

Nehemiah Chapter 2

Nehemiah 2:1 "And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, [that] wine [was] before him: and I took up the wine, and gave [it] unto the king. Now I had not been [beforetime] sad in his presence."

“Artaxerxes (reigned 464 – 424 B.C.), was a king of Persia in whose court Ezra and Nehemiah were officials (Ezra 7:1, 7). Known as Artaxerxes I, Longimanus (“Long-handed”), he temporarily halted the rebuilding program at Jerusalem that his predecessor Cyrus had encouraged (Ezra 4:7-23). However, he later allowed it to resume (Ezra 6:14). In the seventh year of his reign (458 B.C.), he authorized Ezra to lead a large number of Israelites back from the captivity to return to Jerusalem in order to begin rebuilding the city’ walls (verses 1-10; 13:6; see Ezra 4:7-23 and chapter 7).

“Nisan” is April – May and is the beginning of the Persian and Jewish year. The details of chapter 2 take place about four months after Nehemiah began praying. It was still in Artaxerxes’ “twentieth year” (1:1), for his official year began in the seventh month – Tishri (October).

“That wine was before him”: Since the act of tasting wine to ensure it was not dangerous to the king strengthened the trust between king and cupbearer, this was the appropriate time for Nehemiah to win Artaxerxes’ attention and approval. Not surprisingly, kings often developed so much trust in their cupbearers that the latter became counselors to the kings.

“Now I had not been ... sad”: Sadness was a dangerous emotion to express in the king’s presence. The king wanted his subjects to be happy, since this reflected the well-being brought about by his administrative prowess.

The month of Nisan is their first month, similar to our month of April. We learned from the last lesson, that Nehemiah was the cupbearer for the king. He had always been pleasant in the company of the king in the past. At this time, he was not able to keep from showing his sadness about Jerusalem. He was in the very presence of the king serving him, so the king noticed the sadness in Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 2:2 "Wherefore the king said unto me, Why [is] thy countenance sad, seeing thou [art] not sick? this [is] nothing [else] but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid,"

“Was very sore afraid”: He feared that either his countenance, his explanation or his request would anger the king and thus lead to his death (compare Esther 4:11 with 5:1-3).

Nehemiah had reason to fear, for being sad in the king’s presence was a serious offense in Persia (compare Esther 4:2). Also, he knew his request might greatly anger the king.

This king seemed to care for the feelings of those around him. He knew Nehemiah was not sick and he was probably very good to Nehemiah, so this question is understandable. He is very

aware because he realized this sickness was of Nehemiah's heart. Nehemiah was afraid, thinking he might have displeased his king.

Nehemiah 2:3 "And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchers, [lieth] waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?"

“Sepulchers ... gates”: Nehemiah’s deep concern and sadness over the condition of Jerusalem and his people was expressed in his reference to tombs and gates. A tomb was a place to show respect for dead community members who birthed the living generation and passed on their spiritual values to them. Tombs were also the place where the present generation hoped to be honored by burial at death. Gates were emblematic of the life of the city, since the people gathered for judicial procedure or basic social interaction near the gates. The burned gates represented the death of social life, i.e., the end of a community of people.

Nehemiah began with a compliment to the king. His fear of displeasing the king was not as strong as his desire to change things in Jerusalem. Nehemiah told of the things troubling him about his homeland to the king.

Nehemiah 2:4 "Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven."

“What dost thou make request”? The king rightly interpreted Nehemiah’s sad countenance as a desire to take action on behalf of his people and homeland. His immediate response to the king’s question illustrates how continual his prayer life was (compare 1:6).

“God of heaven” (see note on Ezra 1:2).

Artaxerxes was a kind king. He did not like to see his faithful servant so unhappy. The question the king asked Nehemiah was sincere. He was saying, Nehemiah, what would it take to make you happy? It appears that Nehemiah prayed, before he answered the question. He did not want to request something of the king that was not the will of God for his life. His prayer was to God alone. He prayed in his heart before he answered the king.

Nehemiah 2:5 "And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favor in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchers, that I may build it."

Nehemiah asked the king to reverse the first decree (in Ezra 4:21).

“That I may build it”: The request undeniably referred to the city walls, for there could be no permanence without walls, but it also may have included political and administrative rebuilding as well.

This was the first mention that Nehemiah even wanted to go to Jerusalem. He was not asking the king to release him, but just to reassign him to Jerusalem. He wanted to rebuild the wall, gates, and now we read sepulchers of his ancestors.

Nehemiah 2:6 "And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time."

