

*Ezra-Nehemiah: Return and Restoration*

“Conversing with the King”

Introduction: Have you ever heard the term “arrow prayer?” It describes those little, three to four second prayers we shoot out to God when we need immediate help. “Tell me what to say, God.” “Protect me from that person, Lord.” “Show me which way I should go, heavenly Father.”

We find an example of one in our reading from Nehemiah today (2:4-5): “The king said to me, *What is it you want?* Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king . . .” Nehemiah didn’t say, “Hold on a minute king, let me go pray about this for a few days.” No, given the situation he found himself in, Nehemiah needed immediate wisdom. And yet, that four second prayer, uttered during a conversation with his boss, Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, wasn’t just thrown out to the heavenly airwaves by Nehemiah in confusion and desperation; it came out of a much longer conversation (day and night, over four months) he had been having with the Lord, the king of the universe.

So far, in our look at Ezra-Nehemiah (originally one book in the Hebrew Bible), we’ve seen two waves of return of God’s people from their 70 years of exile in Babylon. The first was in 538 B.C. under Zerubbabel, who led the rebuilding of the altar and the temple. The second took place in 458 under Ezra, who led the people in a renewed understanding of the Law of the Lord. The third, which we’ll begin learning from today, took place in 445 under Nehemiah, who would lead the people in a rebuilding of the walls and gates of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah is known for being a man of action, a man with great organizational and leadership skills. But, as we’ll hear in a moment, Nehemiah was also a man of prayer. Importantly, Nehemiah didn’t turn to prayer as a last resort (“Well, I guess there’s nothing left to do but pray.”); it was an ongoing practice that shaped him, that helped his ear be attentive and his heart open to the Spirit’s leading as he longed for the rebuilding and restoration of the community of God’s people.

Let’s hear how his story begins and then consider how his praying might inform and inspire our own as we continue to think about the rebuilding and restoration of our own community of faith.

I. In Great Trouble and Disgrace

A. As opposed to Ezra, who we might say was a “religious professional,” Nehemiah was a layperson who held a very significant role in the Persian court, and whose direct boss was the Persian king. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to this king. This did not mean that he knew the best wines to buy when he went to the store. It did mean that it was his role to test the wines the king would be drinking to make sure no one was trying to poison him. Cupbearers in ancient days were also close confidants and trusted companions of the king. The fact that the king was concerned about Nehemiah’s sad disposition, and also that the queen was present during their conversation, were indicators of this trust.

How wonderful that God doesn’t just use religious professionals to accomplish his purposes! And how important it is as laypeople to cultivate relationships of trust with those on our frontline and in our spheres of influence. You never know how or when God will use you in those places and with those people to further his purposes.

B. What had caused Nehemiah's sadness of heart? Well, one of his brothers had made the trip back to Persia and had found his way to Susa, the winter residence of the king. In catching up with one another, Nehemiah asked how the returning community was faring. "Not well," was the answer. While the temple had been rebuilt, the walls of the city remained a pile of stones and the gates a heap of ashes, just like the Babylonian army had left it decades ago (and kind of like how our old police and fire station looked last week!). In his report, Hanani would likely also have shared that the attempt to begin rebuilding the wall, after the temple had been completed, had been quickly halted by none other than Nehemiah's boss, Artaxerxes himself, who had been led to believe that if the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, the city might rebel, and tax revenue might be lost (Ezra 4:7-23). All of which meant that the holy city not only still looked a mess, but, without walls and gates, remained defenseless.

C. What was Nehemiah's response to this news of trouble and disgrace? He did not stand up and declare that it was time to undertake a building plan. Quite the opposite; he sat down and wept. Those five words never fail to move me when I read them. Nehemiah didn't weep because it meant he would have to cross Jerusalem off of his vacation list; he wept because the city that was to demonstrate the glory of God was a wreck! What causes you to weep? Do we weep because of the 17 missionaries kidnapped in Haiti last Sunday, or do we weep because the Patriots lost a tough game in OT?!

Illustration: Rama and I were in Home Depot last Monday and fell into a conversation with the fellow who cuts the various shades and roller blinds. He was distraught. He was distraught because the Patriots had lost the previous night's game and this man was close to tears. Now, Rama and I had watched the game and so were able to share his frustration and relive all the mistakes the Pats and their coaching staff had been made. But to the point of tears? Those losing players still woke up the next day collecting ridiculously large checks; I won't be crying for them anytime soon!

But when is the last time you wept because of something pertaining to the reign of God? That because of unjust, immoral actions of people who say they follow Jesus the glory and witness of God has been diminished, or because church attendance post-pandemic has greatly declined, or because the voice of God is being ignored in public conversations, or because you continue to have neighbors and family members who do not know Jesus, or because the church is still undergoing persecution in many places throughout the world?

