

A Mile in his Shoes: Nehemiah's Story



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A Work Repurposed

Rachael Suddarth - February 7, 2010

Last week I talked about the devastation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and earlier this morning we heard some of the scripture that foretold this Holocaust. The Jews did evil in the eyes of the Lord and they were destroyed. Not just the destruction of the body, but the destruction of hope and identity.

This week we are continuing our story of Nehemiah. Nehemiah grew up during a dark time for the Jews, knowing that they were being punished for turning away from God, but knowing that one day God would hear their crying and save them.

Last week Kris talked about Nehemiah's prayer, a passionate prayer that we should imitate.

This week we are talking about how Nehemiah was chosen by God to return to Judah and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, to restore stability and a government to his people in their homeland. To restore the covenant between the Jews and God.

So why was Nehemiah given this mission, why was it up to Nehemiah to take action and save his people. Nehemiah was not a priest, not a scribe, not an expert in the law, not a theologian, not a teacher. Nehemiah was a man who held a very important secular job, and used his influence there to protect God's people.

In Nehemiah chapter 1

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

When we meet Nehemiah on the pages of Scripture, he was a servant in the king's palace in Susa, in Persia—far from his homeland, which he had never even seen. Nehemiah had the opportunity to speak to his family about Jerusalem and Nehemiah was devastated to learn that not only was Jerusalem still in rubble but that his people were in great trouble. Nehemiah knew that city walls would not only protect his people, but restore their identity as an independent people under God.

So what did Nehemiah do, he sat down and prayed – for four months he prayed.

11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah knew the expectations God had for him and for the nation. He knew that they were in Persia as punishment for turning away from God. But he also knew that God had promised to gather them together again if they would repent.

We see in chapter 1 that Nehemiah also knew he was in a unique position to change the Jews fate. He was the cupbearer to the King. We think of a cupbearer as someone who tastes the kings food to make sure it isn't poisoned, but the reality is in the ancient world a cupbearer was more than that. The cupbearer was a trusted ally in the dangerous world of court politics.

Now I recognize that being a cupbearer doesn't sound very impressive. The position seems comparable to a dishwasher, or at best a butler or a waiter. The best comparison is the cupbearer to the US Secret Service. Everyday the cupbearer put his life on the line to protect his monarch. The cupbearer tasted the wine before the king drank it, and he tasted the food before the king ate it. If the dinner was poisoned – no more cupbearer, but "Long live the King!" And through the practice of this custom, an incredible intimacy developed between the taster and the partaker, between the cupbearer and the King.

Nehemiah was King Artaxerxes' cupbearer, and Nehemiah was very good at his job, King Artaxerxes ruled for over 40 years and died of natural causes, a rare event in the Persian empire. Because Nehemiah was good at his job he had established a good relationship with King Artaxerxes, but Nehemiah still needed to tread lightly in order to secure the political favor needed to rebuild the wall.

Now Nehemiah can be thought of as middle management. He reported to the King directly, and could not really take matters into his own hands. Middle management is important to consider since (1) most leaders are in middle management positions, and (2) middle-

management is difficult. Middle management is a struggle even in today's world. As I thought of examples from the media and from pop culture, all examples were negative ones. From the ridiculousness of The Office like we just saw, to the backstabbing and power grabbing politics of many workplaces, we live in a world where we do not respect those above us, and we struggle to follow their lead.

As hard as we might have it, clearly Nehemiah was in a tougher position than we might find ourselves in, he couldn't leave the city without the King's permission and he had no rights. The kings of Persia were absolute rulers. Their word was law. And they were difficult.

Well, difficult is an understatement. The Persian kings were impossible at best and were often cruel. Since their oppressive policies were resented by those they ruled, they were almost always in danger of assassination or revolt, so they were usually suspicious of any wrong moves or apparent lack of loyalty by their subordinates. We see a trace of this in Nehemiah 2:2

1 In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; 2 so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

Nehemiah was not overcome with gratitude that the King had asked him how he was, instead Nehemiah's interior monologue was:

I was very much afraid,

Nehemiah had a right to be scared, Persian rulers did not like people to be gloomy in their presence. A disgruntled employee or one who is unhappy is much more likely to kill you.

