

Understanding Nehemiah (Ne. 1-2)



First of all, who was Nehemiah?

Nehemiah was of Jewish origin (his name means “Jehovah comforts”), but was born in Susa (one of the administrative centers of the Persian empire) in 140 BC. He descended from the Jews who were exiled by Babylon in 587 BC and torn from their homeland, Jerusalem. In ancient times, it was the custom of the great kings, when dominating other countries through war, to choose the most beautiful, intelligent, and capable young slaves to be part of the royal administrative body after studying their language, culture, and laws.

The bible presents Nehemiah as the "cupbearer" (Ne 1:11) of the Persian king Artaxerxes I, ruler of the empire that dominated the entire known world back then. The term "cupbearer" should not trick us into thinking that Nehemiah was a mere cup bearer. There was nothing superfluous about his position in the hierarchy of the Persian empire. Nehemiah's position (besides serving the king with wine and tasting it to make sure it wasn't poisoned) was like a king's personal advisor and that put him in a position of great power and influence. In Tobias's apocryphal book, we read about the cupbearer Aicar, who had a similar position to that of Nehemiah:

“Ahikar then interceded for me and I was allowed to return to Nineveh, since Ahikar had been chief cupbearer, keeper of the signet, administrator and treasurer under Sennacherib king of Assyria, and Esarhaddon had kept him in office” – Tobiah 1:22.



Drinking Cup. Bible Lands Museum, Jerusalem. Photo by Leon Mauldin.

Right in the first verses of the book of Nehemiah, he learns from his compatriots that Jerusalem was “in great misery and contempt; the walls are broken down, and their gates burned ”(Ne 1:3). This information left him in a state of deep bitterness, weeping and wailing for days (v. 4). It should not be like that, he thought. The promise to Abraham was that his offspring would be “a great nation” (Gen. 12:3) and not a conquered people, scattered in various regions, enslaved and humiliated daily by pagans who worshiped idols of clay and stone who had no power. Something had to be done, the walls of Jerusalem should be restored, as well as nations's respect for Israel and the worship in the temple of the Lord.

The walls of a city have strong symbolic appeal to our spiritual state (Pv 25:28). Therefore, it may be helpful to follow Nehemiah's footsteps, the reformer of Jerusalem, in order to lift the "broken walls" of our weak and corrupt faith as well.

Nehemiah's prayer is related in Nehemiah 1:5-11. Parallel to his moment of grief, he seeks God longing for ways out of that difficult time. He makes a precious speech there, where he extols divine justice and does not try to hide the mistakes made by the people of Israel, but also identifies himself as a sinner with his nation, as did Moses (Ex 32: 30-33), Daniel (9: 4-19) and Ezra (9: 5-15), so this act of humility shows that Nehemiah was qualified to lead the people of Israel this time. While living in the wealth of the Artaxerxes palace, he cries out to God to deliver them from the “misery WE are in” (Ne 2:17), always speaking in the first person plural. His Jewish roots make him suffer along with his people. Even he was one of the empire's chief ministers, this did not define Nehemiah. The writer Ellen White says: **“There is a constant temptation for human beings to consider that whatever influence they have obtained is the result of something of value in themselves. The Lord does not work with these people, for He will not give to any being the glory that belongs to His name.”** Nehemiah thus shows us that there is no concrete reforms without prior self-evaluation, which results in our identification as sinners, which in turn leads to confession and sincere repentance (Ne 1: 6). For any personal project, there is no better start than to come down from the platform of pride and arrogance, and see who we truly are and the best we can do.

Another important aspect of Nehemiah is that he prayed reminding God of the promises He made to Moses long time ago: *“even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name”* (Nehemiah 1:8-9), thus using the most effective argument, which is to use hearer's own words against himself. Also recalling how God had already acted for His people in the past, at the time of deliverance from Egyptian captivity: *“They are your servants and your people who you have redeemed with your strength and strong hand”* (v. 10). He thus showed that although born in Persian territory and having a prominent position in the kingdom, he did not ignore the history of his people and their sacred writings: the Torah (Pentateuch) and the ancient prophets. The beginning of Nehemiah's prayer for the people is almost an exact replica of the introduction for Daniel's prayer.

““Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.” – Neemias 1:5

“Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments” - Daniel 9:4

God reveals Himself to humanity through His Holy Scripture. There is reported (to the limit of human understanding) the divine nature and will. Our lives must be a constant search for these truths so that we can pray according to the promises God gives us, and also be able to understand the answers. Nehemiah's prayer shows that he did not have a blind faith, as many today, expecting from God what He had never promised, sometimes the object of human desire being something that totally opposes the divine character.

