

“The God of Heaven Will Make Us Prosper”

The Twelfth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Nehemiah 2:1-20; Matthew 16:13-20

In the winter of 445 BC, Nehemiah received word of the current situation in Jerusalem. The Jewish exiles who have returned to Jerusalem are struggling. The city’s walls and gates remain in ruins—after eighty years. The ruined city now brings shame upon the people of God—they and their city are an object of ridicule. Deeply saddened by this news, Nehemiah spent the next four months praying to “the God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and is steadfast love,” pleading that YHWH will hear the prayer of his servant and keep his covenant promises. YHWH hears his servant, Nehemiah, and answers his prayer in the most remarkable of ways.

After recounting his heartfelt prayer in the opening chapter, Nehemiah simply tells us, “*now I was cupbearer to the king.*” The king’s cupbearer was the most trusted member of the royal servants. He was the man responsible for the security of the Persian king Artaxerxes, who was, arguably, the most powerful man in the world at that time. The vast Persian empire extended from Asia Minor (Turkey), to the Black Sea (on the northwest) to the coast of Libya on the southwest, to the Indus River (on the East). The Persian empire included remnants of famous empires now fallen, including the Egyptian, Babylonian, and Jewish kingdoms. The book which is the object of our study, Nehemiah, was written by a man who was a Jew—a descendant of those exiled to Babylon in 587 BC. Although far removed from the ancient homeland of his people, news came to him about the great difficulties faced by the Jewish exiles who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon over the previous eighty years since the city fell to Nebuchanezzar and the Persian king Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews to return home. Although a pious Jew, Nehemiah is perhaps the personal servant closest to the Persian king Artaxerxes I, tasting his food and drink, and personally responsible for the king’s safety from assassins in his inner circle.

Our text for this sermon, Nehemiah 2:1-20, is divided into two parts. The first ten verses deal with Nehemiah’s interaction with king Artaxerxes, and reveal the first hint of on-going opposition to Nehemiah’s mission to rebuild the walls and fortifications of Jerusalem. Verses 11-20 of Nehemiah 2 recount Nehemiah’s initial efforts to survey the city and its walls. Despite the work which had been completed at the temple, the city’s walls and gates remain in terrible shape. Nehemiah must survey the damage in order to formulate plans as to how to rebuild the city’s fortifications before a disaster occurs.

According to Nehemiah 1:1-3, word about the state of Jerusalem came to Nehemiah while the Persian court was in Susa, where the king maintained his winter palace. One of his brothers informed Nehemiah that “*the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile,*” were struggling, and that the “*remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.*” This news sent Nehemiah into a state of despair. According to verse 4, Nehemiah explained that “*as soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*” The balance of the opening chapter includes Nehemiah’s prayer of intercession for God’s people.

But it is the way the opening chapter ends—with what seems to be an innocuous throw-line, “I am the king’s cupbearer”—which actually provides us with the essential piece of information we need to understand how YHWH will answer Nehemiah’s prayer. In the providence of God, it was Nehemiah’s

personal relationship with Persia's king (as his cupbearer) which becomes the means through which God will answer Nehemiah's prayer for Israel, and open the door for Nehemiah to be the one who will go to Jerusalem and oversee the massive project of rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. This will ensure that the exiles who have returned from Jerusalem will be able to defend themselves from the "people of the land" (Canaanites), and from any possible attack from Persia's enemies to the southwest, i.e., the Egyptians.

As noted last time, as a trusted member of the king's inner circle, Nehemiah, perhaps more than anyone else, understands Israel's precarious situation. The city is vulnerable to attack, and Israel has enemies with the means, motive, and opportunity to do them great harm. The temple itself had been rebuilt, sacrifices are being conducted, but many people still live in the ruins of what was once a great capital city, Jerusalem. Rebuilding started and stopped, and the work on the city's foundation and walls—which require a full-fledged construction project, had not really gotten underway. Nehemiah, who, no doubt has heard much discussion within Artaxerxes' inner circle about possible enemies to the west, knows all too well that unless the city's defenses are rebuilt, Israel's return to the land after the exile will come to a quick end with but one determined attack from any number of Israel's enemies. If Jerusalem falls yet again, the expectations for a hoped-for Messiah will be dashed. No Jerusalem, no temple, no Messiah.

