

## Panic to Provision – Nehemiah 2:1-9

### Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 2:1-9

#### Introduction

How many of you are familiar with those moving sidewalks they have at airports?

I get a kick out of feeling kind of like Steve Austin on that old TV show Six Million Dollar Man as you can really move if you walk along at a normal pace – it kind of makes one feel superhuman

On one trip, though, I was in an airport somewhere waiting for a flight and I watched a little girl who was having a great time on the moving sidewalk as she and her family also waited for a flight

Only she was being contrary as kids sometimes are and it was pretty comical to watch her try to walk the opposite way on it because she would work really hard for a while before turning and going with the flow and then try again to make her way to the other end by going the wrong way

I imagine her parents let her play that way so she'd sleep on their flight which isn't an all-together bad idea

I mention that story because it serves to illustrate how futile and exhausting it is to go against God's desires or to work across purposes with God's plans –it's like walking the wrong way on an infinitely long moving sidewalk – it just doesn't work

Whereas aligning our desires and efforts with God's intentions actually multiplies our effectiveness and causes amazing things to happen and sometimes at a miraculous pace

We're going to see just that in the section of Scripture that we are studying today and what happened in Nehemiah's case serves as an example of how God can work through every Christ-follower

And it doesn't matter how routine or controlled his or her present existence seems to be

Because we are going to see that God will supply his people with what they need when they need it in order for them to accomplish his purposes when they remain in a committed relationship with him and act in the confidence and trust that comes out of that relationship

When we left Nehemiah last week he had heard the report of the despicable condition of Jerusalem's wall and he was praying consistently, persistently, and patiently for God to act on behalf of his people

Now we come to Chapter 2 and we see in the beginning of verse 1 that Nehemiah has been praying this way, night and day, for 3-5 months reminding God that he had redeemed his people by his great power and strong hand

And there was an urgency and immediacy to his prayers as he prayed repeatedly for God to act "today" as if he was telling God, "Lord, if you don't do something about this situation right now, it's going to reflect really badly on you!"

But God's reckoning of time isn't the same as ours

In fact, as we read in **2Peter 3:8** – one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day with the Lord

And God's timing is always perfect as he has been using those intervening days to teach Nehemiah patience and persistence and allowing Nehemiah to refine his thinking and align it with God's

Waiting on the Lord is a characteristic of those who cast their troubles on the Lord and his timetable knowing that fretful anxiety and impatience accomplishes nothing and is, in fact, a sign of distrust and unbelief

Still, we have to admit that there are times when we can allow prayer to become an excuse for inaction when what God wants us to do is clear enough and the path for doing it is open and the only thing lacking is our will to do it

We see that in the book of Haggai when the first of the exiles to return to Jerusalem under King Cyrus were busy working on their own houses while convincing themselves that the time wasn't yet right to rebuild the temple

But that wasn't the case with Nehemiah because, while it seems he understood and perhaps anticipated that he would be instrumental in the endeavor and might be the answer to his own prayer, such aspirations were pointless on a human level and, from a purely human perspective, Nehemiah had been praying for the impossible to happen

But as we know, with God all things are possible and one day, as Nehemiah was tending to his duties before King Artaxerxes, things got really interesting really quickly as his rather prosaic life turned to panic

## **I. The Prosaic Turns to Panic**

The established etiquette of the Persian court required servants to look happy as they carried out their tasks and being caught with a downcast countenance could have easily been mistaken for having an evil heart or bad intentions

And in the latter part of verse 1 and verse 2 [**Neh. 2:1-2**] we see that Nehemiah has let his feelings show and Artaxerxes has noticed

It could be, as some have speculated, that Nehemiah deliberately put on a sad face to catch the king's attention

This seems unlikely, however, because such an act could have resulted in severe and immediate consequences without the benefit of an inquiry as to the reason for the breach of etiquette

And since we see in verse 2 that Nehemiah shares that he "*was very much afraid*" at the king's notice it seems unlikely it was planned

