

Nehemiah 2:11-20
Caversham Baptist
24.1.16

Highlights of Nehemiah #2 Journeying in the dark

Introduction

Chapter 1 ends, 'I was cupbearer to the king.' Here is a man with one easy job! Here is a man living a life of luxury in the palace of the king. And God calls him to a new task, a far from easy task. And he goes.

We too are called, called to follow Jesus. This is also not easy when we have to say no to some of the things of the world. Nehemiah is a man of courage, and a man of action, and a model for us.

Rebuilding the walls of a city is an unusual thing for God to call someone to. We expect to be sent to the poor, the lost, the enslaved. This is usually where God calls people like our TranzSend people. It's worth asking, why, why the walls?

Q1. Why did God want the walls rebuilt?

A. See ch1:3; 2:18 the people were in disgrace. Also this is the last book of events before Jesus, this is a restart, a rebuild, vitally important if the Saviour - Jesus is going to come from these people. Kidner says the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC by the Babylonians was a death to make way for a rebirth. Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem around 445 - 446 BC

Nehemiah senses God moving his heart (ch2:12), calling him to this task. He is appalled by what he has heard from his brother and others (ch1:2) who returned to Susa. And it bothers him, saddens him. And he prays. And the evidence that God is with him in this plan becomes obvious very quickly as we go to chapter 2 (v1-9).

A sad cupbearer enters the king and queen's presence (ch2:2). Now the first thing in the cup bearer's job description was 'Don't be sad in the presence of the king'. The king didn't want sad sacks around. The king wanted his mood lifted up. No bathplug people thanks. In going in sad Nehemiah faced at least the sack. But God worked in the king's heart and he showed interest and compassion. It shouldn't have been. (In Ezra 4 the king had stopped the rebuilding) God was confirming to Nehemiah that this was the right track.

Have you ever experienced something like this? Look, I don't know what benefit God's kingdom got through this, but when I was teaching I got an idea that didn't go away. It was my last year teaching, 2003, and I wondered about taking my class from Taranaki to Wellington, for the week. Trouble was the Board of Trustees had decreed that there would be no camps outside the town boundaries. It would have been an easy excuse to stay at school.

One day I caught the Board Chair and the Principal in the office together and I went in and asked permission. Either of them should have said no, what's more it was the senior pupils that usually camped, and I had middle school. But they both said ok. I felt God was in this plan.

It felt at the time and still does as I look back, very much like Nehemiah where things that shouldn't have been, things could have, should have gone the other way, but they didn't. God's enabled it.

With the king's permission, with orders for materials, and protection from the king, Nehemiah takes the long road to Jerusalem. Literally a long road 900 miles, nearly 1500km's, that's four months travel!

And before we read today's passage, Nehemiah stops for three days.

Q2. Why? What do you suppose Nehemiah was doing in that first three days?

A) sightseeing b) recovering from jet lag c) partying d) something else

A. Lining up the ducks. Ezra did the same (Ezra 8:32), my guess is that Nehemiah was praying, giving thanks to God and praying about the way ahead.

Read Nehemiah 2:11-20

v11-16 Silence and Smells

There's stealth in verses 11-16, stealth and silence.

Why are these first six verses silent? Even God who puts the idea into Nehemiah's heart, v12, is not necessarily out loud. They creep around the walls at night, at night, at night. Why the emphasis? It would be very hard to see, they'd have to use all their other senses. Maybe when we're quiet, we hear God clearer?

They come across a burnt gate. How would you know it was burnt in the middle of the night? Would you still be able to smell it many years, 141 years after being burnt?

We value being able to see. It's helpful when you're driving, even walking. The unknown is scary. Nehemiah journeys in the dark. Have you had this experience? Not necessarily literally at night. Sometimes we feel like our life's journey is in the dark. It's not easy not knowing what's ahead. It's not easy not knowing if you're on the right path.

Diane and I were on the Milford Track sixteen years ago. We were running late having detoured off to the base of the Sutherland Falls. As the light faded we didn't worry because I had a torch in my bag. Well, I had a torch in my bag. Somehow it was no longer. Here we were on the track, with a tiny bit of moonlight, shuffling our way forward, not knowing how far it was to the hut, being able to see almost nothing. In the morning when we saw the deep drops off the side of the track, we were grateful to have made it safely. We were on the right path.

Nehemiah's on the right track, he hears from God, prays, and journeys into the dark. We call it stepping out, or pushing the boat out. And what happens when he does? Coincidences, God confirms he's on the right track. The king blesses his request.

v17-20 Speaking

And in v17 the speaking begins. 'Let's rebuild the wall so we will no longer be a disgrace.' I worry about how people see us. We often get positive reports which is nice. We work hard at keeping the building to a reasonable standard, it says something about us when it's uncared for. We don't want to be a disgrace. What more can we do so as not to be a disgrace?

Nehemiah then tells the leaders his testimony. God has spoken to him, he's spent time in prayer, he's seen 'the gracious hand of God' - coincidences along the way that convince him he's on the right track, and he acts. It's pretty compelling, and the leaders erupt with enthusiasm, let's do it!

If you want to read about coincidences of God, remember the books that were handed out last year when we had Robyn France from CAP, Christians Against Poverty speak to us. She handed out books on the CAP story, Nevertheless. What a read! Apart from the continual shortfall of money the way God continued to

enable that ministry/mission to grow was staggering! Coincidences don't just happen when God is in control!

But is it ever easy? The opposition we see here in v19 is a reminder that it's no cake walk. These three 'problems', three people were like governors of the surrounding areas, literally surrounding Jerusalem. They were a very real and powerful threat. And instead of Nehemiah threatening them with the king, he reminds them that they'll be fighting against God. If you read on in Nehemiah you'll see who won.

Conclusion

What is God's word to us today? Firstly you can see that God has put an idea in Nehemiah's heart. The same God also gives us a passion for things, visions, ideas. Be encouraged, God still speaks today!

Secondly, Nehemiah's response is a model. He prays. For days he mourns, fasts and prays (v4 of Chapter 1). And then, thirdly, Nehemiah acts. He steps out to see if this is the right direction. And it's as if God says YES!!! When Nehemiah should have been imprisoned for appearing sad, the king takes time to listen, validates him, and supports God's idea.

Only then, with the evidence of God's backing, the coincidences that don't just happen, does Nehemiah bring others on board and put the plan into action.

Is that all?

Is that our message?

Where was Nehemiah's heart? This is what strikes me. Nehemiah might have been a servant of the king, small k, but really Nehemiah was a servant of the King, capital K. Nehemiah sought to honour and serve God first. He was open to God, open to God's direction, and willing to act.

This is the big lesson for us today. Jesus first. Other things follow.

Where is your heart?

Is it in the humble, open place Nehemiah's was?

Will God be number one for you this year?

Listen to 'I surrender' Hillsong

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcnfT4arZtI>

Benediction

You are the people of God, gifted with dreams and visions.
Upon you rests the grace of God like flames of fire.
Love and serve the Lord in the strength of the Spirit.

May the deep peace of Christ be with you,
The strong arms of God sustain you,
And the power of the Holy Spirit strengthen you in every way.

Amen.