

NEHEMIAH 2 : 1 – 6

Protection for church builders

Nehemiah 2
The LORD sovereignly protects Nehemiah
in his request to rebuild Jerusalem

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction: Last time we were introduced to Nehemiah, the Lord's servant, who was still residing in the Persian capital Susa, but who longed to see the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the restoring of Israel. We noted his deep love for the church of the Lord as a result of his strong bond with the Lord of the church.

Nehemiah was shocked at the situation in Judah and Jerusalem. He prayed about it and decided to take action. He would speak about it to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. He said (1 : 11): "O LORD, give your servant success *today* by granting him favour in the presence of this man." Note the word: today. Nehemiah wanted to take, it seems, immediate action. Being cup-bearer to the king, he would be able to do so, he thought. "I was cup-bearer to the king," we read, an important, confidential, and strategic position. Of all people, Nehemiah was the best suited, the best-positioned person to raise the matter immediately.

Nehemiah came to this decision, we read in chapter 1, in the month of Kislev (which would have been in our month of December), but as we pick up the sequence of events in chapter 2, we are suddenly in the month of Nisan, which is our month of March. Between what is recorded, then, in chapter 1 and chapter 2 lies a time space of three to

four months. Nehemiah had apparently not that same day – or even immediately thereafter – carried out his intention to speak to the king.

That raises a few questions. Why wait all this time in such a pressing matter? When we read our text, we notice also that even after this time, Nehemiah is still bungling things; he doesn't seem to dare to raise it directly. It is not Nehemiah but the king who gets the ball rolling. What are we to think of this?

One explainer suggests that all this was a matter of strategy. Nehemiah carefully waited for a good moment. And then he put on a sad face to make the king curious, and so he got the sympathetic attention of his imperial majesty. I think that this explanation is wrong, for it makes Nehemiah into a cunning actor who depends on a slick presentation. Church building is not done through smooth strategy. Sure, just as every construction company knows: you have to plan your work and work your plan. But no servant of the Lord is going to build the church on the basis of an academy award performance. Jerusalem and Hollywood have nothing in common.

We have to conclude therefore that Nehemiah did not have any real opportunity from December to March to present the matter of Judah to the king. One reason could be a rather obvious one: like other notables, the Persian kings had a summer and a winter residence. From December to March the king may very well have been in his winter palace – away from Susa – where there was other permanent personnel. In that case Nehemiah could only attend to the matter after the king's return. And even then, when the king returns, Nehemiah has to tread carefully, for it is a serious and dangerous matter.

In our text we do not get the profile of a cunning man who has conceived a masterful plan and now carefully works that plan to his advantage. The church is not built in that way. We read here about the sovereign work of the LORD, who leads Artaxerxes to allow Nehemiah to go to Judah. That's the issue in this text. Also here it is: *solī Deo gloria*, all glory be to God alone.

The LORD sovereignly protects Nehemiah in his request to rebuild Jerusalem.

- 1. The occasion realized by the LORD.**
- 2. The tension relieved by the LORD.**
- 3. The decision rendered by the LORD.**

1. In verse 1 we read how Nehemiah is called to bring in wine to the king, the mighty and feared Artaxerxes. Some explainers suggest that this may have been the first time since Nehemiah's decision to present the matter of Judah that he is called in officially to serve the king as cup bearer. It is even plausible that the king – upon returning to the capital city and the central palace – held some kind of official reception for the royal court and for all the nobles and ministers who had functioned there during his absence.

I tend to agree with this suggestion because we read in verse 6 that the queen was also present, sitting beside the king on a royal throne, and we know that this suggests a special occasion. Remember from *The Book of Esther* how king Xerxes had commanded Queen Vasti to show herself at his banquet, and how she refused. The presence of the queen here leads to me accept the notion that some official, formal banquet was held, where her presence was required, and where also the imperial cup bearer, Nehemiah, would have to serve the king.