It might also have been that Nehemiah intended to fulfill his duties as usual but that the months of grieving, praying, and waiting with no answer had taken their toll and Nehemiah's sadness broke through in spite of his intention to hide it

That would seem to explain the fear he felt because the original Hebrew of the king's question could be translated as more accusatory than sympathetic

More like asking "Why do you look so out of sorts today?" and following up with, "You must have an evil heart that's causing you to look as you do"

That's the way the same words are interpreted in **1Samuel 17:28** when David came to the battlefield on his father's orders and his brother accused him of having an evil heart and shirking his work out of a desire to see the battle

And it would have been quite dangerous for the king to interpret Nehemiah's demeanor as the result of a malicious plot he intends to carry out

I'll mention one more possibility and there may be others but it could have been that the king has been at another palace or been served by another cupbearer these past months and that this is the first time Nehemiah has been before the king since hearing about Jerusalem's troubles

While we can't be certain of reason behind the events, we know that Nehemiah could have been in serious jeopardy because; at that moment the king's attitude toward him was ambiguous at best and suspicious at worst

Nehemiah can have no confidence that he can count on the king being sympathetic to him and it's a very touchy situation for Nehemiah to be in

All of a sudden, it was as if Nehemiah found himself on a **tightrope** suspended high above the ground without a net and every step had to be taken with the utmost care because any misstep at all would almost certainly spell disaster

Any tightrope walker will tell you that preparation, focus, and balance are critical to making a successful walk

And as we proceed through our passage we are going to see how Nehemiah demonstrated those characteristics as he replied to the king's questions

The first question, of course, is in verse 2 "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick?" so let's take a look at Nehemiah's reply and the king's acceptance of it

## II. Nehemiah's Reply and the King's Acceptance

His run-of-the mill workday had just gotten really interesting when he hears the king ask "*Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick?*"

I would imagine Nehemiah's heart might well have skipped a beat or two when he heard those words but he recovered sufficiently to answer the king **honestly** but also quite **shrewdly**

Let's look at his answer as we find it recorded in verse 3 [**Neh. 2:3**] –

*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?"*

Notice that Nehemiah says his sadness is the result of the desolation of the city that contains his ancestors' graves

Kings of the ancient Near East are known to have had a special interest in the preservation of ancestral tombs

Ancestor worship and the belief that one's ancestors had influence in the lives of later generations by blessing or cursing them from beyond the grave made gaining and keeping their favor quite important

So Nehemiah's distress over the state of the derelict wall guarding the tombs of his ancestors would have made sense to Artaxerxes

By answering as he did, Nehemiah maximized the personal element without going near the political implications and he steered Artaxerxes away from thinking about the decree he had made earlier that banned the rebuilding of the wall

We can learn a great deal from how Nehemiah dealt with Artaxerxes and how he answered him respectfully and honestly but also tactfully

Pursuing God's purposes often involves dealing with unbelievers and we should always be honest and sincere with them and never be aggressive or critical or overbearing

And we must never appear aloof or superior to the unbelievers we deal with – in fact, it might be a good idea for us to imagine we are Nehemiah and they are Artaxerxes just to remind us to be respectful and honest but also cautious

Nehemiah was respectful and perfectly honest with Artaxerxes but he didn't mention that the city he was talking about was the capital city of Judah, Jerusalem

I'm sure you would agree that it would have been very unwise for him to have done so and for him to have explained to the king God's promise to always have a son of David on the throne and rule the whole world from the very city whose defensive walls he was seeking to rebuild

Now I need you to understand that God's people are never to be deceptive but they are to use good judgment about what information to share and when to share it

We see this principle in **Matthew 10:16** where Jesus says –

*Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

Harmless but wise; honest but discerning – those are the principles by which we should govern our conversation with others because, as Nehemiah demonstrates here, honesty doesn't always necessitate full, exhaustive disclosure

Nehemiah was respectful, honest, and shrewd in answering the king but still, his answer was rather bold

It's quite possible, and really quite probable, that Artaxerxes understood that Nehemiah had just laid the blame for his sadness right at his feet