I don't raise these questions to induce guilt, but just to ask myself, and to ask us, what moves my heart? Am I seeing the needs around me, am I seeing what is not, and what therefore needs to be, such that I'm moved to pray, and listen for what God might have me do?

## II. For some days...I prayed

A. That is where Nehemiah went next. Having heard the need, he spent considerable time in prayer. The text suggests that he mourned and fasted and prayed, both night and day, for over four months (Kislev to Nisan, 1:1; 2:1). I'm pretty sure Nehemiah had no clue he would end up being released from the king's service, then make the long and difficult journey to Jerusalem, and then lead the returning remnant in a construction project! But he was willing to patiently wait on what the Lord might call him to do in response to this sad news. The prayer recorded for us looks like it was either a summary of the kinds of things he prayed, or the final prayer he prayed, when God finally gave him a vision for what he was being called to do and so moved his heart to approach the king and seek his favor, "today."

B. As I studied this prayer, I was struck by the word “today.” It reminds me of the word Jesus spoke early in his ministry when he was asked to read the scripture in the synagogue in Nazareth. He read from a passage in Isaiah which anticipated the coming of the Messiah, the breaking into human history of the reign of God, and the restoration such inbreaking would bring. After reading, Jesus declared, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:16-21). And the rest of the gospel story is about how that reign of God has arrived in the world in Jesus. Nehemiah, it seems, is praying for nothing short of the reign of God to break into the reign of Artaxerxes, right then, “today,” to begin to bring the healing that only God can to the trouble and disgrace that were a part of his experience. We, too, when we pray, are calling on a power well beyond ourselves, the power of God to break into our lives, into our world, and bring its healing to bear on our trials and temptations.

C. One of the ways we can learn to pray more purposefully is to study prayers such as this one and allow them to inform and give shape to our own praying. What we see in this prayer is that it was saturated in scripture—many of its phrases coming directly out of the Torah—and focused on God. In other words, Nehemiah was using what he learned about God and God’s ways and God’s promises to help give shape to what and how he prayed. Let’s notice a few things about his conversation with the King of kings.

1. He begins by acknowledging the majesty of God as the God of heaven and the great and awesome God. This God whose name is the LORD is not another local deity but the Lord of all creation. Great and awesome was a description used of God in times and places where his people felt overwhelmed by their circumstances or by the peoples around them. God was with them and had absolute power and authority (cf. Dt. 7:21-24).

2. He continues by acknowledging the covenant of love this God had entered with his people. It was not a business transaction in which the parties owed each other something; a covenant was a relationship that required both obedience and mercy. It began as this God had seen the misery and heard the groaning of his people in slavery in Egypt, and Nehemiah was calling on this God’s “ears” and “eyes” to hear and see their cries again (1:6; Ex. 2:24).

3. Acknowledging the greatness of this God and how God had reached out to this people to redeem them leads Nehemiah to confess the various ways they had failed, in response to their having been rescued, to follow God’s ways, a failure that led God to make good on his promise to scatter them into exile. But Nehemiah also stands on God’s promise to gather them, even from far away, and bring them home if they repent and return to him (Dt. 4:27-31).

4. He closes by praying that God would enable him to have success in what God had laid on his heart, and to be bold in approaching the king with what he needed. When his conversation with the king takes place, we’re not given the content of Nehemiah’s “arrow prayer,” but the essence of it likely was – “Lord, give me strength to lay out before the king what you have laid on my heart.”

D. Let’s notice a couple things about Nehemiah’s following conversation with the Persian king.

1. First, notice that Nehemiah was willing to participate in being the answer to his praying when, after the king invited him to speak, Nehemiah reveals that he had been planning along with praying – he gave the king the time that the journey would take, he knows exactly what kind of authorization he’d need to take with him, and he knows exactly what kind of materials he’ll need and where to source them. In his

praying, God seems to have given Nehemiah clarity on what needed to be done, and Nehemiah was not only willing to name it, but willing to do it, to be a part of the answer.

2. Second, Nehemiah knows, after all that he's prayed and planned, that it is only by God's gracious hand that the decree to stop construction by this king was now being reversed, and that the trouble and disgrace now being experienced by this community could be healed.

One of the ways we might use this prayer to help teach us to pray would be to pray it every day for a week, and to let it, each day, lead you into a conversation with God that connects with what is going on in your life. You might take an additional step and read the rest of chapter 2. Pay attention to how Nehemiah walks through the city streets, examining what had been broken down and seeing what needed to be repaired. Then imagine that you are walking through the various streets of your life in these days. What do you see that has become broken? What needs repairing? How might you invite God on that walk to look at those places with you? What might God be inviting you to see? Where might he be inviting you to be part of the answer?

So let us, as we sing, be reminded of that great invitation given to us by our amazing friend, Jesus, to gather up all that troubles us and needs repairing, and take it to the Lord in prayer.