

Nehemiah

Description

This account has an interesting and challenging narrative about a man who was so moved by compassion and concern for his own people that he was compelled to act. A man who had everything to lose and who chose to use his position of responsibility for the good of others.

The story starts with Nehemiah, a man who has an important job as the cupbearer to the king of Persia. His job was what we would call a butler today. It was a job that required him to be confidential and discreet as much of his time was spent at court in the presence of the king and having access to highly sensitive information around the administration of the empire. At times, as cupbearer, he would be required to be alert and protect the King from plots against him and would also be required to taste the wine if poison was expected. Nehemiah was held in very high esteem by the king of Persia.

The account of Nehemiah tells us that the role that Nehemiah was employed in was one of a high ranking court official who was very financially astute. He was also a man who was compassionate and concerned for his own people and his own country, although he himself had probably been born and raised in Babylon he still had this sense of belonging to a city and country that his people, the Jews, called home.

Nehemiah 1:1 tells us which year and month this story is set. Nehemiah was in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, known as Longimanus, who reigned from 465 – 424BC. So Nehemiah was in year 445BC and his enquiry of the Jews in Jerusalem takes place in the month of Kislev, mid November – mid December. I want to note this as Nehemiah 2:1 starts in the 20th year and month Nisan (mid March – mid April) a period of approximately 120 days. This period of 120 days demonstrated that it is always important to wait God's time. Jesus says to his disciples in Luke 24:49 – "And now I will send the Holy Spirit just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven." Before we can do anything with God we will always be required to be filled with the Spirit of God. Although being filled with the Spirit is something that takes place when we accept Christ it is not a once for all experience. The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 5:18 – "Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit", this is rendered in the original Greek as be being filled, in other words one fill many fillings. Sometimes these fillings will take time, time that should be used to wait on God for the "word of God" to be formulated in our lives and hearts. God's plan always requires God's helper.

Nehemiah 1:2 tells us that Nehemiah enquires of Hanani and others concerning the Jews, his people, in Jerusalem. The answer is not very encouraging. The people are in great distress and reproach, in other words they are very down hearted and pressed and persecuted. They are unable to be a witness from lack of encouragement and support. Nehemiah is also told that the walls and defences have been broken down and the gates have been burned with fire. What a sorry state of affairs. God's people left and scattered without hope and unable to sing and praise their God, the living God who had delivered them so many times before in their history.

I wonder if we may be permitted at this point to draw a parallel to our own situation and the circumstances we currently find ourselves in? Are we, or do we feel neglected and under pressure, in distress or reproached in our own city or town? Do we feel unable to pull together in order to be a witness for our God? The same living God who delivered Israel so many times in its history. Do we feel disjointed and scattered and without hope? Have the walls and defences of our lives, our churches and communities been broken down? Have our gates been burned with fire and have we been left without hope, like sheep without a shepherd who are unable to witness to and for our God freely and without constraint?

What we see is Nehemiah coming before God with humility in prayer on behalf of all those who love you?• Nehemiah 1:5. Nehemiah is so moved with compassion for his fellow Jews that he puts himself in a position before God where he pleads and appeals to God to deliver all those who are oppressed and more significantly all those who are God's people who have sinned against God. He then is more specific about this sin in Nehemiah 1:7 •We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees and regulations that you have given us through your servant Moses?• There is something here that tells us about what God requires, that of His highest for us, a standard that demonstrates that we love God and acknowledges that He is great above all nations. This will undoubtedly make us unpopular at times, but by the same token will be the very means whereby God is made known to those who are lost. It seems to me, as in Nehemiah's day, that people, the Jews in Nehemiah's case, had not kept the standards expected by God. They had strayed from God and compromised their position and were now living in their land in a compromised position and were subject to challenging questions and life styles that had made them unable to help themselves. They were so trodden down that they were unable to find their way up and out into a place where God was being glorified. So in steps Nehemiah, a man who had waited on God and who had realised that with God all things are possible, he was a can do man with a can do attitude.

Nehemiah approaches the King, his employer, and asks for leave to go to Jerusalem in order to rebuild it. Here is a man with a big ambition or more to the point, a man who trusts •a can do God?• who enables •a can do man?•. The change occurred in Nehemiah's heart, •I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength?• Philippians 4:13.

What we see here in the early chapters of Nehemiah is a man who was moved with compassion when he heard of the distress of his own people, a man who was prepared to act and lay aside his own security and ambition. A man who was willing to go and do. We also find that there was opposition to Nehemiah's plan, in Nehemiah 2:19 we see that three significant and important men, men with influence, heard of Nehemiah's plan and laughed and scorned him with words like •What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?•

I wonder what our response is to this kind of human and social backlash to our God given spiritually inspired plans? Nehemiah's was •The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants will start rebuilding this wall. • Nehemiah 2:20. If we are to be a witness for our God, the God of heaven, then we need to stand up and be counted and we need to be bold in our God given, God inspired and God formulated mission in the face of any opposition.

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Category

1. Characters

2. Nehemiah

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