“The queen”: Since Esther was the queen of the previous king Ahasuerus (Xerxes; ca. 486 – 464 B.C.), and the stepmother of Artaxerxes, it could be that she had previously influenced the present king and queen to be favorably disposed to the Jews.

Some think the set “time” actually turned out to be 12 years (as 5:14 indicates), after which he returned to the king for several years (13:6). Others believe he reported back after the dedication of the walls, within the year, then had his appointment as governor renewed and returned to Jerusalem.

The queen was named Damaspia. Since she was in the room, this was possibly a time of relaxing and putting away the government issues. He would be in a good mood at that time with his wife there. He did not want to give Nehemiah up completely, but would listen to any reasonable time he might want to be away. Nehemiah explained to him the length of time it would take, and the king approved and let him go. Nehemiah actually stayed away 12 years.

Verses 7-8: This decree was the same as the one (in Daniel 9:24-27), which relates to the beginning of the 70 weeks of prophetic years to “restore and to build Jerusalem”. Note how specific Nehemiah was in the contents of his request. The “palace” actually was a fortress or tower and may have been Hananeel’s mentioned (in 3:1). It protected the temple and overlooked the northwest corner of its courts. Hyrcanus I (134 – 104 B.C.), built an acropolis here, and later Herod rebuild it and named it Antonia. The “house that I shall enter” is the governor’s home.

Nehemiah 2:7 "Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah;"

“Let letters be given me”: Official letters transferred a portion of the king’s authority to Nehemiah. In this context, he needed to pass through the lands of Judah’s enemies who could harm him or prevent him for rebuilding Jerusalem. The roads upon which messengers, ambassadors, and envoys of all sorts traveled had stations where such letters could be inspected for passage. Three months of travel from Susa to Jerusalem was long, dangerous, and ridden with protocol where letters were required for passage. The danger associated with the passage, but particularly the administrative authority which Nehemiah carried in the letters, led Artaxerxes to send captains of the army and horsemen with Nehemiah for protection (2:9; see notes on Ezra 1:11; 7:8-9).

The letters would declare that Nehemiah had not run away, but had been sent by the king. This would give him safe passage.

Nehemiah 2:8 "And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which [appertained] to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me."

“And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest”: Lumber was a very precious commodity. This is illustrated in a document from one ancient city in Mesopotamia in which a forest official is taken to court for cutting down a tree. Forests were carefully guarded, and written permission from the king would assure Nehemiah of the lumber he would need to build the citadel, wall reinforcements, and his own residence from which he would administrate the reconstruction.

“Palace”: This edifice located next to the temple on the northwest side was a fortified building for the purpose of guarding the temple. It was subsequently rebuilt by Herod and named Antonia.

“The good hand of my God upon me”: This refrain is common to both Ezra and Nehemiah. It is a frequent reminder in these inspired books that God works through His servants to accomplish His will (compare Ezra 1:5; 7:6).

The timbers that Nehemiah was asking for were possibly from trees growing in an area near Jerusalem, so they would not have to be carried far. This was a generous king, and he granted the request of Nehemiah. He realized these were not for Nehemiah's own use, but for the wall and gates that he went to repair. It would be of no use to go, if there were no materials to do the work with.

Verses 2:9 – 3:1: The journey from Persia to Jerusalem and the preparation period was to be 3-4 months (compare 2:1 with 6:15).

Nehemiah 2:9 "Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me."

“I came to the governors”: Nehemiah’s encroachment upon their provincial control posed a tremendous threat to these officials. If handled improperly, disregard for the other local officials would have put Nehemiah’s life and the lives of those in Jerusalem in jeopardy. To prevent such a reaction, God had moved the Persian king to dispatch royal army captains and horsemen to accompany Nehemiah and to guard against such attacks.

The escort provided more than protection; it gave the expedition style and impressively reinforced their credentials to the neighboring governors, vividly illustrating the change in policy.

Not only did the king allow Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem, but he sent captains of the army and horsemen with him to give him a safe journey. The governors received Nehemiah with his proof of the blessings of the king written in the letters he had sent.

Nehemiah 2:10 "When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard [of it], it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel."

“Sanballat ... Tobiah”: These men were probably also behind the opposition described (in Ezra 4:7-23), which stopped the work in Jerusalem. Sanballat served as governor of Samaria (Horonaim being a town in Moab, he was probably a Moabite), and Tobiah of the region east of the Jordan. These district magistrates were leaders of Samaritan factions (see chapter 6), to the north and east. They had lost any recourse to prevent Judah from rebuilding since God’s people were authorized to fortify their settlement against attack from enemies such as these two officials. To overtly attack or oppose the Jews would be to oppose the Persian king.

