

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 3, Chapter 2

While the books of Ezra and Nehemiah work together (similarly to the books of Kings and Chronicles), the men Ezra and Nehemiah and their assignments from God were quite dissimilar and distinct. Ezra was a Priest and a Torah Teacher. His job was to revive the Priesthood into a properly functioning body and to reform the Hebrew religion from the early Judaism it was currently practicing that had been born up in Babylon, back into the God-ordained, Torah-based religion of the Bible. We could say that Ezra's mission revolved around religion and spirituality and that indeed his position and purpose was as a religious leader.

Nehemiah on the other hand was primarily a politician. His mission proceeded mostly along secular lines. His job was to revive the city of Jerusalem and to make it defensible by rebuilding its broken down walls and gates. He also needed to raise the economy and increase the population of Judeans in the city. We saw immediately in Nehemiah Chapter 1 that Nehemiah, King Artaxerxes' cupbearer, had a spirit that was sensitive to God and open to His instruction, and that he knew the Torah (probably having been taught it by Ezra). Most importantly we learn that it was the Lord who prepared then called Nehemiah to his new role to govern the people of Judah. This tells us something important: every element and level of the Believing community plays its role and is needed. From the community leader to those who perform the less desirable tasks like cleaning up after others, everyone is needed to participate and do their part. And the Lord is not more disposed and present (nor is He more impressed) in the life of the leader than He is in the lives of the blue collar laborers. However the Lord does place more responsibility on the leader because the leader invariably has a greater effect on the direction and success of the community. This is a principle that perhaps Paul did the best job of explaining, whether we examine the Old or New Testaments. And although we've all heard it before, it's time we hear it again and recommit to it. If we're to be a true community of Spirit-driven Believers (which is what a congregation is), then we need to operate within this principle.

READ 1CORINTHIANS 12:4 - 27

Usually when this passage is read, it is to highlight that even the so-called "lowliest" among us have important roles to play, and if we obey the Lord in doing so then in His eyes we are great. Where I'm heading is that it is popular (and often warranted) in our day to disparage and blame our political leadership for the downward trend of our nation's morality, stagnant economy, dubious wars we send our young men and women to fight, and generally anything else we're dissatisfied with. And the first thing I want to remind us all of is that God tends to give us the leaders we deserve, not the leaders we need (but usually don't want). I think about King Saul for instance, whom the people wanted because he was big, tall, youthful and handsome; all the outward attributes that tends to be attractive (if not irresistible) to people who haven't learned God's principles, or have but put them aside.

Especially as concerns elected leaders in Democracies, in reality they are accurate reflections of the condition and attitudes of that nation's citizens. Think on that for a moment. Much like the condition of *Tzara'at* (the spiritually caused skin disease affliction) was but an outward indication of the inward state of spiritual defilement of a God worshipper, so are the men and women we elect but the most visible indicators of the inward state of morality and uprightness (or lack of it) of our nation's citizenry. They **are** us. It's only that oftentimes (as in our day) that we don't like what is revealed in them, because it's really an indictment about us.

However in His great mercy on rare occasions Yehoveh will raise up a community leader that runs counter to the prevailing culture (in a positive way), and this leader works by example and decree to bring the citizens out of their self-centeredness or pessimism or moral decay, and to put the community or nation back onto a more Godly footing and uplifting track. My point is that while Nehemiah was indeed a government politician and essentially acted as a secular government leader, he was needed as an indispensable part of the Judean community. He was as needed as Ezra who was entirely focused on the spiritual sphere. And even though Nehemiah was equipped by God, and providential circumstances trained him up to be a leader of a secular government, and he would fight for the practical, the pragmatic and the tangible things of everyday life for his people, the Jews, he was not a secular man; rather He was a devout worshipper of the God of Israel. Thus as happens from time to time, God raised up a leader in Nehemiah (even in a pagan empire) that didn't reflect the community condition but rather he was sent to reform it and to strengthen it.

