

4. Nehemiah: Praying for Success

Question to begin

- How open are you about your feelings when you are disappointed or sad? Would you never let anyone know how you are feeling or would you moan and complain endlessly? Or somewhere in between?
- When have you had to rebuild or restore something?

The Reading: Nehemiah 1:1 – 2:18

Bad News from Jerusalem

¹The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ²one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³They replied, ‘The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.’

⁴ When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵I said, ‘O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. ⁷We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.” ¹⁰They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!’

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah Makes a Proposal

2 In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served to him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. ² So the king said to me, ‘Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart.’

Then I was very much afraid. ³ I said to the king, ‘May the king live for ever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors’ graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’

⁴ Then the king said to me, ‘What do you request?’

So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵ Then I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors’ graves, so that I may rebuild it.’

⁶ The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), ‘How long will you be gone, and when will you return?’ So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date.

⁷ Then 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 grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; ⁸ and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.’ and the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.

Assessing the Damage

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 officers of the army and cavalry with me. ¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. ¹² Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. ¹³ I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon’s Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. ¹⁵ So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

¹⁶The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.

17 Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.’ ¹⁸I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, ‘Let us start building!’ So they committed themselves to the common good.

First Impression

Was there anything that surprised, impressed, delighted or challenged you in these readings?

Questions for Reflection

- How does Nehemiah know that the report on Jerusalem (1:2-3) is accurate?
- Whose faithfulness is the basis of Nehemiah’s appeal to God (1:5-11)? How does Nehemiah’s confidence in God’s mercy compare with David’s in Psalm 51?
- At the news of Jerusalem’s condition, Nehemiah “*mourned for days*” (1:4). How do you think he was later affected by the sight of the city (2:13-15)?
- Amid social and political events, where does Nehemiah discern God’s activity? Consider especially 1:7-8; 2:8, 12, 18. How is it possible to discern God’s purposes and actions in the world?
- What Nehemiah asked God to do (1:5-11) he later describes as something God put into his heart to do (2:12). Why?
- Why is Nehemiah willing to accept the burdens of leading his people in their difficult situation?
- Nehemiah prays for success. What is his idea of success? Is his idea of success different from yours?
- What is the relationship between praying for God’s help and serving God? What is the relationship in your life?

- Where are you especially aware that people are deprived, suffering, exploited or oppressed? How might you pray for these people? As you pray, do you feel a desire to take some kind of action? What step could you take?
- What opportunity has God given you to build in your family, in your country, in the Church? How would you compare this opportunity to Nehemiah's response to the situation he faced? What could you learn from him? How do you pray for success in the work God has given you? What could you learn from Nehemiah's prayer?

Closing Prayer

New Testament writers regard the city of Jerusalem as a symbol of the Church as God's people gathered together in Christ, both on earth and in heaven.

St. Paul speaks of "*Jerusalem above*" – our heavenly home (Galatians 4:25-27).

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Christians belonging already to the "*heavenly Jerusalem*" through Jesus (Hebrews 12:22-24).

From this viewpoint, pray Psalm 122 as a prayer for the Church. Notice especially verse 7, which mentions the subject of Nehemiah's concern: "*Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.*"

Psalm 122 Song of Praise and Prayer for Jerusalem

¹ I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'

² Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³ Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.

⁴ To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

⁵ For there the thrones for judgement were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
'May they prosper who love you.

⁷ Peace be within your walls,

and security within your towers.’

⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’

⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.