

Faithful Through Opposition; Nehemiah 2:1-20

***Introduction**

Throughout the book of Nehemiah God is a faithful God. In the first chapter He remembers and fulfills his promises without fail. In this chapter, chapter two, we will see another way that God displays his faithfulness - that is through opposition. God will display his faithfulness to his children as they walk through times of opposition by causing them to remember his provision and care in the past.

***Background**

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king.

Now for that first sentence to make any sense at all we must fill in some background for you who are just joining us. Nehemiah has been told that his people are "in great trouble and shame" and the walls of Jerusalem have been destroyed and the gates burned. He is motivated by the Spirit to go talk to the King. So far we don't know what about. He told us in chapter one verse eleven that he is the cupbearer to the king - a high and privileged position within the kingdom. As you can see from the first verse the king is Artaxerxes.

We've also seen that Nehemiah is a man of prayer and he knows his Bible well.

So we start fresh this week in the month of Nisan, for us Mar/Apr time frame. Nehemiah has been praying for success and mercy in the site of the king since Nov/Dec time frame. He's been praying to the God of Heaven about this conversation for about four months. The time has now come for him to put his life on the line.

He goes forth into the kings chamber, takes up the wine and gives it to the king.

Can you imagine the scene. After month of faithful prayer to God you go into the chamber. Surrounded by the familiar gold decorations and the cool marble floor that you would certainly have knelt down on many, many times you know your mission and you know the risk. God, the only true God is with you and grab the ornate cup that is unmistakably the kings and hand it to him.

What will happen? Let's look down at the end of verse one...

***A God prepared conversation**

Now I had not been sad in his presence. 2 And the king said to

me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. 3 I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" 4 Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" 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, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." 6 And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.

First notice how perceptive the King is. Nehemiah has been in the chamber with the king many times since he started praying, but this time is different. This time he exposes his heart before the king and he notices. He not only notices that Nehemiah is sad, but he correctly connects the sadness with his heart. Here's a Bible truth we don't think of very often, but one God had revealed to the king. There are only two reasons for being downcast. The spiritual (what the king refers to as the heart) and the physical. Now sometimes these two are difficult to separate, and certainly one can contribute to the other, but for today, just note that a downcast spirit is one of those two things.

Now, we don't know how long Nehemiah had been in the king's presence at this point, but I imagine it wasn't long. I take it that way from Nehemiah's immediate response is verse two, "then I was very much afraid". What got to him? Was it the immediateness of the King's response? Was it the King's insight into Nehemiah's heart that took him back a step? Or was it this...Nehemiah had been praying for four months and God had worked this situation so perfectly that it was scary? I have a hard time believing Nehemiah was afraid of the King. He knew the book of Daniel like the back of his hand. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were Bible friends he knew and trusted. I think Nehemiah got a picture of the powerfulness of God and prayer at the King's response that blew him away and caused him to fear God, yes, but not only that, it also caused him to trust God all the more.

Second, see the way Nehemiah responds to the King's question. "Let the King, live forever." Nehemiah has a respect and reverence for the man God has placed on the throne. He is willing to risk his life before the man because he knows who put him there. He need not fear that the king will suddenly act outside of the providence of God. This is God's man, there to do God's will. Even if that means death!

Do we think of our leaders this way? Have the words coming out of your mouth about your leaders sounded like, "Let the King live forever". Is it possible that what is going on in our country is the direct working of God and your bad mouthing the leadership is actually bad mouthing the sovereign ruler of the universe? Perhaps the difference is that you don't trust God. God will be faithful in opposition and

hard times. Do you believe that as it pertains to you?

Well, Nehemiah puts a question back to the king. Why shouldn't I be sad with all that's going on in Jerusalem? And again we see God's preparation of the king. What do you want? If he had no compassion for Nehemiah he would not have noticed his sadness of heart and he would not have inquired as to what he wanted.

So Nehemiah goes back to God one more time and then spills the beans to us and to the King. He asks, that he be allowed to go to Judah and rebuild the city. This is the thing we've been wondering all along. What is God up to through Nehemiah and now we see it. God wants his city rebuilt and Nehemiah is his man. We see at the end of verse six what God had planned. "So it pleased the King to send me." The King doesn't begrudgingly let Nehemiah go, but he is pleased to send him.

Now you might think that Nehemiah would high tale it out of there as soon as the King said yes. But as I said earlier I believe his confidence and courage were bolstered by the evidence of God's faithfulness with the king. So, he goes on in verse seven...

***A Bolder Request is Made**

7 And 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 let me pass through until I come to Judah, 8 and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, 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 good hand of my God was upon me.

Let's think about this for a second. It's one thing to ask the king if you can leave. It's another to ask the king if you can leave with some of his stuff! Isn't it?

He asks for two things. Number one is clear passage through "the province Beyond the River" and the second, is a letter to the keeper of the King's forest. Okay, if this doesn't pull you into the story I don't know what will. Imagine what "the province Beyond the River" must have looked like in Nehemiah's mind. I doubt the cupbearer got out and saw the world much. Was he excited, was he a little nervous? And then this, "Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest". What must this guy have been like, right? I picture a very large dude with lots of facial hair.

