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The Decree to Rebuild Jerusalem

Nehemiah 2:1-10

The decree to rebuild Jerusalem DIG: In the intervening three months, what do you think Nehemiah had been doing? What did King Artakh'shasta notice and why? Why had it taken so long for Nehemiah to express his grief? What does he request the king to do? What three questions does the king have? In Nehemiah's ready response, what do you see that demonstrates his practical wisdom? His dependence on God? On human resources? His respect for his superior? What obstacle to his success looms on the horizon? Why?

REFLECT: Can others read what you are thinking or feeling, almost like an open book? Or is your heart under lock and key? Why is that? If someone could read what you feel right now, what would they see? How can you make your needs known to your King? What are some of the challenges in your life that you are praying about? What do you need to do to be ready to help make the answer to one of those requests come true?

March-April 445 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (to see link click [Bt](#) - The Third Return).

Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs (see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: The Nehemiah Memoirs).

There are very few areas of life in which we live or work that do not come ready-equipped with a superior - a boss or other authority figure. Student, teacher, nurse, executive, salesman, airline pilot, coach, chef, or scientist all have immediate superiors whose presence significantly controls and affect their lives. It is our task to develop qualities of leadership germinating within ourselves while still being accountable to these superiors in our individual spheres of influence. It isn't easy! Leaders are usually better at leading than being led. The question remains, when that time of confrontation comes - between boss and employee, parent and child, coach and player, teacher and student - how do we handle it? That question.

Becomes increasingly complex when the superior is insensitive to, or unconcerned with, spiritual things.

Proverbs 21:1 says: **A king's heart is like a stream of water in the hand of ADONAI.** The **heart** that communicates attitudes and decisions **is in the Lord's hand. He directs it wherever He wants.** YHVH has in **His hand the heart of the king** (whether **the king** is a believer or not is irrelevant). Because **Ha'Shem** has **the king's heart in His hand, He** literally *causes it to be bent* wherever **He** pleases. What is true **of the king** is true of your superior! To understand your boss, you must be acquainted with **God's** method of operation, for **the Lord** has **the heart** of your superior **in His hand.** Pause for a moment and rivet that thought in your mind.

We will see how the story of **Nehemiah** beautifully illustrates the truth of **Proverbs 21:1.** **Nehemiah** worked for **the king** of Persia, who had a reputation of being a very stubborn, hard-headed man who wouldn't change **his** mind. As mentioned before (see [Bu - Nehemiah's Intercedes for Jerusalem](#)), was in an influential position, for **he** played an intimate part in **the king's** life. But **Nehemiah's heart** wasn't in Persia; it was in **Jerusalem.** **He** wanted to go back to **his** beloved **city** and **rebuild her walls,** but **he** couldn't just leave **his** job. **He** needed a leave of absence. **Nehemiah** prayed, in effect, saying, "**Ha'Shem,** I ask **You** to change **the heart of the king.** Alter **his** attitude. Change the situation so that I may be allowed to do **Your** will with **his** pleasure." **He** didn't act hastily, but laid **his** problem before **the LORD.**

So, what happened after **Nehemiah** prayed? Nothing! At least not right away. **Now I was cupbearer to the king in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artakh'shasta.** **Nehemiah's** story began in **Chislev** (November-December), and it resumes in **Nisan** (March-April). For four or five months, nothing happened. **Nehemiah** was in a familiar situation. **The king** and **his** queen were reclining together, having finished their superb meal. The delightful aroma of food permeated the room. **Nehemiah** poured some **wine and gave it to the king,** adding the insightful statement, "**I had not been sad before in his presence**" (**Nehemiah 1:11b-2:2a**). Up until then, **Nehemiah** had controlled **his** feelings. Four months, however, can seem like a long time to wait on **the LORD.** There had been no response. No visible glimmer of hope. Nothing. Everybody's got a breaking point. **Nehemiah** had probably come to the place where **he** had just begun to wonder, "Is this ever going to happen?" for **he** was rather **sad** when **he** served the royal couple that day.²¹¹

