

Nehemiah's Prayer Answered

Nehemiah 2:1-10

Nehemiah 2:1-6 – *“And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. ² Therefore the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.”*

So I became dreadfully afraid, ³ and said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?” ⁴ Then the king said to me, “What do you request?”

So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵ And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it.” ⁶ Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), “How long will your journey be? And when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

⁷ Furthermore I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, ⁸ and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy.” And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

⁹ Then I went to the governors in the region beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. ¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.”

Background Notes

The year was about 445BC. Nehemiah was the Jewish cupbearer to Artaxerxes, the Persian king. Nehemiah had heard that the wall around Jerusalem lay in ruins, and he wanted to do something about it. He was willing to leave his prestigious job in Persia and travel to Jerusalem to lead the people in a rebuilding project. So he prayed for an opportunity to speak to the king about it - and God answered Nehemiah's prayer.

Verse 2 says that Nehemiah was “*dreadfully afraid*” when the king asked him why he was upset. We might think that Nehemiah would jump for joy when the king asked what was bothering him - but no. He was afraid, because the king had

noticed his sadness, and one was never to show any emotions or feelings in the presence of a Persian king! To appear sad before a Persian monarch could cost you your life.

If you work in the White House you're supposed to be calm and professional. You're not supposed to walk around wearing your feelings on your sleeve - but at least in America you wouldn't be killed for looking sad! In the Persian Empire it could cost you your life.

In addition, Nehemiah was afraid because Jerusalem was not a pleasant topic to bring up before King Artaxerxes. Ezra 4 says that it was Artaxerxes who had stopped earlier attempts at rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. So Nehemiah was a little reluctant to bring up this topic. However, Nehemiah had prayed about this matter, so he placed his life on the line and leveled with the king. And the king not only listened to Nehemiah - he granted Nehemiah's request! A great answer to prayer!

Next the king asked Nehemiah for a time schedule (v6). Nehemiah probably asked for a limited number of months, but later chapters reveal that his time away from court was extended. In fact, Nehemiah actually stayed in Jerusalem for twelve years! (See Nehemiah 5:14.)

In verses 7-9, the "River" would be the Euphrates River. Susa, the Persian capital was to the east of the Euphrates. So the provinces "beyond the river" would include Judah and Jerusalem, where Nehemiah wanted to go.

Sanballat and Tobiah were enemies (v10). They were officials from the Persian provinces that surrounded Judah. They didn't want the Persian province of Judah to become stronger than their provinces, and we will see that they were willing to do almost anything to stop the wall of Jerusalem from being rebuilt. By the way, Sanballat's name has been found in extra-biblical literature dating to that time.

Doctrinal Points

1. God does not always answer prayer requests immediately.

God really does answer all our prayer requests. Sometimes the answer is "yes"; sometimes the answer is "no"; and sometimes the answer is "wait." Maybe you're praying about something right now and it seems that God is not answering. Maybe He actually is answering - but the answer is "wait."

Compare the date of Nehemiah 1:1 with the date in chapter 2 verse 1. Nehemiah had been praying for four months about bringing the condition of Jerusalem's wall to the king's attention. Nehemiah felt that Jerusalem's problems were extremely urgent, so praying for four months about the defenseless city seemed like a very long time.

However, God doesn't always answer our prayer requests immediately. God's timetable is not our timetable. When I was a research scientist for a large corporation and teaching the Bible to youth groups in the evening, I was praying that God might make it possible for me to be involved in teaching the Bible on a more full time Basis. The Lord answered that prayer with a "yes" - but it actually took 5 years of praying!

Psalm 27:14 says, *"Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart, and wait for the Lord."*

2. God always answers prayer requests in time.

God doesn't always answer immediately, but He will always answer in His time. Sometimes God says, "wait," but when He answers the timing is always perfect - from God's perspective, and not necessarily ours!

In Nehemiah's case, Daniel's prophecy was one reason why God chose the Jewish month of Nisan to answer Nehemiah's request. In the context of Daniel's great 70-week vision of the timetable for the coming of the Messiah, Daniel 9:25 says, *"Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. The street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times."*

We don't have a time to go into Daniel's prophecy now, but Daniel 9:25 predicted that the starting point of the timetable for the coming of the Messiah was **the very date that Nehemiah's prayer was answered** - the date given in Nehemiah 2:1! So we can see one reason why God delayed answering Nehemiah's prayer for four months!

God always answers prayer in time – His time! God may not answer our prayers immediately, but when He tells us to "wait," we can be sure He will answer in His own time. God answers our prayer requests in **His** time. It will never be too late. It will be just right.

Practical Applications

1. Our short prayers should be backed up by our prayer lives.

In verse 4, Nehemiah shot up an "arrow prayer." It was one of those short, quick, silent, prayers: *"Then the king said to me, 'What do you request?' So I prayed to the God of heaven."* But remember, Nehemiah's short prayer was backed up by four months of real concern and prayer about the sad state of Jerusalem. He wept, he fasted, and he prayed.

In the same way, God does indeed answer our short prayers - but our short prayers should be backed up by serious prayer lives. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, *"Pray without ceasing."* Our lives should be characterized by prayer. God may answer our quick arrow prayers quickly - but they should be backed up by lives of prayer.

2. Let's walk through the doors that God opens for us!

"Ask and it shall be given you. Seek and you shall find. Knock and it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7). Nehemiah practiced this principle. He asked, he sought, he knocked - and God opened the door in an amazing way.

Then Nehemiah continued to ask. He walked through the door that God opened. Nehemiah asked for letters so that he would have the king's stamp of authority when he went to Jerusalem (v7). In verse 8, he even asked for the materials that would be needed for rebuilding the wall!

Nehemiah was "striking when the iron was hot"! He had done his homework well. He even knew the name of the keeper of the king's forest. He knew that Artaxerxes had been good to Ezra some years before (see Ezra 7.) Nehemiah was definitely practicing the principle of "knocking, asking, and seeking" - and when God opened the door, he is ready to walk through those doors. And he did so!

If God were to answer your prayers about your church or a specific ministry you're involved in, would you be ready to walk through the doors He opens? Some Christians aren't ready. They pray about something, and God answers their prayer and opens up the door - but they never walk through! We need to be ready to walk through the door of opportunity as God answers our prayers and opens up the doors.

The "Talks for Growing Christians" radio ministry is a good illustration. As you know, "Talks from Nehemiah" is actually our beginning series - the first book of the Bible that has been recorded for the radio program. We've been praying for God's direction and blessing. He has answered some prayers about this ministry, and He has definitely opened some doors of opportunity. It is now my responsibility to walk through these doors - to be disciplined, and to make the time to study, prepare, teach and record the programs. We trust the Lord to guide us, to direct us, to provide for us - and we know He will provide for all those needs when we walk through any door **He** opens.

When we pray about a need or a problem, and we want to do something about it, we're not to push doors open by ourselves. We're to wait for the Lord to open the doors - but then we're to take the initiative to walk through the doors He has opened.

So when God answers prayer and opens doors, let's walk through the doors He opens!