The point is, we need worshippers of the God of Israel in secular government. And we need to pray for our government leaders (secular or Believer) because they are a necessary and needed part of the community. But especially we need to pray for leaders whether in government, the Church, or the Synagogue who are swimming against the tide of secular humanism, populist trends, tolerance and inclusiveness for all things, and immorality. These leaders will be opposed, accused, slandered, and despised by the majority of whatever kind of community they have been assigned to lead. But that's the nature of the job. And already in Nehemiah Chapter 2 we see the opposition to Nehemiah's mission surface, just as it did for Ezra.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 2 all

Although we won't thoroughly review it, the chapter opens with that troublesome piece of information that it was in the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, that Nehemiah found an opportunity to approach the king about going to Jerusalem. I'm only going to address this because I'm constantly hit with questions about the Hebrew Calendar, the Biblical Calendar, and the modern calendar and how we are to relate to them as Believers (and these calendars get mixed up rather easily). Very briefly: chapter 1 says that Nehemiah learned about the problem of Jerusalem's walls still in ruin, and the Judean people's precarious position as a result, in the month of Kislev; but now chapter 2 says that in the same year that Nehemiah learned of it, in the month of Nisan he went to the king about this matter. Let me use modern month names to better explain the conundrum: Kislev is equivalent to November and Nisan is equivalent to March. So the Scripture passage says that Nehemiah learned about the matter in November, but in the **same year** went to the king in March. That doesn't add up, does it, since obviously November comes after March? But imagine if one day our government decreed that January was no longer the 1st month of our calendar year. Rather for certain reasons it was being changed to November. So from here forward the 1st month of the year is November, and the last month of the year is October. There's nothing magical about it; seasons don't change, festivals don't change, which month comes first is simply a decision. That's essentially what has happened here in Nehemiah.

In the Hebrew world the year originally began in Nisan, because it's that way in the Torah. But in the Babylonian world, they started the new year in Tishri (7 months later). Because the Jews had been exiled to Babylon, and then remained in the same area by choice when the Persians took over the empire from the Babylonians, the Jews in time adopted the Babylonian way of counting months and years. That is why on the one hand the Jews can say that from a "religious" viewpoint, the new year indeed begins in Nisan, but in the "civil" or better "secular" viewpoint, the new year begins with Tishri. To commemorate this changing of calendars (that God in no way authorized), the Jews invented the holiday of Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year). But in reality it wasn't "Jewish" at all (Jewish New Year is a complete misnomer); it was merely the Jews conforming to the calendar of the pagan gentile world, as originally created by the Babylonians. But later on, in the Roman Empire, the Romans again changed the calendar and now the new year began with a newly named month called January. January was named for the Greek god Janus, the god of beginnings. The 2nd month of the Roman calendar, February, was named after Februum, a pagan purification ritual. And so on and so forth. And yet when the Romans made this change, the Jews stuck with the Tishri calendar of the Babylonians, did not revert to the Biblical Hebrew calendar, and so now in our day the Jews still celebrate New Year's Day as the 1st day of Tishri (using the Babylonian calendar), advance their Hebrew calendars by one year on the 1st day of Tishri, and thus Jewish New Year moves around in relation to the modern world calendar, originated by the Romans.

So, for those of you who prefer to celebrate New Year's Day on the 1st day of Tishri as the Biblical one, and shun the 1st day of January as New Year as pagan, just know that you are not celebrating anything Godly or Biblical either way. Actually by celebrating Rosh Hashanah you are observing the ancient pagan Babylonian calendar (that Judaism adopted), and by observing the 1st day of January you are observing the ancient pagan Roman calendar (that every literate society on earth has adopted, except for Judaism). I'll bet that burst a few balloons.

So, as concerns our story, the Persian Empire operated on the basis of the Babylonian calendar starting with Tishri and that's what Nehemiah is using. In this system Tishri is the 1st month the year, Kislev (when Nehemiah first heard about the Jerusalem problem) is the 3rd month of the year, and Nisan (when he requested to go to Jerusalem) is the 7th month of the year. So we learn that Nehemiah heard about the problem in the winter, and then about 4 months later in the spring he was finally able to speak to the king about it.

