

NEHEMIAH'S CONFIDENCE IN GOD (Neh. 2:1-8)

In the opening verse of the book, we are introduced to Nehemiah in King Artaxerxes' winter palace in Susa. Life was 'ordinary' for him until the devastating news arrived from his beloved Jerusalem. The city was in ruins, the people were despondent, and the great hope with which so many had returned over ninety years earlier had evaporated. The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire (1:3).

He immediately slumped into despair. He sat down, he wept, he mourned unconsolably, and he did not eat for many days. He truly was in a dark place, but despite the dire circumstances, he prayed and through it all, he recognised the sovereignty of the God of heaven (v.4), O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible *[awesome]* God (v.5), and he gave thanks to Jehovah for remaining faithful to his wayward people, and for being ready and willing to forgive them if they would repent and turn again to Him. And so Nehemiah concluded his heartfelt petition, ¹¹ O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. ... And he added, For I was the king's cupbearer. ... He wasn't a prophet or a preacher. He wasn't a priest or a Levite. He had no 'theological' training. He didn't come from a long line of great Old Testament characters. He was an ordinary man who loved the Lord, and who prayed for God to be gracious to him, his people, and his city. ...

Also, something else ... *he was in the place where God wanted him to be*. How do you know you are where the Lord wants you to be? Do you attend this fellowship because you believe this is where the Lord has a purpose for you to serve Him? ... You're not a 'hanger on', in some self-propagating sycophantic manner. Instead, you are here because you truly believe this is the place where God wants you to serve Him and has for you to be.

Nehemiah loved the Lord, and the Lord's people, and the city in which the glory of the Lord had been known ... and he was *devastated* when he heard about the condition it was in. ... And when the king asked him what he could do for him (v.4 For what dost thou make request?), Nehemiah did not hesitate in telling him, ⁵ send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it. ... He had such a heavy burden, - and having brought it to the Lord (v.4), - he knew straightaway how to answer the king.

How do you feel about the spiritual condition of Scotland today? ... Do you have to think about it, or does it trouble you so much you have already been praying? ... Churches have been closed in recent times and in some places, there seems to be little urgency in reopening. Even before the coronavirus, churches have been emptying at an alarming rate ... and the preaching of the Gospel is floundering, worldliness is invading and directing the Church agenda because secular and ungodly standards have unashamedly replaced the teachings of God's Word ... Indeed, in many quarters the declaration of the Old Testament prophet is so appropriate, The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so (Jer. 5:31). ... It is an *awful* picture of a people who knew the blessing and favour of God but have obstinately turned away from and abandoned Him.

And that was the condition of many of Nehemiah's fellow-countrymen ... both those who remained in Babylon and those who had returned to Jerusalem ... *but not Nehemiah!* ... Nehemiah believed God could do something about it, otherwise, he wouldn't have prayed. ... Nehemiah belonged to a remnant God was keeping faithful to Himself ... a remnant God always keeps by His grace. There has never been a time since creation when a people faithful to God has not survived. Even through the darkest days prior to the greatest judgment this world has ever known, - the Flood, - he kept Noah preaching the Gospel of righteousness. When it seemed as if the people of Israel were infatuated with idolatry, he had Elijah as His faithful testimony in the land. ... He has *never* been without a witness ... and He never *will* be without a witness until Jesus Christ returns to this earth for with absolute certainty, - no matter how anti-God and anti-Christian this world becomes, - ... the gates of Hell will *never* prevail against God's people, and the Gospel of saving grace *will* be preached in all the world to all the nations. ... The people of this world can become increasingly intoxicated with its hatred of everything to do with God, but neither they nor Satan can hinder His glorious plans and decrees!

And Nehemiah believed that too for even though he was weeping and in despair, he petitioned the God of Heaven to be merciful unto his people. ... And God gave him the unexpected opportunity to tell the great and powerful King Artaxerxes all about the predicament in Jerusalem.

It was an opportunity Nehemiah would *never* have thought of ... Nehemiah learned of Jerusalem's plight during the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign (445 BC), in the month of Chislev (1:1; mid-November to mid-December). It wasn't until four months later during the month of Nisan (mid-March to mid-

April) Artaxerxes noticed Nehemiah's sad demure and asked him what the matter was. So, for four long months, Nehemiah agonised in prayer before God concerning Jerusalem. ... His burden neither lessened nor diminished.