Nehemiah goes to perform his duty. But obviously his heart is not in it. He writes, "I had not been sad in his presence before." It was actually forbidden, I believe, to be "sad" in the presence of the king. Everyone had to observe proper decorum, feel honoured to be invited, and especially the servants were to go about their business efficiently and cheerfully. There's nothing that can destroy your appetite more than a waiter who is a grouch. Maybe you know – from books or documentaries – how it goes at these official galas: everyone is cheerful, smiling, the talk is light banter, for in the presence of the king everyone must have a good time. To have a scowl on your face, or give any evidence of dissatisfaction, could mean losing the favour of the king, and that could lead to further problems, even death. So everyone made sure that they were visibly enjoying themselves. The wine flowed

freely, the food was abundant, the company exquisite, and the atmosphere bubbly.

It certainly was not a good occasion for Nehemiah to raise the delicate matter of rebuilding Jerusalem. But Nehemiah was so concerned about the people of God that he simply could not put on a cheerful face. The man was really not a good actor at all. He goes about his duty, pours the wine for the king, is in his immediate vicinity constantly, but does not seem to be himself. He is subdued and cannot display his normal cheerfulness. Something is obviously bothering the man. Maybe, as much as Nehemiah tries to get into the proper festive spirit, it doesn't work, and as the feast progresses he becomes increasingly absorbed by his grief over his people. This lavish opulence, this rich banquet only brings all the more forcibly to his mind the sad state of Israel. There's nothing contrived about Nehemiah: he simply cannot get caught up in the joy of the moment. It depresses him even more.

The king who, like any despotic ruler, always keenly observes everyone around him, especially his personal attendants, cannot but notice that there is something wrong with Nehemiah. And the king asks Nehemiah what is wrong. Probably that's the last thing Nehemiah wanted. The rule for every servant at the royal court was: don't get any attention focused on yourself, keep your nose clean, stay in the background, do not ever provoke the king. Perhaps Nehemiah's heart skipped a beat when the question suddenly came: Nehemiah, why does your face look so sad?

Now the question of the king is not immediately threatening. Actually, some explainers suggest that there is some humour in the way the king presents it. It almost seems as if his majesty is trying to boost Nehemiah's sagging spirits. The king says, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." Nehemiah has probably told the king that he is not ill. The king then suggests "sadness of heart," and some explainers feel that he may mean that Nehemiah is suffering from a "broken heart," having perhaps been rejected by a woman he loves. In other words: Nehemiah, what's the

matter, is something wrong with your love life? Some explainers find this all the more plausible because they believe that Nehemiah (as close servant of the king, with access to the royal harem) may have been a eunuch, and eunuchs have no sexual life. Then it would indeed be a rather crude joke.

Now I am not at all convinced that Nehemiah was a eunuch. Nevertheless, the king does touch on reality. Nehemiah is not bothered by some physical problem but by a deeper matter; something is troubling him greatly. It shows on his face and probably in his entire physical demeanour. The man looks bad, haggard and wearied. He has probably not slept well in the past months and this is beginning to show. As much as Nehemiah tried to carry on as usual, it simply does not work. He is obviously depressed. I think that this shows us again something important about Nehemiah. The plight of God's people is not a momentary, passing concern, but something which disturbs him day and night. The mental and spiritual pressure on God's servants often has physical implications as well. Nehemiah is stuck with a very real problem: how to raise this delicate issue at an opportune moment and gain the attention and favour of the king.

Now here is his opportunity. Perhaps it is not a moment that Nehemiah himself would have chosen, in this festive crowd. Not now, in public, with the wine flowing freely. The opportunity that presents itself is almost an embarrassment. It makes Nehemiah even more vulnerable. What if he does speak, and the king is outraged at his insubordinate request to have a royal edict repealed?