The occasion of speaking with the king doesn't seem to have been planned but rather was an opportune moment. Apparently the king was having a banquet, and we know from as early as the story of Esther that Persian kings were especially fond of two things: wine and women. Thus it is usual to see the king's wife, the queen, in attendance but usually it was during the many social affairs that involved heavy drinking. Indeed Nehemiah is presenting the royal family with wine, and the queen is present. Since it was a party, and it was supposed to be a pleasant, happy and playful affair, it would be a serious breach of etiquette for any member of the king's staff to wear anything but a pleasant expression on his or her face. So when Nehemiah appeared in a down mood, and wasn't able to hide it, the king instantly saw it and inquired why Nehemiah looked "bad". The Hebrew word used is "rah". Its basic meaning is evil, but it can also denote something that is "bad" or "unpleasant". In fact in the most literal Hebrew the phrase is: "Why is your face so evil (or bad)?" Face, *panim*, means presence or countenance. So a good understanding using modern words would be: "Why is your countenance so depressed?" But then the king comments that Nehemiah doesn't appear to be ill, so his body language must indicate some deep inner grief.

We next read that Nehemiah thought to himself that he was now in trouble, so he became fearful. Why would he be in trouble? Again, the job of the king's staff was to be in tune with the mood of the occasion. A down mood was completely inappropriate for a good party. And thus Nehemiah feared the king would punish him (even

perhaps discharge him) for this insolence. Of course a reasonable question is: since it's been 4 months since Nehemiah first heard about Jerusalem, why now is he so depressed over it that he can't hide it even though he understands that such an appearance is not usually tolerated by royalty? We're not given any reason for it, nor are we given any clue why it took 4 months before he said something to the king. It could have been that the king was not at the palace in Shushan when Nehemiah first got the word from his brother and the king only had recently returned. Or it might have been that Nehemiah was waiting for the right moment. Or perhaps (as I suspect) after walking around the rock and considering every aspect of the matter and what trying to do something about the situation might mean for his career or social status, he was getting cold feet and was ready to drop the whole thing. Yet he was tormented about it in his heart and only by accident did the king see the torment written on his face and force the issue.

Whatever the reason for the long delay it seems that Nehemiah was surprised and unprepared to be confronted at this moment by Artaxerxes. I imagine that God had intervened and answered Nehemiah's prayer from chapter 1 (prayed 4 months earlier) in a most unexpected way and unexpected timing, producing a most uncomfortable situation. But isn't that how God works? His way and His time despite our opinion on the matter? And if we procrastinate the Lord is just liable to force the issue when we least suspect it's coming. A word to the wise from my own experiences with the Lord; do what we see the truly righteous of God do all throughout the Bible: get up early in the morning and run to the righteous battle we've been assigned and trust in the Lord for the outcome. If the Lord has willed it for us we're going to face whatever-it-is one way or another. Better to do it in the Lord's will, and in faith, rather than being less-than-willingly throw into battle because we've hesitated.

What Nehemiah had feared was annoyance in the king questioning him turned out to be Artaxerxes' true sensitivity towards a man that the king obviously had affection and respect for. Artaxerxes cared about what troubled Nehemiah because he had never seen him in such a state before. But Nehemiah is stuck; he can't say "I don't want to talk about it right now". When the king asks, you reply. So he responds first with the standard Persian greeting of respect by saying, "May the king live forever", then asks rhetorically why shouldn't he look depressed when the place where his ancestors were buried was in ruins with its gates burned up? This response has a few aspects to it that were par for the course in Nehemiah's day but might go unnoticed in modern Western culture. First, the dilapidated condition of Jerusalem, the ancient homeland of his people, wore on Nehemiah because it was still an important symbol of his Hebrew heritage. But second, the issue of shame and honor was at stake. Shame and honor were the driving forces behind all Biblical era societies. And since ancestor worship played a role in the death and afterlife cult in virtually all known societies of that era (even in Hebrew culture) then for Nehemiah's ancestors' burial sites to be desecrated (in his eyes) brought shame upon he and his family.