Court etiquette in ancient times required that subjects appear cheerful before the king, and a sad or grim face could actually bring down the royal wrath. Happy subjects suggested the king was a good and wise ruler, while being worried or downcast in the royal presence was dangerous, because it was liable to be misinterpreted as disloyal thoughts. Nehemiah would have needed to observe such customs of courtly behavior very carefully because the erratic temper of Persian kings was well known. Hence, Nehemiah's fear described in the next verse. But the king noticed Nehemiah's glum expression and said to me, "Why is your face so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." Near Eastern monarchs normally did not take time to consider the personal lives of their subjects.

This was the moment Nehemiah had been waiting for. God had thrown the door wide open. I was very frightened, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever!" The subject sensitively introduced. Like Esther (see the commentary on Esther Bi - Now Write a Counter-Decree in the King's Name on Behalf of the Jews), he had the wisdom to present the matter first as news of a personal disappointment rather than a political issue. "Why should my face not be sad, when the City where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire" (Nehemiah 2:2b-3)? Such a description showed by Nehemiah's respect for his ancestors and also his sense of shame at the condition of his native City. Nehemiah's request no doubt touched the sentiments of the king. He carefully avoided raising the king's suspicions by not mentioning Yerushalayim by name and so reminding him of his earlier decree (see Aw - The Resumption of the Work Under King Darius). True, the decree had left a loophole for change (Ezra 4:21). He left himself the option to make another decision in the light of new circumstances. Such a quick about-face would be a great deal to ask anyone, and a king's wrath is a messenger of death (Proverbs 16:14a). Nevertheless, Nehemiah showed his great ability in communication and delicate diplomacy. He first had to get the king's sympathy before going into the details.²¹²

In the fifth example of leadership in the life of Nehemiah, successful leaders must be prepared and ready when God opens the door of opportunity (see Bt - The Third Return). The king asked me, "What is your request?" Then I prayed quickly and silently in my heart to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it seems good to the king and if your servant has found favor in your sight, send me to the city in Judah where my

ancestors are buried that I may rebuild it” (Nehemiah 2:4-5). This is the third of twelve **prayers** recorded in **Nehemiah (9:5ff, 1:5-11, here, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29, 13:31).**



Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you return?” Esther had been **queen** of King Ahasuerus, who was **Artakh’shasta’s** father. It is possible that **her** role as the present **king’s** stepmother had made **him** predisposed to show favor to **the Jews** - especially if **she** was still alive. **Since it pleased the king to send me, I set a time for him (Nehemiah 2:6).** The journey of almost a-thousand miles had taken **Ezra** four months to make, so it was unlikely that **Nehemiah** could have anticipated returning in less than a year. We learn from **Nehemiah 5:14** that **he** was **governor** in **Jerusalem** for **twelve years**. It seems that within a year **he** reported back to **Artakh’shasta** after the dedication of **the walls**, then **his** appointment as **governor** was renewed.²¹³ The whole scene gives us the impression that it was **Nehemiah’s** character that won **him** the right to speak and make **his** request, overriding all the political obstacles.

As the prayerful months had gone by, **Nehemiah** had given some thought to how **his** initial prayer might be answered given the right circumstances. For **him** to secure safe passage, **he** would need **letters!** So, when the time came to speak up before **the king**, **Nehemiah** not only told **him his** request to be sent to **Jerusalem**, **he** also asked for **letters** be given to **him** from **the king** to ensure that **his** reception among **the governors of Trans-Euphrates** would go smoothly.



I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let him give me letters of safe conduct for the governors of Trans-Euphrates that will enable me to pass through without hindrance until I arrive in Judah, as well as a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s royal forest so he will give me lumber to make beams for the gates and towers of the fortress adjacent to the Temple, for the wall of the city and for the residence I will occupy” (Nehemiah 2:7-8a). Asaph is a Hebrew name, so a Jew must have held this position. Some take for granted that **the royal forest** would have been located in Lebanon; however, there must have been other official reserves, and the name of **the keeper** suggests it could have been in Judah. **The fortress** was on the north side of **the Temple**. That side was always the hardest to defend. Therefore, **the fortress** was a precursor to the later Roman **Fortress Antonia** seen on the right side of **the Temple Mount**.