“Sanballat” was the governor of Samaria, according to an Elephantine document written in (407 B.C.), some 38 years after the events of this chapter. He would cause much grief to the Israelites (compare 13:28-29). Sanballat’s name, coming from Akkadian *Sin-uballit*, “Sin [the moon god] Has Given Life”, may indicate something of the mixed character of the Samaritan religion at this time.

“Tobiah” had a good Jewish name, “Yahweh Is Good”, but was a treacherous person. He may have been an ex-slave, but more likely “servant” indicates his position in the Persian Empire, maybe east of Judea. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the term is often used of high officials in the Persian Empire.

It appears that not all of the governors were pleased. He was probably of Samaria. They were jealous of those of Judah. Sanballat and Tobiah were not eager to help Judah. Tobiah was an Ammonite, and especially did not like Judah. They would both rather see them destroyed, than the king sending Nehemiah to help them.

Verses 11-16: Nehemiah spent 3 days discerning what course to follow before informing anyone of his plan; then, he wisely viewed the terrain in secret and surveyed the southern end of the city, noting the broken and burnt conditions of the walls and gates.

Nehemiah 2:11 "So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days."

We see that Nehemiah still made it to Jerusalem, in spite of the opposition. After this long journey, it appears he rested three days.

Before he entered on any business, resting himself from the fatigue of the journey, and receiving the visits of his friends. As Ezra before him did (Ezra 8:32).

Nehemiah 2:12 "And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I [any] man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither [was there any] beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon."

Both the season of the night, and the small number of men to accompany him, were chosen for greater secrecy, that the business he came upon might not as yet be known. And so no schemes formed to obstruct or discourage.

"Neither told I any man what God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem": He was satisfied that what he had in view was from the Lord, who had stirred him up to it. But thought it prudent for the present to conceal it, until things were prepared to put it in execution.

"Neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon": He only rode perhaps on a mule, being not yet recovered quite from the fatigue of his journey. And for the sake of honor; the rest went on foot, that there might be no noise made, and so pass on unheard and unobserved.

Nehemiah was not ready, at this point, to make everyone aware of his mission. He was not part of the system in Jerusalem. It would be a shock, when he explained why he was there. He kept it very quiet and went out to survey the damage during the night, so no one would know what he was doing.

Nehemiah 2:13 "And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire."

"The gate of the valley" was probably on the south wall, in the southwest corner of the city, with the valley being the Kidron Valley (compare 2 Chron. 26:9). The "dragon well" may be either "jackal" or "dragon". The location is disputed and is generally identified with En-rogel, but also the identification with Siloam has been forcefully argued. The "dung port", or gate, was about five hundred yards from the valley gate. It was the city's southern or southeastern extremity, leading to the valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna. Formerly a site of monstrous pagan sacrifices, it had been ritually polluted to desecrate the pagan gods, and turned into a refuse heap.

"Dragons well": The exact location is unknown, although it is somewhere in the southern section of Jerusalem.

"Dung port": A.k.a. Dung gate. At the southern tip of the city (compare 3:13; 12:31), a common sewer ran to the Kidron Brook into the Valley of Hinnom.

This lets us know that the damage to the wall was extensive. He went to several areas of damage, to figure out how many trees he would need to repair the wall.

Nehemiah 2:14 "Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but [there was] no place for the beast [that was] under me to pass."

The “gate of the fountain” may have led to the spring called En-rogel near the southeastern corner, where the Hinnom and Kidron valleys meet. The “king’s pool” may have been Hezekiah’s pool of Siloam which was beside the southern tip of the eastern ridge (compare 3:15). He set out from the west side of the city, coming out of the ruined gateway, and turned left toward the south, and so round to the eastern side. Then he was forced to dismount for there “was no place for the beast ... to pass”, and he proceeded on foot along this ridge above the Kidron Valley, and turned back to his starting point.

“King’s pool”: Possibly the pool of Siloam (compare 3:15).

This just means that all of the gates were torn down. This was possibly speaking of an area between two walls that was torn down.

Nehemiah 2:15 "Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and [so] returned."

“By the brook”: The Kidron Valley, running north and south to the east of the temple mount.

“Gate of the valley”: Nehemiah began and ended his trip at the same spot (compare 3:13 on the west side).

It appears that he rode this animal completely around the wall. He probably stayed out all night looking at the damage. He came in before or at daybreak, to keep the inhabitants from realizing what he had in mind to do.