Of himself, he could not see any comfort and he heard of no one able to step into the breach with a message of hope. The problem was dark and becoming darker! ... And where would an answer come from? *Four months praying*, and no apparent response from God *until* it came from the most unlikely of sources.

Isn't that often how it happens? ... Sometimes God answers our prayers in ways we would never consider. ... There were synagogues in Babylon (that is where they started), but there was no answer coming from them ... The year is 445 BC which is approaching the so-called four hundred years of silence between the Old and New Testaments when the voice of God through the prophets lay silent across the land. ... Nehemiah had no one to talk with about his burden *until* the Lord worked in the heart of the pagan king ... Imagine a high and haughty king such as Artaxerxes enquiring of a foreign Hebrew slave, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart (2:2). ... A mighty ruler on the most powerful throne of his day paying attention to his wine-taster! ... Why should *he* care? It wasn't his problem! ... But isn't it so often the case God comes to our aid by using the most unlikely resources, sometimes by even using the ungodly?

He has the whole world in His hands, including its governments and its rulers, he removeth kings, and setteth up kings (Dan. 2:21) ... and He had Artaxerxes on the throne of *Babylon* at this particular time to carry out His will and purpose for His people. ... Artaxerxes, of course, would have not realised it but Scripture teaches us he was in power because He was ordained of God (Rom. 13:1) to be on the throne, and (unknowingly) this Godless king was being directed by Jehovah for God put it into his heart to speak to Nehemiah.

There are no accidents with God. ... Nehemiah couldn't see the way ahead, but he knew "Who holds the future, and He'll guide me with His hand [*for*] with God things don't just happen, everything by Him is planned" ... and God opened the heart of this pagan king to give the servant of the *King* of kings the opportunity to petition on behalf of his vulnerable people.

When God gives us opportunities, we should always take them. When He opens a door, we should pass through for imagine if Nehemiah had said to the king, "Oh, it doesn't matter; I'll 'get over it'. It's not your problem". ... What would have been the point if he had replied in that manner? After all, he had been praying to the Lord consistently for four months ... why pray if you don't

believe God will answer?! ... Why pray if when God responds, you choose not to do anything about it! ... Nehemiah believed, even though he was 'sore afraid' (2:2). He knew if he said the wrong thing to the king, he could lose his job ... However, he was confident not in himself, but in the Lord to Whom he prayed for he shared with the king his sadness, why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire? (v.3) ... And the king was immediately engrossed, - the Lord was in control, - and the king could not help but enquire further, For what dost thou make request? (v.4)

The king wanted to hear more ... What did it matter to him? It mattered absolutely nothing ... but here is what made the difference, *God was in control!* And look at what Nehemiah did ... Before he spoke to the king, he petitioned the *King of kings*, So I prayed to the God of heaven (Neh. 2:4).

What a faith he had! He was in the court of the most powerful king among *all* the kings of the earth at that time. Artaxerxes had a reputation for being kind and caring and tender ... and that was the person God had in charge for His plans to proceed ... and He also had His servant in such a prominent place.

And when Nehemiah was granted the opportunity to bring before the king the plight of his people and their beloved city, he took it ... and he was even granted the boldness by God to ask the king for a *favour*, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it (v.5). That is what God had put him there for, - that's why he was the king's winetaster. He was beginning to see it now. He was like the king's step-grandmother Esther for God had also put *him* there 'for such a time as this' (Esther 4:14).

Aren't God's plans wonderful? As Paul wrote, how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! (Rom. 11:33) ... He works in ways and means which far surpass our comprehension ... and He never makes a mistake. His plans never need adjustment or refinement for they are perfect, and they are always guaranteed to result in His glory.

And not only did the king permit his winetaster to return to Jerusalem, but he also provided the means to travel, along with all the necessities he would require when he arrived there. Everything 'clicked into place' because God was behind it all ... and Nehemiah humbly and gratefully acknowledged it, And the king granted me, *according to the good hand of my God upon me* (v.8).

God is so good, God is so good,
God is so good, He's so good to me.