So, **Nehemiah** was able to travel safely throughout the Persian Empire and had the full authority as one of **the king’s** officials in **Judah**. In addition to granting **Nehemiah** safe passage, **the king** also provided much of the raw materials **the Jews** would need to rebuild the city gates and **the wall** - and **Nehemiah’s** own **residence** as well. **Lumber** was a precious commodity at the time, and the ruling monarchs guarded their royal forests carefully.²¹⁴

Nehemiah had not been presumptuous, **he** was practical, and **Artakh’shasta** was impressed. It is important to recognize that in **the First Return** led by **Zerubbabel**, in **the Second Return** led by **Ezra**, and in **the Third Return** led by **Nehemiah**, it was always the gracious prompting of **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** that led the remnant home to **Jerusalem**. **The Second Return** will begin with **God’s** prompting of **the Persian king** to act compassionately toward **Isra’el** by granting **Ezra everything he requested because the hand of ADONAI his God was upon him (Ezra 7:6b, also see Ezra 7:9, 28, 8:22 and 31; and Nehemiah**

2:18). Similarly, in **the Third Return, Nehemiah** will again express the conviction that **Ha'Shem** was responsible for the gracious support of the Persian throne when **he** stated: **The king granted me the request because the good hand of my God was upon me (Nehemiah 2:8b)**. The decisive factor was not **his** faith in **his** relationship with **the king**, but **his** faith in **his** relationship with **the King of kings**.

Then I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and I gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officials and cavalry with me (Nehemiah 2:9). **Ezra** had not asked for an escort, but **Nehemiah** accepted protection from **the king** (for the different reasons, see [Bk - Ezra's Arrival in Jerusalem](#)). This **decree** fulfilled **the prayer** of **Dani'el** (see the commentary on [Dani'el Cx - Dani'el's Prayer](#)), and started the clock on the first **sixty-nine sevens** of **Dani'el's Seventy Sevens** (see [Dani'el Da - The Seventy Sevens](#)).

Then we meet **Nehemiah's** opposition: **Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite**. These two **men** cast a long shadow over the story. Both of **them** were men of considerable influence and power, as can be seen not only from the connections **they** established with the **high priest (Nehemiah 13:4 and 28)**, but from secular sources as well.

Sanballat the Horonite: As the governor of Samaria, **he** would have been a formidable opponent. Sanballat is a Babylonian name. **Nehemiah's** term is **Horonite**, that is, a native of **Beth-horon**, about eighteen miles northwest of **Jerusalem** mentioned in **Joshua 16:3-5**. No doubt **he** saw **Nehemiah's** visit to **Jerusalem** as a mission that would produce a strong **Jerusalem** and therefore bring about a decrease in **his** own political power. We know nothing of **his** own personal belief in **YHVH**, but it had to be a faith far removed from that held in **the City of David** (see the commentary on [the Life of Solomon Dd - Golden Calves at Bethel and Dan](#)). In **Sanballat's** opposition to **the Jews**, we see the old hostility renewed between the northern kingdom of Samaria and the southern kingdom of Judah.²¹⁵

Tobiah the Ammonite: One conjecture is that **he** was employed by **Sanballat** in some capacity, perhaps as **his** scribe. **Tobiah** is a **Jewish** name and not **Ammonite**, but the **Tobiah** family was to have influence in **Ammon** for a long time. These **Tobiads** may have been the descendants of the **Tobiah** who in **Ezra 2:60** was rejected from the **Jewish** community because **they were not able to give evidence of their fathers' households and their descendants, whether they were of Isra'el**. If so, their long-standing hatred against the