The occasion, however, is realized by the Lord. He gives this opportunity, and as often He does so at a very unexpected time. We tend to go along, worrying and wondering, but the Lord guides things in such a way that an opportunity simply presents itself. That's God's way. Perhaps the most unlikely moments and unsuited occasions are precisely used by him to further His kingdom. For it does not depend upon our strategy but on God's sovereignty. We can learn from this. It is God Himself and God alone who opens doors and realizes occasions, so that we can suddenly progress. How many times does it not happen that we wonder how a certain problem must be resolved and the Lord guides

everything so that it almost resolves itself? This occasion is sovereignly realized by the Lord, majestically, masterfully. For the Lord is not bound by our circumstances and situations; He creates situations so that He can use them to His glory and our benefit. God has a unique and wonderful way of guiding things in life, so that unexpected opportunities arise. The point is then whether we will make use of the opportunity which has suddenly come about.

2. I do believe that the king's question suddenly puts Nehemiah on the spot. If the question was asked in a widely audible voice, everyone in the vicinity will suddenly have become quiet and attentive. Everyone will feel: there is something in the air here.

Please note that it says at the end of verse 2: "I was *very much afraid*." That's perhaps a mild translation. It says something like: I was dreadfully afraid. Nehemiah suddenly stands as it were before a bottomless pit. It is a dangerous, intimidating moment. One wrong word, and he is finished. What thoughts will have been racing through his mind? O, how did I ever get into this terrible position; not here, Lord, not right now, I am not ready for this!

Now Nehemiah could possibly have tried to get out of the situation by also cracking a joke, by making some light and easy response which would have pleased the king. It could all have been kept on the level of easy humour and good clean fun. There are many tactics possible to avoid the issue, to change the subject, and we often use such tactics. When we are suddenly dreadfully afraid, the adrenaline starts flowing, and we can come up with amazing escape routes. No, I'm fine, your majesty, just a little tired lately, or whatever. When sudden tensions arise, we are adept at diffusing the situation.

But Nehemiah's fear does not lead him in that way. He says: I was very much afraid (the memory of that moment still frightens him), *but* I said to the king, may the king live forever. *But I said . . .* Nehemiah speaks despite his fear. He decides that this is the God-given moment to speak up, regardless of the consequences. And we must say: it is the Lord who gives Nehemiah this strength and courage. For from whom

else do we receive strength? In that instance, as life and death flash before the man's eyes, the Lord enables him to speak up for the cause of His people. Therefore I formulated: the Lord relieves the tension. It is God who gives us the courage and the words to speak in such decisive moments. That has always been the comfort of the Lord's children. Fear not; I will enable you to speak and give you the words required.

Nehemiah is no hero. He's a haggard-looking, weary man, possibly at the end of his tether, but it pleases God to use such people for mighty progress in His kingdom. God's heroes are often simple, tired, over-burdened people who would never have come through were it not for the enabling power of God's Spirit. The strength of God always becomes visible in the weakness of His servants, for the treasure is contained in "earthen vessels," as Paul writes later. So that whoever boasts, will boast in the Lord. Here again we see the basic contours of the Gospel: the power of God manifest in the weakness of men.

As much as he is afraid, Nehemiah does not lose his composure. He says, "May the king live forever." This was a very polite and common address to the king, especially when an important request was about to be made. It also tends to convey that the request is not threatening to the king or his kingdom. May the king live forever; far be it from Nehemiah to ask anything that would displease the king or pose a threat to His majesty. Nehemiah retains the humility of a servant whose loyalty should not be doubted. At the same time, he indicates that something far-reaching is about to be asked.

And notice how carefully Nehemiah phrases his request, in the form of a (rhetorical) question: "Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" We might also read it as: how can I really be happy when . . . ? It is a simple but emotional question in which Nehemiah pours out all the anxiety of his heart. That is what makes it also a genuine statement. There is no political speech. There is no long-winded resume. Here is a *cri-du-coeur*, a cry from the heart. This man has no hidden agenda, no secret plan; he plans no evil conspiracy against the

glory of Persia's king, but he experiences deep pain over the state of his own people.