Shame isn't in reference to the emotion of being ashamed (feeling bad or guilty); rather it means Nehemiah's social status of honor has been diminished, and a serious element of shame has been introduced into his life (even though until 4 months ago he had no knowledge of this situation with his ancestors' burial place). For a shame and honor based culture, loss of honor is intolerable. And since the burial places of all the Jews in and around Jerusalem would also have been affected similarly, then this shame would extend to many Jews thus making his kinsmen generally in a condition of shame as well. Understand: from Artaxerxes' viewpoint the king of a shame and honor society could NOT have one of his royal court living in a social status of shame, because it would reflect badly on him. So Artaxerxes, obviously seeing Nehemiah of great value to him, took this situation immediately to heart and essentially asked how he might help to remedy it.

What is interesting is that while we know from the story that the city and place Nehemiah is referring to is Yerushalayim, no where do we find it told to the king. I can only assume that the city as Jerusalem was understood, or that not all of the conversation was recorded because it is unimaginable that a king so interested in Nehemiah's request wouldn't inquire about what city he was talking about. It is equally unimaginable that the king didn't know that Nehemiah was Jewish; there was no need in the Persian Empire to hide one's ethnicity. So

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there is no ambiguity; the subject was Jerusalem.

Verse 5 says that Nehemiah prayed before he responded to Artaxerxes' question. No doubt this was a quick and silent prayer, the kind that most of us have prayed silently in but a second as we came upon a bad traffic accident and saw injured people, or as our Doctor told us we have a health problem, or as we are seated for a job interview. This just further shows that Nehemiah had a close relationship with the Lord and knew that the outcome was in His hands. Boldly Nehemiah blurts out his request: he asks to go to Jerusalem, to the city of his ancestor's tombs, and to rebuild it. Note: not just to rebuild the walls, but to rebuild the city. Also note, still no mention of Jerusalem.

So why was the word "Jerusalem" left out of conversation in which it was the chief topic? I think it is because the issue of Jerusalem was a sensitive one. An earlier Persian king, Darius, had allowed Zerubbabel to go there to rebuild the Temple and the city walls. However when local opposition arose to the project, Darius first took the position to stop all work based on the accusation of the opponents that Zerubbabel's hidden agenda was to create the conditions for a Jewish rebellion. Further, it wasn't Darius's idea that Zerubbabel go to rebuild, it was his predecessor King Cyrus's. Once a records search found Cyrus's original decree to allow the Jews to rebuild their Temple and the city walls, confirming Zerubbabel's claim, Darius allowed the work to begin again. But only the Temple was completed, the city walls were not rebuilt.

Later, King Artaxerxes took over the reigns of the Empire, and he allowed Ezra the Priest to go to Jerusalem to institute reforms to the Priesthood and to the Jewish religion as it was being practiced at the time. Artaxerxes even contributed substantial quantities of gold, silver, and other items needed for ritual and sacrificing; like animals, olive oil, and grain. But then social issues centering on the Judeans marrying foreign women arose causing a huge furor and the resultant dissolution of hundreds and hundreds of marriages seemed to disrupt any further improvements to the city, including rebuilding the defensive walls. No doubt King Artaxerxes was deeply disappointed and troubled that the walls of fortress Jerusalem hadn't been rebuilt as planned, because he needed this strategic location to help him keep hold of his empire. Now Nehemiah, a member of his royal court, stood before the same king asking to go and to attempt the same endeavor. Would he send yet another Jewish governor, and pour even more of the Persian treasury into this issue of Jerusalem?

But the matter of Jerusalem was too strategically important to ignore, and Nehemiah was not Ezra. Nehemiah had proved himself to be a capable leader, loyal to the king, trained in the ways of power and diplomacy, compromising when necessary: he was a politician. And it was going to take a person with special qualities to make this project happen. The king well knew the political sensitivities involved in the region, and his eye was on the several rebellions swirling around his empire to spend too much political capital on resolving power struggles of a handful of relatively petty potentates in the Beyond the River Province. Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem would be a supreme challenge and few could pull it off (the fact that those important walls lay in ruin for about 175 years is proof enough of the difficulty). The king thought Nehemiah could be that special man and so fully supported Nehemiah's requests.