Jewish community may have begun at that time.²¹⁶

They were very displeased that a man had come to seek the welfare of Bnei-Yisrael (Nehemiah 2:10). **They** immediately began to plan how to stop **Nehemiah** from accomplishing **God's** will. This attitude revealed the true nature of those men and **their** followers: **they** were committed enemies of **YHVH** and **His people**. It is particularly revealing that they were not so much opposed to the authority that **Nehemiah** possessed, but were opposed to anyone who sought **the well-being of the Righteous of the TaNaKh**. But **Nehemiah's** motivation would remain strong. **He** knew that **ADONAI** had brought **him** to that moment in **Isra'el's** history and **he** was about to tackle a project that others, for almost a hundred years before **him**, had been unable to complete.²¹⁷

An important lesson to be learned here is that our protection is found in **God** alone. **The Jews** in **Jerusalem** were anxious to rebuild **the city walls**. **They** wanted a strong defense against the many enemies who surrounded **them** and would have been glad to see **them** carried off into captivity once again. **King Artakh'shasta himself** recognized the danger in the region, which is why he provided **Nehemiah** with a powerful military escort to protect him on the dangerous journey. These were treacherous times for **the Jews**, for there were many who hated **them** and longed to participate in **their** destruction.

Yet, **ADONAI** did not need stone walls or well-armed soldiers to protect **His people**. **His** omnipotent hand was sufficient, and **His** faithfulness to **His** promises ensured that nothing could ever touch **His** servants without **His** permission. **Ezra** had previously chosen to trust in **Ha'Shem's** protection and make the same long journey without any military escort (see [Bk - Ezra's Arrival in Jerusalem](#)), and **his** faith had proved sound. This does not mean, of course, that **Nehemiah** had less faith than **Ezra**. **The king** had offered the escort, and **Nehemiah** saw that as **God's** provision at the time. Nevertheless, had **the king** not offered any soldiers, **Nehemiah** would still have arrived safely through the faithfulness of **YHVH**.

However, we must not overlook the important element of obedience in **God's** protection. Notice what **Nehemiah** prayed: **YHVH, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps the covenant and lovingkindness with those who love Him and keep His mitzvot, please let Your ears be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant that I am praying before You today (Nehemiah 1:5-6)**. **Ha'Shem** is always faithful to **His** promises, and faithful during the trials of life to be with **His children**, but **He** also

expects us to be faithful to **His** Word. When we sin knowingly, we make ourselves vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one and hinder **God's** hand of blessing in our lives. Our job is to obey **His** Word and trust **Him** for our needs.²¹⁸

Nehemiah gives us four timeless principles of preparation:

First, changing hearts is God's specialty. Do not try to change people to fit your specifications. Don't try to manipulate people, play games, plan schemes, trick or deceive them. Instead, tell **God** on them! You may be dealing with someone who is just plain stubborn, and from every indication they are not going to change. Let **Ha'Shem** deal with their stubbornness. Relax. Let **Him** take care of it.

Second, praying and waiting go hand-in-hand. You have never really prayed until you've learned to wait, and wait with release. Abandon yourself – let **God** change **the king's heart**. This is tough; it cuts across the grain of our human nature. But stand firm. Give up your own homemade solutions and run the risk of letting **YHVH** take charge.

Third, faith is not a synonym for disorder nor a substitute for careful planning. People of faith need orderly minds. Leaders like **Nehemiah** think through the problems they face. Although their circumstances may only allow them to take the first step now, you can be sure they have already thought through the next ten steps. Why – because faith breeds organization, **for God is not the author of confusion (First Corinthians 14:33).**

Opposition is to be expected when God's will is carried out. When you follow **God's** will, the Adversary will get busy. You become a threat. That's why it's important to study **Nehemiah**. You just have to love **his** tenacity. When **he** faced financial needs, **he** asked the king for letters. When **he** was afraid, **he** said, "**ADONAI**, give **me** the words to say." **He** was a man of faith, yet **he** carefully balanced faith with realism. **He** didn't have to have a detailed game plan in **his** hands, but **he** thought through the possible difficulties.²¹⁹