Nehemiah 2:16 "And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told [it] to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work."

The rulers of the city of Jerusalem, who seem to be officers of the king of Persia, since they are distinguished from Jewish rulers in the next clause.

"Neither had I as yet told it to the Jews": What he came about and designed to do.

"Nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers": The principal men among the Jews, both ecclesiastical and civil.

"Nor to the rest that did the work": Of building and repairing. Neither those that were employed in it, nor those that overlooked it.

It appears that Nehemiah wanted to keep all of this quiet, even from the rulers, until he had his plan ready. He had not even asked for workers yet. The first thing to do was to find out what would be needed to complete the work, and then he could tell.

Nehemiah 2:17 "Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we [are] in, how Jerusalem [lieth] waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach."

“That we be no more a reproach”: The destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar brought great reproach upon Israel, but particularly upon their God. Nehemiah assured the Jews (verse 20), that because God would prosper them in this endeavor for His glory, they should move ahead.

After he had all of his plans ready, he told them of what he wanted to do. I am sure he also told them of the trees available to them to do the work. He would need their laborers to help him in the work. He explains that this would be a benefit to all of them.

Nehemiah 2:18 "Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for [this] good [work]."

The sight of Nehemiah’s credential and his motivating message revived their drooping spirits to begin the building despite the bitter taunts of influential men (verses 19-20).

At first it was difficult for them to understand why a total stranger would want to come and do such a difficult task with nothing to gain for himself. When he explained that God sent him to do this, they understood. He got all of the help he needed when he told them that God wanted him to do this, and the king allowed him to come and provided the timber.

Nehemiah 2:19 "But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard [it], they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What [is] this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?"

“Sanballat ... Tobiah” (see note on 2:10).

“Geshem the Arabian”: This ruler most likely officiated to the south of Jerusalem.

“Geshem” (compare 6:1-2, 6), was an even more powerful figure than his companions. He and his son seem to have ruled a league of Arabian tribes which took control of Moab and Edom, together with part of Arabia and the approaches to Egypt, under the Persian Empire. Nehemiah was surrounded by enemies, with Samaria to the north, Ammon to the east, and now Geshem to the south.

These three Arabs were from three different directions, but none of them wanted a wall to be built around Jerusalem. They laughed and made light of the idea of Nehemiah attempting to do this. They had forgotten the power of God. They were trying to say that Nehemiah wanted to build the wall, so he might rebel against his king. Of course, this was not true, because the king was in favor of him building the wall.

Nehemiah 2:20 "Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem."

“God of heaven” (compare Nehemiah 1:5 and see note on Ezra 1:2). Not only did Nehemiah have the king’s permission and was not rebelling, but he had God’s protection. Those enemies who tried to intimidate against the work had neither since they were not commissioned by God or the king.

Nehemiah said they had no “portion”, which refers to a “legal share” in the Jewish nation. Sanballat and Tobiah were also serving the Lord, but in an illegitimate way. Therefore, they had no jurisdiction over the pure religion of the exiles.

Nehemiah realized that God sent him on this mission. He told these Arab leaders, opposed to the building of the wall, that they would have no portion in it. God would see that the walls were rebuilt. Nehemiah put his trust in God.

Nehemiah Chapter 2 Questions

1. What is the month Nisan on our calendar?
2. Nehemiah was the _____ for the king.
3. What was unusual about Nehemiah serving the king in verse 1?
4. What did the king ask Nehemiah?
5. The king discerned that Nehemiah was _____ of _____.
6. What compliment did Nehemiah answer the king with?
7. Why was Nehemiah sad?
8. What did Nehemiah do, when the king asked him what his request was?
9. What was the request?
10. Who was with the king, when he was talking to Nehemiah?
11. How long would Nehemiah be gone?
12. What did Nehemiah ask the king to give him, so he could travel with no problem?
13. Where would Nehemiah get the material to build with?
14. Who went with Nehemiah?

15. Who did Nehemiah show the papers to?
16. Who opposed Nehemiah?
17. Why did they oppose him?
18. How long did Nehemiah rest, when he arrived in Jerusalem?
19. When did Nehemiah go to examine the walls?
20. Why did he not tell anyone?
21. What did he find?
22. How did he travel around the wall?
23. When did Nehemiah tell them what he wanted to do?
24. When did they believe Nehemiah, and offer to help?
25. Why did the opponents of Nehemiah not want a wall built?
26. What had they forgotten?
27. Nehemiah put his trust in _____.