And we understand that this also helps to relieve the tension. Honesty is not just the best virtue, it is the only way to relieve tension. The statement is genuine, without embellishment, true and sincere. And it touches the king's heart. I am becoming more and more annoyed with the explainer who suggested that all this is careful strategy. Here is a man who spontaneously speaks from the heart in love for his people.

True, Nehemiah doesn't mention the *name* of the city. That may have been because he had to be careful. Emotion must be combined with caution, and integrity blended with wisdom. Be innocent as doves, and wise as serpents, said Jesus later. Nehemiah says: the city where my fathers are buried . . . my ancestral city is in ruins. That may touch a chord in the hearts of the Persians, for they also respected their ancestors and were proud of their heritage. It is something to which the king can relate. If even your deceased fathers – who pose no threat – cannot rest in peace and honour, something is wrong.

This genuine and honest statement relieves the tension of the moment. God relieved the tension. Does this not teach us something? We worry about many things, we toss and turn, about personal matters, about work and finances, also about the things that happen in the church, but the Lord in His own wondrous way and simple manner resolves all things. Church builders must know about this and work in this simple trust. Do what you have to do, what you can do; do your best, but trust that the Lord Himself will open the way.

The king realizes that more must be said. He asks: what is it you want? Okay, Nehemiah, come to the point. Be specific now. This question, I believe, is asked calmly and kindly. The tension has been ebbing away already. But this question also gives the issue its final focus. For now comes the real test.

At this point we read these words (verse 4b): "Then I prayed to the God of heaven." Nehemiah first prays! Now we all understand that this cannot have been a lengthy prayer. It was a short, but a spontaneous intense prayer: Lord, help me now, bless me now! Just a few thoughts

in his mind that were directed to God. Notice: the God of Heaven. The omnipotent and sovereign God. If ever Nehemiah needed God's help, he needs it *now*. And before he speaks further to the king, he speaks to God.

Can you relate to this? A quick and intense prayer in a moment of need? When you face a situation that is extremely tense and in which you feel so vulnerable and helpless? This intense reaching out to God, it shows us something again about the kind of man Nehemiah was. This is his true strength. He is a man of spiritual depth. Have you ever uttered such a prayer, silent, within yourself, but clearly directed to God? Sometimes we come to stand in a situation where we are indeed driven to God, and you know it: Lord, if you do not help me now, I am lost, I cannot do it, I cannot handle it.

I will tell you honestly: I can relate to this. More than once we stand before situations of which we know: Lord, if ever I needed your help, it is now. How else will you get through those moments of immense tension when so much is on the line? Now, of course, this kind of quick prayer must flow out of a life of prayer. We cannot suffice with such short and quick prayers in moments of tension. Our whole life must be directed by and filled with prayer. We have already seen that Nehemiah was a man of prayer (chapter 1). If that is the case, then in times of need you may go to the Lord, the God of heaven, the omnipotent and sovereign God. Only those who pray regularly may also pray spontaneously in times of sudden need.

This prayer emboldens Nehemiah. He receives new courage. He makes his request concrete and simple. Let me go to the city in Judah so that I can rebuild it. He still hasn't said "Jerusalem," but everyone knows what city is meant. Nehemiah actually says: send me! Not just "let me go," no, send me! It has to be an official mission ordered and sanctioned by the king, or it will meet with failure.

Well, there you have it. *En plein publique*: the whole court hears it. The request is not made in a quiet man-to-man talk in a confidential setting, but before all of Persia's nobles, diplomats, and advisors. No back-room deal, but an open and clear request. This is probably not how Nehemiah

envisioned it, but this is how God has directed it to show forth His sovereignty. *For He builds His church in the face of all the world*, and in that confidence we build.