In Nehemiah's case, the answer to his prayer was himself. **God had set in his heart the purpose** of traveling to Jerusalem and restoring its walls (Nehemiah 2:12). But he could not make this trip without first asking for a license from his service at the king's court in Susa. And this was not as easy to do as it may seem at first glance. This same king (Artaxerxes) had already opposed rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem before (Ed 4:23), and a request from the king's cupbearer to be absent from service just to break his order was very likely to result in criminal execution to Nehemiah. This was a time when a servant's life was worth very little, practically the king's effort to declare an order of execution. That is why we are told that Nehemiah greatly feared for his life (Nehemiah 2:2).

At one point, the grief over Jerusalem's ruininess is expressed in Nehemiah's countenance while he poured wine to the king. At that time, displays of sadness or disgust were not tolerated in the Persian royal courts. “A servant should be happy since being close to the king was enough for his happiness” (Barnes). In Esther 4:2 we see that no one mourning was allowed to see the king. Since the ruler of the Persian empire naturally possessed several enemies, every caution against possible aggressors was taken, including attention to any kind of dark expression around the king. “A servant who showed a bad temper to the king could be considered a conspirator, or a bad servant” (Champlin). Therefore, when asked by the king the reason for his head down, Nehemiah hastens to clarify that he had no evil intentions: “Long live the king” (Ne 2: 3).

Fearing for his life and seeing no better opportunity,, Nehemiah makes a quick inner prayer and makes his request (Nehemiah 2: 4-5). Some interesting thoughts:

1) Nehemiah refers to Jerusalem as “the place of the tomb of my fathers” (Ne 2:3): Having lived in Persia all his life, he knew that because of their culture, the Persians had a great respect for tombs and strongly disapproved of their violation. Knowing this, he used this rhetoric to enhance the emotional appeal of his request to the king.

2) At the time of the conversation between Nehemiah and Artaxerxes, the “queen sat with him” (Ne 2:6). Nehemiah cleverly identifies this as a propitious moment. Just having the queen present would be of great influence to the king, even more if we accept the possibility that the referred queen was Esther (this possibility is raised by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown in their commentary, but it is not a unanimous opinion among scholars. If this queen really were Esther, it would make more sense this line in the book of Nehemiah, since the wives of kings were usually never mentioned in the ancient books). Esther, being Jewish like Nehemiah, would have a fondness for him and could positively influence the king to allow the rebuilding of Jerusalem. And that would be most effective in Artaxerxes, as we read in the Adventist Bible Commentary: “According to ancient historians, women had primary importance in the decisions made by the king. Artaxerxes is said to be a toy in the hands of his wives, and that affairs and intrigues in the harem were of more interest to him than the

politics and administration of the kingdom. Darius II was completely controlled by his cruel and cunning wife, Parysatis, who was also his sister, and who had an uncontrollable thirst for power. ”

3) Even though totally dependent on God, Nehemiah did not act as if there were no material difficulties that needed greater caution (Ne 2:7-8). For example, he requested authority letters from the king and armed escort through some length, as well as the provision of building materials. He saw every opportunity to advance his project and grab all of them. **Many times we think that having faith in God means abandoning all caution and prudence, and practically throwing yourself down the cliff hoping that God will catch. But God has never asked us for blind faith, but for faith so great that it will not be discouraged by difficulties. Contrary to the mundane idea that religion is synonymous with irrationality, planning and high reasoning are present at every stage of our spiritual journey. The only difference between Christian and worldly reason is that the former is not mistaken. The bible brings truths that are impossible to find in a laboratory or philosophical digressions. Worldly reason does not accept this and places the limited human mind in a place where it can never be, as understanding and forming all that exists.**

4) We miss many opportunities due to lack of planning. At the time of the conversation with Artaxerxes, Nehemiah thought his request probably would not be granted. But in the remote possibility that the king would allow him to go to Jerusalem, he had already thought, planned, and knew how long his trip would take and the materials he would need. So if the king wanted to know any details, Nehemiah could give the answer (Nehemiah 2:6-10). **We must kneel and ask God's blessings according to His promises, but as we get up on our knees, planning and concrete work should begin.**

Finally, it is interesting to note that the Jewish exile lasted about 70 years. And after Cyrus's permission for the Jews to return to their homeland, it took approximately 100 more years for the city to be rebuilt and the temple worship service to be restored. Therefore, for all things it is necessary to **wait, trust and not be discouraged.**

“He does not always lead us to pleasant places. If we did, in our self-sufficiency we would forget that He is our Helper. He longs to manifest Himself to us, to reveal the abundant supplies available to us, and to consent to us to pass by trials and disappointments to acknowledge our helplessness and learn to turn to Him for help ”(Ellen White).

Times to go by Turns, Robert Southwell

"Not always fall of leaf, nor ever spring;

No endless night, nor yet eternal day.

The saddest bird a season finds to sing,

The roughest storm a calm may soon allay.

Thus, with succeeding years, God tempers all,

That man may hope to rise, yet fear to fall."

Comentary by: Ícaro de Lima Nogueira

Site: www.didaskalicon.com

Email: didaskalicon@gmail.com

Facebook, instagran, twitter: @didaskalicon

Based on Seventh-Day Adventist Church's Sabbath School Lesson