



## From Burdened to Boasting

Nehemiah 2 is a very helpful chapter about how God's children can move from anxious questions to confident answers through a Godward focus. Nehemiah's first words in the chapter are a doleful question: "*Why should not my countenance be sad?*" (v. 3). Nehemiah's last words in the chapter are a confident creed: "*The Lord of heaven, he will prosper us*" (v. 20). Let's look at these steps whereby the Lord leads Nehemiah.

### Nehemiah's Sadness for Zion's Ruins

Nehemiah was sad at the king's court. Wine, which many abuse to cheer their hearts, gave him no cheer; the pageantry, festivities, and luxuries could not lighten his heart. His hands might have held the finest of wines, but his eyes pushed back the saddest of tears. The marble floors of the palace might have held up his feet, but his heart sank down under a heavy burden. For many, this world's dainties make them forget their sadness for a while. When a child of God is sad, however, whether it be over his remaining sin, his missing of God, or his homesickness for heaven, the world is not able to mitigate his sadness.

We are told that Nehemiah had not been sad in the king's presence before. In fact, we know that many kings did not tolerate those around them to be sad, serious, or sullen; they preferred to surround themselves with levity and flippancy. This, of course, is not peculiar to kings. Today's generation has largely the same attitude. People prefer the vacuous smiles and hollow laughs; they choose whatever might make them laugh. Man would rather have the crackling of thorns (Eccl. 7:5) than the sobriety of the wise.

When the king asked him the reason for his sadness, Nehemiah answered honestly: "*the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste*" (v. 3). Nehemiah was burdened for the state of Zion.

The world does not know the joys of the Christian, but neither does it understand his sorrows (see Lam. 1:12). Yet, true Christians would not want to trade even their sorrows for the world's joys. Artaxerxes can have his cup of wine; Nehemiah will have his cup of affliction, if God has put it in his hand.

### Nehemiah's Prayer to Zion's God

Large machines often turn on little cylinders. Likewise, nothing is too small for God's great providence to use. Look at the motions of God's providence here. First of all, God's providence made the king draw attention to Nehemiah's sadness. He could just as easily have ignored it, or not even have noticed it at all. But God's providence directs his eye, mind, and mouth: "*Why is thy countenance sad?*" (v. 2). Secondly, after Nehemiah explained the reason for his sadness, God's wondrous providence again fastened itself to the king so that he asked: "*For what dost thou make request?*" What a question!

One writer comments: "*This simple question opened the strings of Persia's giant purse.*" Military might, financial fortunes, political position — all, conceivably, lay at the disposal of Nehemiah by the king's simple question. God's works are a mighty deep!

However, Nehemiah does not lunge forward and grab whatever this earthly monarch could offer. He first goes on an errand to heaven — a quick errand; it was so quick, Artaxerxes probably didn't even notice. This shows how heavenly minded Nehemiah was. The coals of true devotion were hot

in his soul. He needed no retreat to his closet to stoke the fire of prayer. His prayer jumped like a spark to heaven. In no time, he had laid his need before the throne of grace, and now he could answer the throne of the empire.

Stated times for prayer and fellowship with God are essential to any true godliness. However, believers experience that God's ears are always open to their cries. Through the ever-living High Priest and the blood once offered up for all, we can have constant access to the throne of God. Not that this is always our experience. But it can be, and it was here for Nehemiah.

Nehemiah did not have a self-reliance that simply answered the king's offer without prayer. He did not glibly lift his sails to ride the winds of providence. He wanted to have grace through providence, not providence without grace.

### **Nehemiah's Forwardness for Zion's Good**

Having opened Persia's purse to this dejected cupbearer, Artaxerxes took a considerable risk. What will he have to give up?

On the other hand, Nehemiah also took a great risk, a risk many Christians would be loathe to take. Jerusalem was just a dot on the empire's map. How could he ever bother the world's most powerful man with the needs of a few nameless pilgrims and strangers on the remote edge of his empire?

Perhaps you work for a large company. Imagine if the president of the company opened the company's resources for anything that you wished. Would the cause of Christ come to your mind? Would you dare say: "You know, I am very worried about poor Christians in Eastern Europe. They have so few resources. The winters are long, the harvests bad, the resources scarce, and practically no one is looking out for them." Would we have such courage? It is astounding how many people come to our doors and ask for donations to help environmental groups, animal causes, and the like. Have you ever thought to say to them: "You know, I would love to help you help abused pets, but did you know that the unborn are being killed every day in our city? They have souls and they really need your and my help."

Nehemiah was forward for Zion's good. He asked the king to send him and resources along with him to build Zion's walls. And he had the forwardness to go himself. He could have asked the king to send someone else to coordinate the work, and then he could have stayed among the marbled terraces and clinking gold dishware while someone else went. No, he wished to exchange the gold and marble of Shushan for the rubble and ashes of needy Jerusalem. His had a self-sacrificing forwardness, a forwardness into lowliness.