As we turn to the first section of our text (the first ten verses), in verse 1, Nehemiah sets the scene for his reader. *"In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence."* The month "Nisan" spans April-May, which, in light of the previous chapter tells us that Nehemiah had been fasting and praying for his people for nearly four months. The twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign is 445 BC. It was Nehemiah's job to taste the king's wine and then hand him the cup—provided the cupbearer tasted nothing amiss. Nehemiah kept his sorrow over the fate of his people to himself—at least until this particular occasion. The passage does not specifically say whether Nehemiah intended the king to realize that his cupbearer was sad (which is implied by what follows), or whether the king (who had to know the cupbearer well enough to trust him with his life) merely happened to notice Nehemiah's depressed state.

We read in verse 2, *"the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.' Then I was very much afraid."* We are given a hint in verse 11 of chapter 1, when Nehemiah prayed "today" that YHWH give his servant success in Artaxerxes' presence, that Nehemiah had kept his feelings hidden until an opportune time. The account in the first ten verses of chapter 2, recalls the day when Nehemiah took a chance to reveal his feelings to the king. This was no small thing. Nehemiah is risking his life by letting the king see him downcast. Seeing his cupbearer in a depressed state, the king had to wonder, "was Nehemiah downcast because he was plotting something?" "Was he downcast because he was aware of a threat against the king?" The king could tell however, that his servant was not sickened by poisoned wine.

As verse 11 of chapter one may imply, Nehemiah planned to speak with the king at some point about changing the Persian empire's current policy toward the Jews, and the rebuilding of the city's fortifications—reversing the king's earlier decision to suspend construction as recounted in Ezra 4. Or it may be the case that Nehemiah could not hide his feelings and the king noticed something was not right with his cupbearer. Regardless, Nehemiah gains an audience with king, who has noticed his servant's downcast manner and then asked him about. He admits to the king he is sad, and since this is probably a huge breach in protocol, he is terrified of what the king will do next. But YHWH is about to answer the cupbearer's prayer and deliver his people.

According to verse 3, *"I said to the king, 'Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when*

the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Nehemiah is wise not to announce that he disagrees with the king's policy toward Jerusalem and the Jewish exiles, nor does Nehemiah complain that the king's policy is wrongheaded. He does not explicitly mention Jerusalem, although the king obviously knows that Nehemiah is referring to Jerusalem and the Jewish exiles. Instead, Nehemiah answers the king's question, "why are you sad?" In the providence of God, the king is truly interested in his cupbearer's downcast state. Nehemiah explains that his sorrow has nothing to do with a plot or the king's safety—"let the king live forever!" But he goes on to explain to the king that the current state of Jerusalem troubles him deeply. In his response, Nehemiah demonstrates great loyalty to the faith of his fathers, and an appropriate reverence toward his ancestors and their homeland—attributes which the Persian king would respect. Nehemiah must be beginning to realize that his prayers were being answered beyond all expectation. The door was opening wide.

As we learn in verse 4, "*then the king said to me, 'What are you requesting?'*" The most powerful man in the world asks his cupbearer a direct question. YHWH has answered his prayers, giving Nehemiah his chance to speak his mind. Offering a quick prayer before speaking we read, "*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, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.'*" Realizing in whose presence he is, and aware of the amazing opportunity he now has, Nehemiah gets right to the point. No back story, no endless string of details. Just a straight-forward request to a man used to making immediate decisions.¹

The king is obviously open to what his cupbearer requests. "*And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), 'How long will you be gone, and when will you return?'*" The mention of the queen in verse 6 helps explain the circumstances. The presence of the queen indicates that this was an informal occasion, where the king felt more comfortable asking a trusted servant a personal question, something which would be completely inappropriate during official state business. All kinds of theories have been advanced about the queen's presence.² Perhaps she favored Nehemiah, or that her presence for the conversation meant that she was a legally binding witness to what was promised. The most likely circumstance is that the presence of the queen is incidental. Obviously, the king was impressed with Nehemiah, aware he had handled his responsibilities well, and the king had likely grown fond of him over time. In a sense, Nehemiah has gained the right to speak as the king's subject when asked. The outcome was favorable to Nehemiah and vitally important to the well-being of Jerusalem. "*So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.*"

Nehemiah does not miss the chance to make a specific request. He tells us in verses 7-8, "*and I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.'*" If Nehemiah did not have clear, precise answers, the king could easily dismiss Nehemiah's request as that of a depressed, homesick, disgruntled servant who had grown tired of sipping good wine. But Nehemiah humbly submits to the king, and recognizes the protocol of the era—asking for the proper letters of reference from the king. Nehemiah also has a plan—concisely stated, yet with enough specifics to demonstrate the idea to be workable, yet not too

¹ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 81.

² Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 180.

wordy so as to bore the king with needless detail. Nehemiah would like to cross the Euphrates (“beyond the river”) and make his way to Judah (the Jerusalem area), with official sanction from the king to secure the materials necessary to rebuild the city’s walls and fortifications.

If this encounter took place as spontaneously and quickly as the account seems to indicate, two things are clear. First, Nehemiah has spent four months praying about this all the while planning what to say, if he got the chance. He got the chance and he took it. He was well-prepared. As a result, the king changes his policy. Second, the real explanation for what just happened with the king is that YHWH has heard Nehemiah’s prayer and answered it. In fact, verse 8, closes with the full recognition of the fact that “*the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.*” Artaxerses has named his cupbearer the new governor of Judah, but ultimately it was YHWH’s mighty hand which brought this remarkable thing to pass.

Recall that Ezra rejected a military escort when he traveled to Jerusalem as a matter of faith—he had proclaimed that YHWH would protect him and so he made the trip to Jerusalem with much gold and silver without an escort. But Nehemiah needed the official backing of the Persian empire to ensure that everyone in Jerusalem cooperated with the rebuilding project, and to impress upon the local officials that the work he was to about begin was being done under Persian authority and with Persian blessing—there had been a reversal of policy. Although it was not an easy journey to cross the desert from Susa and Babylon to Jerusalem, Nehemiah speaks of the journey as routine (v. 9). “*Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.*”

If Nehemiah is the hero of the story, the main antagonists are introduced in verse 10. “*But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.*” These are men of power and influence (which may be another reason why Nehemiah traveled with soldiers—to impress upon them the fact that Nehemiah was now in charge). As one commentator notes, Sanballat and Tobiah will “throw a long shadow over the story.”³ Indeed they will.

We know from additional archaeological evidence—the Elephantine papyri, a document dated 407 BC—that Sanballat was the governor of Samaria (the region to the north), and as we will see in chapter 13, he had strong ties to the high priest’s family. In light of the work stoppage recounted in Ezra 4, it may well be that Sanballat was given authority over Jerusalem, until unexpectedly replaced by Nehemiah. This would explain, in part, Sanballat’s hostility to the king’s “cupbearer,” who is the new governor.⁴ Tobiah (a Jewish name) was from a prominent family in Ammon (now in Jordan), a region which had very strained relations with Judah for some time. Nehemiah mocks him as “the Ammonite servant” because he was under the authority of Sanballat—i.e., Tobiah was Sanballat’s lackey.⁵

In verse 11, the story shifts from the Persian Court and Nehemiah’s commission, to the situation on the ground in Jerusalem. Nehemiah tells us, “*so I went to Jerusalem and was there three days,*” probably

³ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 81.

⁴ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 184.

⁵ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 81.

enough time to rest from his trip, and consult with the local Jewish leaders, and maybe even meet with long-lost friends and family. His break was not long, because after three days, *“then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode.”* Nehemiah knew there would be opposition to his plans, and he knew it important to figure out what would be needed before the opponents could organize against him. Nehemiah also knew that many of the people in Jerusalem had friendly contacts with the people of the land—what happened in Jerusalem didn’t stay in Jerusalem. There was no need to alert the opponents as to what he was about to do. Nehemiah must first see for himself just how bad things were. He will discover that they were as bad or worse than he heard. The gates were blocked with rubble, and the walls were down across most of the city.

In verses 13-15, Nehemiah tells us *“I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.”* The Valley Gate and the Dung Gate—which is what its name implies, the gate through which the sewage was dumped outside the city—are about 500 yards apart, with the latter at the extreme southern end of the city. The Fountain Gate led to a spring where the two main valleys meet (the Kidron and Hinnom) while the King’s Pool is a reference to the Pools of Siloam. The gates where in such bad shape that Nehemiah’s animal could not pass through them because they were blocked by rubble. In its current state, the city cannot function.

Nehemiah’s call to rebuild the walls was from the Lord, and it was not yet time to reveal publically what was going to be done. In verse 16, we read, *“and the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.”* Informing these men what is to come must wait until his survey was complete, the damage was assessed, and until YHWH creates the right set of circumstances for Nehemiah to explain to the city’s leaders his plan to rebuild the city.