3. Now all eyes are on the king. What will he say to this? Actually, in keeping with the constitution of the Medes and Persians, no imperial edict was to be revoked. Not customarily, in any event. Nehemiah's request was an impossible one; it could perhaps even be considered insubordination. I can picture the nobles around the king suddenly holding their breath. It may have become very quiet around the throne of Artaxerxes. Rebuild Jerusalem? That centre of rebellion and rioting? That most difficult trouble spot in the whole empire? Why, the king had expressly decreed that the city, which he called "a place of rebellion and sedition" (Ezra 4) would not be rebuilt until so ordered. The king cannot back down, and that means: Nehemiah is done, finished. Everyone is waiting for the explosion that will come from the throne.

But amazingly we read these words: "Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, 'How long will your journey take and when will you get back?'" From this Nehemiah concludes, "It pleased the king to send me, so I set a time." The king says: yes. Notice the fact that the queen is mentioned: the king of Persia, with all his royal splendour, queen beside him, all his advisors and nobles in attendance, publicly and officially says: yes! The former royal decree is revoked, and a new decree is officially issued.

Nehemiah is even sent out officially on behalf of the king, with letters of recommendation, and a royal escort of cavalry so large that it requires officers (verse 9). Talk about receiving official endorsement! In his wildest dreams Nehemiah would not have dared to think of this possibility. Even Zerubabel and Ezra had not received such courteous treatment. Nehemiah even dares ask for official letters to enable him to get timber from the king's forests for the rebuilding of Jerusalem: cedars from the imperial forests of Lebanon. Well, sure, why not, when you're on a roll, go ahead and ask. The flood-gates are now open, seize the moment of divine opportunity. Church builders must have an eye for

opportunity and must be bold in the Lord. To be a church builder, you need not only courage, but also vision. Look ahead, count the cost, see the opportunities, and dare to ask.

Now we can say: this Artaxerxes must have been a kind and warm-hearted man. But in reality he was not. At best he was an “enlightened despot” in the tradition of the Persian kings, such as Cyrus, who tried to keep peace in the regions by allowing people to worship their own “gods” in their own manner. But Judah and Jerusalem were always a threat to stability in the empire and there was no political reason for Artaxerxes to change the earlier decree.

We should not even say that Nehemiah was lucky, that he must have caught the king in a good mood. For we all know: there is no such thing as “luck,” and the kingdom of God does not depend on the good or bad moods of human rulers. Yet it remains remarkable that Artaxerxes so quickly and easily gave in. Would it not be normal for a Persian king to take time to consult with his advisors and to study previous edicts before making a decision? At best Nehemiah could hope for a promise from the king that he would set up a committee to study the matter. But the king immediately responds in a positive sense.

And we must say: *this decision is rendered by the Lord*. As were all previous decisions of Persian kings. It is the Lord alone, the God of heaven, who in this wondrous way continues the rebuilding of His church. He uses Nehemiah, and He directs the king of Persia. His providence and almighty power become evident in a clear manner. I had to think of Proverbs 21 : 1: “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases.” Kings, all kings, do only what God wants. This is His sovereignty, always the same, always astounding. Nehemiah says it himself in verse 8: because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my request.

It pleased the king? No, it pleased the LORD, the God of heaven. That’s the real secret of church history, of church building. To be functional in church building, also today, we must know this secret, believe this truth. The hand of the LORD is upon us. Do you believe

this hand, and feel this hand? In your life? In the life of the churches? He enables us and also protects us. In this way He uses us for the building of His church. Ascribe then strength to God alone (Psalm 68).

There are many things we can and do worry about. The political situation, the economic climate, the secular influences: all these and more constantly threaten the existence, the gathering and increase of the church of Christ. And we have to deal with all these things. We face immense challenges in every generation. But we know: the decision in all these things is rendered by the Lord, by the Son of God, who is now seated on the throne of heaven, where as the Head of the church He governs all things. God still gives unexpected opportunities. He enables us to rise to the challenge. And when it comes to the crunch, the decision is always rendered in favour of His church.

Always.

AMEN.