Now think of the forwardness of Nehemiah's Lord. For Him it was not robbery to be equal with God (Phil. 2:6). His were the glories of heaven. But for Zion's sake, He humbled himself unto the deepest reproach and pains of hell, both in body and soul. He said: "*Lo, I come.*" Nehemiah's forwardness flowed from Christ's eternal forwardness and prefigured Christ's sacrificial forwardness.

### **Nehemiah's Inspection of Zion's Condition**

As Nehemiah entered Jerusalem some weeks or months later, the winds of God's providence were in his sails, so to speak. Yet, this didn't make him proud or make him assume he knew what to do and how to do it. He waited three days (v. 11), and then, in the obscurity of the night, he rose up secretly, unannounced and without ceremony, and inspected the situation on the ground. He circled the city as far as he was able. His eyes, which once took in spotless luxury and lavish splendor, now gazed on destruction, decay, and desolation. It was probably worse than he had envisioned. Perhaps he knew Psalm 48: "*Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion ... Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof.*" At one time, this would have been an impressive and awe-inspiring journey. Now it was depressing and awful. Yet, Nehemiah did not turn away from his task. He was acquainting himself with the greatness of and

the precision needed for the task. He did not go forward in ignorance or petulance, but with an experimental acquaintance of Jerusalem's wretched condition.

Christ's first thirty years on the earth were also years in which He moved in relative obscurity. His eyes also traced the misery of man, and what sin had made out of His creation. Through the long thirty years prior to His initial preaching, He rode past the broken gates and ruined walls of a lost world. It must have impressed upon Him the weight of the work the Father had given Him to do; as the Son of God, He had, unlike Nehemiah, a perfect knowledge of man's state, and yet, in His human nature, He increased in wisdom (Luke 2:52), also in this respect. Then, after these thirty years, the time came when this One, greater than Nehemiah, could preach the cure, in full recognition of the disease.

### **Nehemiah's Challenge to Zion's Inhabitants**

Nehemiah had two words for Zion's condition: distress and reproach (v. 17). The word "distress" is actually "badness" in the original. "Badness" is the corruption of goodness, and this is what Nehemiah first confronted. He didn't come with the plan without emphasizing the need for the plan. "Ye see," he said, *"the distress we are in"* (v. 17). Notice the "we": Nehemiah placed himself next to them as sharing their lot. They should have known this "badness," since they had lived in it for so long. Now Nehemiah had seen it, and he unveiled its ugly character to the people. He detailed its features. *"Jerusalem lieth waste ... the gates are burnt."* There is ruin, wretchedness, and, as a result, reproach. This word "reproach" means disgrace. Today, as then, the world scorns God's name, God's city, God's people. Nehemiah faced the people with how things truly were.

Yet he didn't leave them with the bad news. As his enemies even acknowledged, he had come to seek the "welfare" of Jerusalem (v. 10). Here the original uses the word "goodness." Nehemiah was all about restoring Jerusalem from its existing badness back to its original goodness. And he didn't do this in his own strength. He comforted the people by declaring to them the *"good hand of God"* (v. 18). He met the badness of the people's situation with the goodness of the Lord's disposition. If the people were simply to embark on correcting the badness with their own goodness, or even the goodness of Nehemiah, there would be no reason for hope. Instead, God's goodness is the promise that can impel weak hands and raise up distressed spirits.

And this is what happened: *"So they strengthened their hands for this good work"* (v. 18).

### **Nehemiah's Confidence with Respect to Zion's Enemies**

The exercise of faith does not stop the attacks of the enemy; in fact, it increases them. It is not coincidence that, when the people committed to the work of the wall, the enemies' devices increased (v. 19-20). Here these devices took the form of scornful laughter (v. 19).

The chapter began with Nehemiah's sadness; now we hear of the enemies' laughter. The godly sorrow of God's children on earth is worked by heaven; and the scornful laughter of God's enemies on earth is worked by hell. Yet heaven takes note of both, and the time is coming when each will come to an end. God will wipe all tears from His children's faces, but He will also turn all scornful laughter into eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In the meantime, the enemies' taunts should be opportunities for confident confession: *"The God of heaven, he will prosper us"* (v. 20). Nehemiah made his boast in God. He sang out: *"We'll wear the victor's crown, no more by foes assaulted, We'll triumph through our King."*

In the space of one chapter, God has brought Nehemiah from anxious burdens to gracious boasting.

### **Questions:**

1. What forms of sadness can Christians experience? Why can't the world's "wine" help them?

2. What can we learn about Nehemiah's spontaneous prayer in the king's court (v. 4)? We know he had been praying for four months (see 1:1 and 2:1). Why pray now?
3. Have you known someone who has been very forward about his or her love for Christ and His cause? Doesn't it seem like the world is more forward about its commitments than Christians? Think of ways in which that could change.
4. Imagine Nehemiah's nighttime tour of inspection. Make such a tour of the Christian church today. What does it reveal? Do you ever take a tour of the condition of your own heart?
5. Take a close look at how Nehemiah challenged the people (vv. 17-18). What adjectives do you think best describe the character of this challenge? Explain.
6. How did Nehemiah rise above the laughter of his enemies? What does this teach us about the Christian's stance in this world?

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