We do not know the interval of time between verse 16 and 17, but the time did indeed come for Nehemiah to reveal his intentions to the city’s officials. According to verse 17, *“then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.’”* Using the first person plural (“we”) Nehemiah identifies with the city and its people. He may have come from Artaxerxes’ court, but he is a Jew. It is clear that the damaged gates and walls leave the city virtually undefended. But the most striking thing is not his concern about the city’s safety, but that the city of God is an now object of Gentile scorn. The words of the 48th Psalm were very likely ringing in his mind as he inspected the city.

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, 2 beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. 3 Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress. 4 For behold, the kings assembled; they came on together. 5 As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight. 6 Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor. 7 By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish. 8 As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever. 9 We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. 10 As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. 11 Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments! 12 Walk

about Zion, go around her, number her towers, 13 consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation 14 that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.

Nehemiah has counted what was left of the city's towers, but cannot sing this Psalm except with sorrow. The great city of YHWH is now a source of derision. YHWH, his covenant, his people, are the object of ridicule. But YHWH will not leave his city in this state, so in verse 18, Nehemiah tells us, "*and I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me.*" God's mighty hand has brought Nehemiah to Jerusalem, and granted him the permission of Atraxerses to rebuild. Israel's fortunes will be reversed. Upon hearing this wonderful news we learn that "[the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work] said, '*Let us rise up and build.*' *So they strengthened their hands for the good work.*" The response to Nehemiah's report could not be better. The people of Jerusalem are excited and ready to get to work.

One of the subplots throughout the Bible is the war between Christ and the antichrist. So, we should not be surprised that minions of Satan now surface in the account. In verse 19, the two antagonists, Sanballat and Tobias, reappear along with a third opponent to the rebuilding project, a man named Geshem. "*But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it [i.e. the plan to rebuild the city], they jeered at us and despised us and said, 'What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?'*" Geshem, also known as Gashmu in Nehemiah 6, was the most powerful of all. He was leader of an Arabian confederacy which controlled the vast desert areas to the south, and which dominated the very profitable trade of Frankincense and Myrrh. His name may be loosely translated as "chunky."⁶ These men do not want the city of God rebuilt and restored according to the imagery of Psalm 48. YHWH's messianic purposes will interfere with their current political appointments and lucrative trade. Even worse, Jerusalem's rebuilding means that the true worship of YHWH will bring an end to the religious paganism (syncretism) practiced throughout the region. Satan will do everything in his power to disrupt the restoration of God's city.

Nehemiah grants his opponents no quarter. According to verse 20. "*Then I replied to them, 'The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.'*" We can paraphrase his response as, "God is with us, not you;" "we are his servants and we will rebuild, despite your opposition;" and "you have no right or claim to this land." "The city and its temple belong to YHWH—not you." "You may go now . . ." No amount of opposition can stop the hand of God. As we will see next time, the work of rebuilding gets underway post-haste.

What then, do we take with us by way of application? First, Nehemiah knows the hand of God is upon him—he has already witnessed YHWH direct the most powerful man in the world to send him to Jerusalem with the authority to rebuild. Nehemiah is confident that YHWH will prevail, and whatever opposition he will face—as difficult as it will be—cannot thwart the purposes of God. God keeps his promises—and that means Jerusalem will and must be rebuilt.

Second, we should never be surprised by Satanic opposition to the purposes of God. Nor we should ever lose confidence that God will finally prevail, since Satan has already been crushed by the cross and empty tomb of Jesus Christ, who removes the guilt and breaks the power of sin. As we see in our New Testament lesson (Matthew 16:13–20), Jesus promises Peter—who makes a remarkable profession of

⁶ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part ten)

faith, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God—*“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”* If the gates of hell, cannot prevail against Christ’s church, and if the earthly city of Jerusalem prefigures that church, then what chance do Sanballat, his lackey Tobias, and their friend “Chunky” have to disrupt the rebuilding of the city. Slim and none. But that won’t stop them from trying.

Finally Nehemiah has learned the lesson well. “The God of heaven will make us prosper.” Because Jesus has died for our sins and was raised for our justification, God has already ensured that his people (his church) will prosper in a way beyond anything Nehemiah could imagine. For, as the author of Hebrews tells us, we *“have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest . . . [we] have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.”*