Nehemiah's difficulties did not stop there. To be sad in King Artaxerxes' presence was dangerous enough. In addition to that, Nehemiah wanted to go to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls, and it was King Artaxerxes who had already said NO to rebuilding the walls. Nehemiah's plan meant asking the King to reverse his own policy. A strong Jerusalem was a threat to the supremacy of the nearby city-states, so those rulers sent this letter to King Artaxerxes.

Ezra 4:11-16

(This is a copy of the letter they sent him.)

To King Artaxerxes,

From your servants, the men of Trans-Euphrates:

12 The king should know that the Jews who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations.

13 Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and the royal revenues will suffer. 14 Now

since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonored, we are sending this message to inform the king, 15 so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place of rebellion from ancient times. That is why this city was destroyed. 16 We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates.

These rulers near Jerusalem did not want to lose their money or power, so they approached the king with rhetoric he would listen to. King you will lose your money and power. After receiving a letter like this of course Artaxerxes stopped the rebuilding of the wall. A wall meant stability and independence, a dangerous combination when you are ruling an empire.

Ezra 4:22

Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interests

Nehemiah knew that Artaxerxes was against rebuilding to Jerusalem wall. Nehemiah knew that Persian rulers did not “make mistakes”. So Nehemiah was left in a dangerous position. Ask the King to change his mind, without getting executed. It was no small matter for Nehemiah to convince the king to reverse his own “wise” policy.

So let’s look at how Nehemiah successfully petitioned the King.

Loyalty

The story does not make a great point of Nehemiah’s loyalty to King Artaxerxes, but Nehemiah’s whole demeanor and his success presupposes it. When the King asked why Nehemiah’s face looked sad and he replied with the expected court greeting, “May the King Live Forever!” it was not hypocrisy or even mere formality. Nehemiah’s job was to protect the King and he was successful. If Artaxerxes did not trust Nehemiah, then Nehemiah would not have lived to save the Jews.

Middle managers live in limbo, if their supervisor does well then they do well. If their supervisor gets fired, they get fired. Loyalty has rewards, raises, promotions, and protection. A new manager would have his own favorites, those who were already loyal to him.

We are called to be loyal to, and follow those in positions of authority. It is a concept I know I struggle with. How are you better than me, what special skills do you have, it isn’t fair you have the job and I don’t. Nehemiah lived in an unfair world, but he remained loyal and faithful to the king, and it saved his people.

Tact

First, when the King asked why Nehemiah was sad, Nehemiah answered with a disarming question,

I was very much afraid, 3 but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

We might have tried something like, “ Why am I sad? I’ll tell you why I’m sad, Thirteen years ago a bunch of jealous governors insisted that my people not build a wall to protect themselves, and you didn’t hear the Jews side at all...”

Although a reply like that might feel good – to get it off our chest – we would have been executed immediately – swift action in the face of an arrogant response.

Instead Nehemiah asked

Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

This question, instead of making Artaxerxes defensive, actually won him to Nehemiah’s side. The king understood why Nehemiah was sad and wanted to help his loyal servant.

Second, Nehemiah presented his desire as a personal matter and not as a political one. He knew that what he wanted would require the reversal of Artaxerxes former public policy, and that any request to fortify a city was suspicious. So he did not treat it as a political issue at all. He treated it as a matter of personal grief, which the king, who was proud of his own city and who also had ancestors, would understand.

This is also the tactic Esther took when she was asked to intercede with Artaxerxes’ predecessor, King Xerxes. An official in the palace named Haman had passed a law according to which, on a certain day, all the Jews in the empire were to be killed and their possessions plundered. Mordecai, the uncle and guardian of Esther before she became queen, heard of it and instructed Esther to intercede for the Jews, even though she was risking her own life. What is significant here is that when she had a chance to implore Xerxes, she did not present the problem as a matter of civil wrong or injustice, which would have made the king defensive since he had sanctioned the slaughter. Rather she presented her case personally.

