

February 21

Scriptures: Read Nehemiah 1 & 2

Key Verse: "... The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build..." (Nehemiah 2:20)

Overview

God had providentially placed Nehemiah in an influential and sensitive position as the cup-bearer of Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. To attain such a position, Nehemiah had to be a loyal and trustworthy official. Since his duty was to taste the wine before it was served, he would have had regular access to the king. Nehemiah lived in Shushan, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire, and he resided in the king's winter palace. Although Nehemiah was born during the Israelite captivity and had always lived in a foreign land, his heart was in Jerusalem, the home city of his forefathers (cf. 2:3). He had an honoured position and was doing quite well for himself, yet he was unselfish and sincerely concerned about the well-being of his brethren in Jerusalem (thus his question, 1:2). He was moved with heart-felt compassion and grief to hear of their distress and the broken condition of his ancestral city, the former glorious capital of Judah, the site of God's Temple.

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Nehemiah decided to take action. He was a practical and intelligent man with a vision and a burning desire to glorify the Lord. By restoring the ruined city of Jerusalem, where the Lord had chosen to put His name, he would be bringing glory to the Lord. His motivation was, firstly, his love for God and desire to do His will, and secondly, his love for his brethren in Jerusalem. Nehemiah's first reaction to this grievous situation was to go to the Lord in prayer, accompanied by fasting. With humility and brokenness, his intercessory prayer recognized that God was almighty and faithful to the covenant, even though the people were unfaithful. He confessed the sin of the people and sought the Lord on their behalf, reminding Him that they are His own special people and that He had promised to hear the prayers of the faithful. Finally, the crux of his prayer was that God would grant him favour in the sight of Artaxerxes (1:11).

It is no wonder that Nehemiah prayed fervently for several weeks and was fearful when he presented his desire to Artaxerxes to go and help build the walls of Jerusalem, considering the fact that this same king had just issued a decree (in response to accusations of insurrection by the adversaries of the Jews) to stop the walls from being built (Ezra 4:21-23). In the providence of God, however, King Artaxerxes had put a clause in this decree which allowed for it to be changed (Ezra 4:21). The Lord answered Nehemiah's prayer; a favourable response came from the king (2:6), as well as official letters which gave Nehemiah the right to lead the people in the rebuilding of the walls. He was even given a military escort for his protection, since he was an official of the king (cf. 4:23).

Nehemiah wisely and secretly surveyed all around the walls of Jerusalem by night, so as to not cause much excitement or violent reactions from the many adversaries of the Jews who had just obtained the decree from Artaxerxes to stop them from building the walls. These adversaries had violently imposed the decree (Ezra 4:23), and in so doing they would have destroyed any

newly built portions of the walls and gates. This recent destruction was such that Nehemiah could not even go through one of the gates on his donkey (2:14).

After prayerfully considering the magnitude of the task which lay ahead, he revealed his plans to the Jews, including the priests, nobles, officials, and those who had previously been working on the walls (2:16-17). His words of encouragement, giving God the glory for making it all possible, gave rise to enthusiasm and a team spirit among those who had been in despair and defeat. They arose with unity and fresh zeal and immediately began to rebuild. Their enemies mocked and despised them, but Nehemiah was patient, self-controlled, and persistent. He was also confident in the power of the God of Israel who would give them success (2:20). When people of the Lord step out in faith and do a work for Him, opposition is to be expected (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:9), but our God is victorious.

Prayer

Lord, thank You for the eleven times in this book we read of Nehemiah praying. Keep us also in Your will as a result of our sincere prayer. Help us to keep praying throughout this day, that Your plan will be accomplished.