And what we should note beyond how good God relates a story is that Nehemiah has pushed beyond his original request. Not only does he want to be given some amount of leave from the king to rebuild the city, but he would also like the king to assure his safe passage and provide all the building materials!

And the king grants him what he asks! Why? "for" or, because "the good hand of my God was upon me." Nehemiah's faithful God has not only let him live, he has supplied more than he could have imagined. Nehemiah was confident when he came into the chamber and he becomes bold as he see the hand of God at work in the situation.

God is preparing Nehemiah, in the good times, for the times of opposition to come. Let's read on in verse nine...

***Opposition Begins**

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

Now see the abundance of blessing through the king in that he sends officers and horseman with Nehemiah to the province beyond the river. But God is not done showing himself to Nehemiah through blessing, yes, and through opposition. Sanballat and Tobiah are seen here for the first time, but definitely not the last. They are not worried about protecting the king's goods or defending his rule. They are greatly displeased that "someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel." They hate God and his people. That is their motivation. Keep that in mind while we look on to verse 11...

***Night time recon**

11 So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. 12 Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. 13 I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were 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 room for the animal that was under me to pass. 15 Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. 16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

This is great! There is opposition to the work and he knows it. He has people with him, but he has not shared with them what he has in mind. Only he, and the king and queen know what he intends to do. The work is a secret.

Side note: And look at the names the people have given different sections of the gates and walls. Ever wonder where they get these

names? There has to be a story behind some of them. I mean, really, "the Dragon Spring", "the Dung gate", "the Fountain Gate", and "the King's Pool". These are great names. Don't turn off your imagination when you read scripture. Don't let it interpret for you either, but...

***The Plan Revealed**

17 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." 18 And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

Finally, Nehemiah reveals what God would have him do. Notice how he does it though. First he tells them what the plan is in verse seventeen. And it's almost as if he preempts their doubt with verse eighteen. Telling them of the hand of his God being on him for good and secondarily of the words the King has spoken.

Do you rehearse the goodness of God with each other? That, is at least part of the reason we have people get up on stage and tell us how they came to Christ when they come into membership. We need to hear it. That's why we have folks give their testimony before we baptise them. We need to hear it. When we have sentences of praise on Sunday evenings, what are we doing? Rehearsing the good hand of our God. Because we need to hear it. When you pray at flock don't just ask for prayer. Let it be a time when we rehearse the good hand of our God.

Look down at the end of verse eighteen for the result of this reminder that God's hand is upon us. "Let us rise up and build" Their hands were strengthened for the good work. Not by physical exercise, but by a reminder that God's hand was at work. Let that be us. Let us encourage one another with the works of God in the past, to fuel the works of God in the future. You never know when opposition is coming. Look down in verse nineteen...

***Opposition continues**

19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" 20 Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

Look at the question they ask of them in verse nineteen. "Are you rebelling against the king?" We know from verse ten what their motivation was and we see now that they are willing to manipulate the

circumstances to get what they really want. And isn't this the way evil is. Sometimes you get the truth of why it is there, but often you get a twisted version of the story that is aimed at bringing about the circumstances it wants.

But Nehemiah has come to far and his God is too good for him to be scared off now. Look at what he says in verse twenty. "The God of heaven will make us prosper" This sanballat and tobiah is a work of God and he will make it prosper and further more, "we his servants will arise and build" so do what you like. We are going to follow the true king and do his will unafraid. And if that wasn't enough he basically ends with "get outta here". None of this was yours in the past, you have no right to it now, and no claim to it in the future. Go away!

This is God wrought courage- filled to over flowing with remembrance of God's goodness in the past, Nehemiah has unbeatable faith in the future grace of God for he and his people. Do you?

***Reflect and Respond**

Two things for you Christian

1. God is good and you need to remember his goodness.
 - a. take time when you sit around the dinner table to discuss the goodness of God in your life. I'm reading a book on the situation for Christians in the Sudan...you have a LOT to be thankful for. God has been very good to you.
2. As you face the inevitable opposition to the Gospel that is coming your way, use God's faithfulness in the past to fuel and encourage you in the present.
 - a. If you sit there thinking, but I can't remember anything that God has done. He saved you didn't he. Think of the power of God in just that one thing and let it fuel the fire of Gospel work in you.
 - He brought you from death to life. (Eph. 2:1)
 - He clothed you in the righteousness of Christ. (Phil. 3:9)
 - He adopted you as his own. (Gal. 4:4-6)

For those who do not know Christ

1. Opposition is all around you. James 4 tells you that in your pride you are being opposed by God at this very moment. He is not sitting back and watching you go through life, no, he is actively against you. You, are his enemy. But James 4 says this also, "but he gives grace to the humble". So humble yourself before God, confessing your sin and expressing your reliance on him and his work on the cross. Jesus has come to this earth, fully God, and fully man, he has lived a perfect life and he has given his life on the cross to pay for the sins of those who would believe in him. And God has shown his approval by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand. Humble

yourself today and beg God to make you his own. He is listening.