I mean Nehemiah had been respectful and all but it was pretty obvious who he thought was at fault

And that could have made for another tense moment – kind of a wobble in the tightrope as it were – as Nehemiah waited to hear how the king would respond

If this was a made for TV drama, this is the spot where the camera would show a close-up of Artaxerxes' scowling face as he looked down on Nehemiah, the music would swell ominously, and we would cut to a commercial break

Or we might even see the dreaded words: "To be continued..." and hear the encouragement to tune in next week

I suspect that Nehemiah's mouth might have been more than a little dry and his heart rate might have been a bit elevated as he waited to see how the king would react

And what a relief it must have been to have heard the words, "*What are you requesting?*" rather than "Guards! Take him away!"

The king had accepted his reply and Nehemiah had the opportunity to make a request of the king

But still, the question posed required an immediate answer and Nehemiah would only get one chance to get it right so the question had to also heighten the sense of peril at least a bit

So let's turn our attention next to Nehemiah's request and the king's accommodation in answering it

### **III. Nehemiah's Request and the King's Accommodation**

**Nehemiah 2:4** contains one of the most important statements to be found in the pages of the Bible in spite of its brevity:

*"So I prayed to the God of heaven"*

Given the opportunity to make a request of the most powerful man in the entire world, Nehemiah first makes a request of God because he understands that it is ultimately God who provides – even if the provision is made through a king

It's inconceivable that any appreciable amount of time passed between Artaxerxes posing his question and Nehemiah's response to it

There is absolutely no way Nehemiah was able to say to the king, "Hang on a minute while I have a short time of prayer."

And there's no way he could have just stood there silently or hemmed and hawed while he figured out how to answer

In fact, it's highly unlikely that any observers would have noticed any pause in the conversation at all and yet we're told quite clearly that Nehemiah prayed before he responded

So, what are we to make of that?

What it means is that Nehemiah had to fire off a "bullet prayer" – or even more accurately, given the historical time-period, an arrow prayer – to God

It was probably something along the lines of "Lord, help me to get this right!" because he certainly wouldn't have had time to pray as we see him praying in Chapter 1 and yet God hears him and answers his petition

So what are we to learn from this? Let's look at four lessons we can take from this example

**First**, short, succinct prayers uttered in the moment are every bit as effective as regular, lengthy, thought out ones

As followers of Jesus Christ, we don't need to pray long-winded, flowery prayers in a cathedral voice in order to be heard

**Second**, prayer is absolutely essential before taking action

Remember, Nehemiah had been praying about this matter for months and yet, when the moment came to make his request of the king, he found it appropriate to speak to the Lord about it one more time

**Third**, praying in the moment is a product of a life of prayer

Bullet prayers don't tend to happen in a vacuum – they are the result of a life lived in God's presence and, as we've seen thus far in our study, Nehemiah is a man given to prayer so an instant prayer was consistent with his life of prayer

**Fourth**, prayer sometimes receives a "not yet" and sometimes it receives an immediate answer like we see in **Isaiah 65:24** – God decides when the time is right for an answer

So the first thing we see is that Nehemiah continues talking with God about the matter at hand but we also see that he has obviously given the matter some serious consideration because he had an answer ready when the king asked. And once again, Nehemiah replies somewhat boldly but tactfully as he is careful to show proper deference to the king while asking for exactly what he truly wants to have happen [**Neh. 2:5**]

Again, it's a risky request because of the political consequences of rebuilding the city's defenses and the request could be seen as disloyal or even seditious but also because he had no right to ask to be released from his duties. Nehemiah had no way of knowing how Artaxerxes would respond to his request.

I'm sure it was with a great sense of relief that Nehemiah heard the king ask "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" showing that he was at least open to entertaining the idea if the right answer was forthcoming.

And once more Nehemiah had an answer ready that satisfied Artaxerxes because he reports that, when he had given him a timeline, the king was pleased to let him go.

We aren't told how long Nehemiah said he would be gone but we know that Jerusalem was about 900 miles from Susa and that the journey took Ezra 4 months when he made it.

