing an extended leave of absence from his posts in the royal court, and sending the armed escort.

The king was so liberal in granting the request that he even let Nehemiah set the time for how long he'd be gone. The king's response is an illustration of how God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.

And of course that's a paraphrase of Ephesians 3.20. God worked mightily in Artaxerxes' heart to grant Nehemiah his request, but remember that Nehemiah had served the king with impeccable character and faithfulness which provided ample grounds for the king to provide favor to Nehemiah by granting him his request.

God didn't have to work in a heart that was not amiable towards Nehemiah. The king was already predisposed based upon Nehemiah's conduct. So Nehemiah found favor with Artaxerxes partially because there was in his very countenance that which the monarch delighted to look upon.

[27 : 10] R.A. Redford said we should recommend religion, meaning the gospel, by transparent honesty, cheerfulness, and unselfishness. If we think that God is going to work mightily for us even if we lack diligence, dedication, faithfulness, and other important attributes of character, we had better think again.

So once again, if we think God is going to work mightily for us even though we lack diligence, dedication, faithfulness, and other important attributes of character, we had better think again. Throughout the Nehemiah study thus far, we've taken time to consider the providence of God in these events. We intentionally skip part of verse 8 until now.

The last sentence of verse 8 shows why Nehemiah knew that the king had granted his request. Nehemiah said, And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me. Nehemiah was careful to give thanks and recognition to where it was chiefly due. He realized it was God who was behind all the blessings he received from King Artaxerxes.

[28 : 22] The king was only an agent. Proper expression of appreciation would be made to the king by Nehemiah, but here the scripture records Nehemiah's gratitude to the king of kings, the God who made it all possible.

One of the biggest illustrations of God's providence in this section is how God orchestrated events so that Artaxerxes would now see value in having the wall rebuilt. Not only that, but the king was willing to do without his trusted cupbearer while the work was being done.

Allowing Nehemiah to go to Judah will mean a great personal loss for Artaxerxes. So why do you think the king would allow such a valuable employee to be gone from court for such a long period of time, especially when Nehemiah wanted to do something that the king had previously prohibited? Well, from Artaxerxes' point of view, the answer likely had something to do with the changing political climate. The satrap, or vishwari, which is another governor, another word for governor, of Syria, named Megabesus, had headed a revolt against Artaxerxes.

Megabesus had been forced into submission. Artaxerxes distrusted him, but for political reasons, Artaxerxes let him stay in office. So it suited Artaxerxes' purpose to have someone of Nehemiah's loyalty separating Syria from Egypt.

[29 : 48] With Nehemiah in Jerusalem, alliances between Syria and Egypt would be more difficult to form. So it was actually better for the king to have a trusted advisor in Nehemiah away from him and keeping the two forces that were potentially against him separated than it was for the king to have Nehemiah still working as his cupbearer.

That's another illustration of how Nehemiah's character and loyalty played into the king's decision to let the rebuilding start again. It also shows how God providentially ordered events, yet Artaxerxes only did what he knew to be best for him.

Having done so much to prepare himself for this interview with the king, we might expect that Nehemiah would congratulate himself on his success.

Instead, Nehemiah wrote, And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me. His dependence on the Lord is real. You can see that his humility is genuine.

His example reminds us never to boast of the things God does through us as if we had accomplished them on our own. We'll look at one more verse tonight.

[31:03] That verse is more of a teaser of things to come. Things are going very well for Nehemiah now, but in verse 10, we learn that opposition is coming.

In verse 10, we get introduced to the perturbed rascals. The perturbed rascals. I'm not so much a slave to alliteration, but when the first four fit, I decided I might as well make the fifth one fit as well. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel. Most likely, these men were probably behind the opposition that we read about in Ezra chapter 4, which had previously stopped the work in Jerusalem.

Sanballat served as governor of Samaria, and because Horoniam was a town in Moab, he was probably a Moabite. Tobiah the Ammonite official was likely governor of Ammon, but he might have been an Ammonite official under Sanballat's authority.

Tobiah is a Jewish name and not Ammonite, but the Tobiah family was to have influence in Ammon for a long time. So these district leaders were of Samaritan factions to the north and east, and they lost any recourse to prevent Judah from rebuilding because God's people were now authorized to fortify their settlement against attack.

[32:32] To overtly attack the Jews would then be to oppose the Persian king. We see the same thing today, don't we? Today, some are disturbed when God blesses his work, but the books of Ezra and Nehemiah remind us that we should not fear that the work of God is dependent upon human attitude.

We're involved in spiritual conflict of cosmic proportions, but God's armor is available and his victory is assured, and we can see throughout Nehemiah how God is orchestrating events to get around the opposition.

God works in human affairs to accomplish his purpose, and what had begun form a few months earlier as an impossibility was now beginning to appear possible. As we've talked about, the keys were prayer, planning, and perseverance.

Prayer is a deliberate identification with God and his purpose. Christians everywhere bear testimony to the efficacy of prayer. I put this quote in your handout as well.

Charles Trumbull stated, prayer is releasing the energies of God. Prayer is asking God to do what we cannot do. We see that Nehemiah was a man of prayer.

[33:51] We also see that Nehemiah was an astute student of human nature. He prepared himself well. He was familiar with the king's plans and his ambitions, and he also was familiar with the king's problems and his anxieties.

He used all of those things to get what he wanted from the king, and his sensitivity to Artaxerxes helped him as he laid his plan before the king. His approach highlighted the importance of loyalty and tact, along with the need for advanced preparation.

It also highlighted the importance of avoiding any unnecessary polarization as the best way to preserve his boss's authority. A knowledge of human nature will also lead us to be cautious.

We can't trust everybody that we meet. Jealousy and rivalry are all around us. But when we take time to take on a new assignment, we should ask for the public clarification of our role so that others around us will not try to hinder us from carrying out the mandate that's been given to us.

And, of course, we've already talked about how we see perseverance. Nehemiah didn't stop until the king had granted his total request. He could have stopped with just his initial request, but he continued with his petition until all his needs had been met.

[35:13] So we saw in Nehemiah how to emphasize the need for praying, the need for planning, and the need for persevering. But we also saw in Nehemiah tonight that we also should humbly recognize the God who makes God's providence possible.

Without knowing it, King Artaxerxes was a living illustration of Proverbs 21.1. Proverbs 21.1 says, The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord.

Like the rivers of water, he turns it wherever he wishes. So once again, the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. Like the rivers of water, he turns it wherever he wishes.

Let's go ahead and close with the word of prayer. Father, we thank you for the reminder tonight of the importance of planning and the importance for preparing.

We also thank you, though, for the reminder of your providence and how we should always recognize that you are behind the ultimate outcome of what we do.

[36:18] Let us always remember that everything we do is accomplished through you because of you. And let us always do it for your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.