Esther 7:3-4

3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. 4 For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king. "

The King was astonished that anyone would plan to destroy his wife. So, disregarding his own role in the plot, he reversed the decree, spared the Jews, and hung Haman the man who plotted the Jews demise. Nehemiah chose this same approach and again a king of Persia assisted the Jews.

Honesty

To be tactful does not mean you should be insincere. Nehemiah exhibited honesty in two concrete ways. First when the King asks if he is sad, Nehemiah replies with two absolutely accurate statements

To the reader he admits:

I was very much afraid,

To the King

3 but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

Nehemiah fasted and wept for four months before this conversation. It is a wonder that he was able to conceal his true feelings for so long. When asked for the reason for his sadness he was honest. He did not try to invent a more acceptable reason for it.

Second, when the king asked what Nehemiah wanted, Nehemiah told him. He did not pretend that he wanted to take a vacation to Jerusalem to merely look around. From the first he told the King he wanted to rebuild it and the King respected that.

Planning/Prayer

Nehemiah was not impulsive. He prayed and planned for four months waiting for the opportunity God would provide. When the opportunity arrived in King Artaxerxes court, Nehemiah knew what he was going to say.

6 Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

7 I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? 8 And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.

Nehemiah had a goal = Rebuild the wall around Jerusalem, and Nehemiah had worked out the details. He was specific: he knew how long it would take (12 years), he needed letters of safe conduct for the governors of the Trans-Euphrates region, and he asked for requisitions of the supplies that would be needed for the project. When the opportunity came, Nehemiah was ready.

The climax for this encounter came in Artaxerxes' granting his cupbearer's requests. Not only did he grant them, but he also exceeded what Nehemiah had asked for since he also sent army officers and cavalry along with him.

So a man who holds no special religious position changes the destiny of God's people. Nehemiah was good at his job and sought God. Nehemiah used his secular position, a position that no one else could fill, to change lives.

The reality is very few of us will be ministers like Tim and Ryan. We will have jobs in secular places. And it is time that we start turning our hearts toward God, honestly asking how can I serve God in the secular world.

I am currently studying for my PhD. But why am I doing it? Yeah, I really like the idea of being a Dr., really like it, but that isn't a good enough reason to give up everything I have in MO and move to Tucson AZ. When I was completing my master's degree I realized that I had the unique opportunity to impact people in a real way. Academia is not known for its Christian perspective.

Teaching at a university would provide me the continued ability to impact women (I am in a virtually all women field) on a profound, personal level. I am here because this is where God wants me, I don't know why yet, I haven't had my rebuilding the wall revelation, but I am willing to wait and watch.

You alone are uniquely positioned to achieve God's vision for your life. A God who knows the number of hairs on your head has a great purpose only you can accomplish. Nehemiah, one man, made a difference in the lives of many. Seeking God's will each and every step of the way, Nehemiah prayerfully sought to rebuild the walls.

Nehemiah was an ordinary man who stepped out to accomplish great things in God's name. Leaving the safety of his position as the cupbearer to the king of Persia, Nehemiah put himself into harm's way exposing himself to enemies who schemed and wanted to see him fail.

Overcoming each and every obstacle, Nehemiah's destiny was to rebuild Jerusalem's city's walls that were essential for the nation's very survival.

The remnant of Israel had been in exile and was beginning to return to the Promised Land only to find the land of their forefathers in disarray. Jerusalem's city walls lay in ruin exposing her to enemies who would threaten the nation's very existence. Following the direction of God, Nehemiah rebuilt the city's walls in just fifty-two days.

Prayerfully, Nehemiah set out and quietly brought together the whole of the Jewish nation. Finding doomsayers at every turn, Nehemiah overcame each and every obstacle and built, brick by brick, the ramparts that would protect the Jews.

Nehemiah never faltered and never swayed from his mission. Nehemiah waited, planned, and prepared to use his position as cupbearer to answer God's mission.

Honestly consider, what position are you in now? Are you waiting on God, looking for the unique mission only you can complete? Are you listening? Are you preparing? Each of us has a great purpose to accomplish, find it.