So, doubling that for the round trip it's unlikely that Nehemiah anticipated the trip taking less than a year.

In fact, looking ahead to **Nehemiah 5:14**, we see that Nehemiah ultimately spent 12 years in Jerusalem altogether although that may have been with regular return trips for giving reports and receiving extensions.

I don't know about you, but I would have probably heaved a sigh of relief at that point and counted myself blessed that I had escaped punishment and gotten what I had asked for but not Nehemiah.

Having secured the king's permission he made another breathtaking request as he asked for letters of introduction and a requisition for the materials he would need for rebuilding and even mentions the house he would be living in while there.

As a quick aside, mention of the house suggests that Nehemiah went to Jerusalem in an official capacity representing the king – as a sort of governor because the king would typically provide his governors with a house to live in.

Then when we look ahead at 5:14 again [**Neh. 5:14**] we see that this was clearly the case.

Anyway, Nehemiah makes his rather audacious request and we read in verse 8 [**Neh. 2:8**] that the king granted him all that he had asked for.

I'm afraid that, because we're familiar with the account, we miss just how remarkable this all was.

There was absolutely no earthly reason for Artaxerxes to do any of what Nehemiah requested.

Allowing the wall to be rebuilt was contrary to Artaxerxes' earlier decree and a complete reversal of his policy which really makes no sense.

After all, who would the residents of Jerusalem be defending themselves against except Persia?

Taking that into account, it's no wonder Nehemiah attributes his success to God's "good hand" being upon him.

Nehemiah recognized God's complete sovereignty and that even the most powerful ruler on earth is no match for God in heaven.

He understands he has just witnessed a demonstration of **Proverbs 21:1** that says

*The king's heart is like a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.*

Nehemiah also acknowledged God's goodness – God is good by nature but there are times when we recognize God's special goodness as he acts to bring about blessing to further his kingdom and this was one of those times.

And Nehemiah understood his place in all that transpired and he made certain to give God all the credit.

Many passages in Nehemiah emphasize the high degree of commitment God calls for in those who would be in a relationship with him but this one draws attention to the gracious response God gives to those who do trust him

In fact, when we look down to verse 9 [**Neh. 2:9**] we see that God provided more than Nehemiah is shown having asked for because we see that the king sent him on his way guarded by an armed escort comprised of “officers of the army and horsemen”

How often God’s graciousness exceeds anything we could possibly ask for!

And in this account we see that God has power in the lives of his people, he is present with his people, and God is accessible to his people at any moment – even when all we can do is fire off a bullet prayer

## **Conclusion**

But we need to understand something very critical lest we be led astray

Nehemiah was guided by his foundational commitment to God’s plans that was born out of and bolstered by his constant communion with God

His response to the king during the time of crisis was shaped by his understanding of and dedication to what God wanted and his complete confidence that God could and would bring it about

His quick prayer and boldness didn’t just happen – they were the products of a habit of prayer and a life lived close to God

It seems evident that Nehemiah wrote this book as a kind of memoir looking back over the events that took place

And one can’t help but wonder if he marveled at his audacity and wondered how he dared to be as bold as he was when he looked back over the things he said to the king and how things could have gone so very wrong

If he did, it would have served to reinforce his belief in God’s providence and goodness in his life in directing his words and directing the responses of King Artaxerxes

The point of the account is to show the depth of Nehemiah’s commitment and how that shaped his thoughts, behavior, and speech and how, as he acted in faith, God brought the good results

Today, God’s people need to think carefully about God’s revealed plans for the world and what he wants to accomplish in it

And we do that by communicating with God in prayer and by being in his Word

Then we need to adopt those plans and make them our agenda for life as we look for ways to be personally involved in them while seeking his guidance every step of the way

When we do we will be able to act with boldness the way Nehemiah did

And no matter what difficult or frightening or even limiting circumstances we might find ourselves in we will be able to move in the right direction on that moving sidewalk confident that God controls the outcome and will multiply our every effort

Let’s pray