Don't think for a moment that Nehemiah was naïve and didn't understand the king's agenda. The favor that Artaxerxes' showed the Jews, though genuine, served a political purpose. Making his devoted cupbearer, Nehemiah the Jew, the governor of Judah served a political purpose. Rebuilding and repopulating Jerusalem served a political purpose. What the king didn't know is that all of this was being orchestrated from Heaven to serve Yehoveh's purpose.

The king responded by asking Nehemiah how long he'd be gone. We're not told what Nehemiah's answer was, but we can probably assume that the time Nehemiah estimated was substantially less than it turned out to be (11 or 12 years). What king would be concerned that a man that he considered important to his administration not be gone too long, but find 12 years to be an acceptable number? Besides, how could Nehemiah possibly know in advance how long all this would take having never even seen Jerusalem in his life? Thus in chapter 13 we find King Artaxerxes, after his cupbearer being gone for about 12 years, finally sending for Nehemiah to return to the palace.

Nehemiah thoroughly understood the challenges that lay ahead of him and also the precarious lay of the political landscape; so he requested royal letters of safe passage through the various territories that formed the large Beyond the River province. Since Nehemiah's mission was a political one (and a volatile one at that), he was wise to expect subterfuge and outright hostility from the region's various governors and leaders. It seems that Nehemiah being named as the Governor of Judah set off a firestorm of jealousy and discontent among the several local rulers who each tried to hold unofficial sway over the province (that's the way of the power hungry). In fact, the lack of ancient records recording the name of a specific governor of Judah at this time indicates that the appointment of Nehemiah was not replacing anyone; rather he was going to have to carve out his own power structure from among a number of local power seekers who had their sights set on adding the rule over Judah to their current territorial holdings; so Nehemiah would be seen as unwelcome competition.

Once he received the letters of safe passage and introduction to the several governors of the region, Nehemiah also asked for official instructions to be given to Asaf who was the manager of the royal forests so that Nehemiah could obtain all-important timber for 3 purposes: building new gates for the city walls, for use in constructing the walls themselves, and for the governor's mansion that Nehemiah would occupy. It is hard to know whether this would be a new mansion, or if this was an existing one that needed repair and perhaps expansion. Nonetheless, we again see the mindset of an experienced politician who understands that his position merits him living in a grand house, and that doing so sets him apart and above those he governs and alongside those who rule other provinces. In fact it was expected of him by both the king and the Judeans. A mansion was one of the symbols of his authority and establishing his authority was job number one. But as Nehemiah's memoirs state, he also saw through the clutter and recognized that God's hand was upon him and this entire situation. This, to my mind, accounts for the bold and fearless approach that he took to complete his mission.

Remember that Nehemiah's mission, on the surface, was a purely secular one. Rebuild the walls so the King of Persia could have a formidable strategic outpost from which to control the region; revive Jerusalem's economy; grow the population with Jews; and provide safety and security for the residents or none of the aforementioned would amount to much. None of this sounds very pious or Godly, but rather more like a worldly endeavor that any government leader might undertake. Yet, the Father knows that this is the world, not Heaven, and His chosen people were in a stagnant and disadvantaged condition until these very practical matters of daily life were resolved. Sending another Priest was not the answer because a Priest would not be equipped to deal well with politicians and enemies and fortress construction and defense no matter how devoted to the Lord he might be (as Ezra demonstrated); it was going to take a cunning and savvy political leader, with all the downsides in personality that come with it.

I want to end our time together with this thought: we can know as Believers that while we can't live on bread alone, we still need bread to live. And while a job and a place to live won't get us any closer to Heaven, we (and our families) still need income and shelter. It's harder to think on the higher things of God on an empty stomach or when we are under siege, than when we feel safe and secure. And our merciful Father knows this because He created us. So don't ever become so idealistic (or Heavenly minded as some put it) as to think that you can pray your way to solving all the practical things of life that you already have the means to obtain by your own labors and actions. Life with God is a partnership; He does His part and you do yours. And what we see in Nehemiah is

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a great partnership forming between this pragmatic man who says “yes” to God, and seeks Him at every turn; but then is also ready to take action, get his hands dirty and take risks. I admire Nehemiah as a role model of a Godly form of let’s-get-it-done leadership more than I can express.

We’ll continue with Chapter 2 next time.