

## Sermon – 11/01/2009 pm

### Nehemiah's Prayer Answered

Study Text: Nehemiah 2:1-8

There is a popular teaching about prayer that you must be specific – specific in what you ask for. It teaches that we are not to simply ask for a new car but a new red car. Furthermore, we are told that since God loves us and he is all powerful, we should ask for the best red car on the market. A child of God should not give the impression that his God does not provide the best for his children.

It is difficult to find any truth in such teaching but a couple of points can be made. Firstly, it is important to be specific in prayer, as we will learn from Nehemiah. Our prayers are often without a focus. We are not clear as to what we want the Lord to do. We pray according to the Lord's will of course but the Lord wants us to find out his will and pray specifically.

Are our general prayers an indication that we really want nothing from the Lord? In days of plenty this may well be the case. Prayers become quite specific in times of trouble do they not? But Nehemiah was not in personal trouble. He made the trouble of others his trouble. He shared in the shame and reproach of the people of God in Jerusalem in his specific prayer request.

The other point about the 'red new car' prayer is that Nehemiah was not praying anything for himself. He already had a top job as the king's chief steward. He could have boasted that the Lord had blessed him with a good job and comfortable life. 'God I thank you that I am not like other men'. But his concern, his prayer was not about his own position or comfort in the world. He did not simply pray 'Lord bless me and my family' – and then when his prayer was answered stop praying. In fact Nehemiah was ready to forsake his new red car in order to promote the welfare and witness of God's people in a far off land.

### Approach

Nehemiah's prayer of adoration and confession ended with a simple request – that he be granted *mercy in the sight of this man* i.e. King Artaxerxes (1:11). He was the king's cupbearer, a trusted servant in the palace. He had access to the king but still one did not approach the king without first being invited, as Queen Esther made clear to Mordecai (Esther 4:11). Nehemiah's main job was to check the king's food and wine before serving it to him. He was obliged to be pleasant when in the king's presence. Grumpy servants did not last long in the palace.

Nehemiah had never been sad in the king's presence, until this day in the month of Nisan, 445BC. It was four months after he got the news from Jerusalem and began to pray. Why the long wait? We are not told but clearly it was a delicate and dangerous move that Nehemiah planned to make. He kept on praying for the right moment.

He had prayed and trusted God to answer his prayer but this was no excuse for being foolhardy. Nehemiah did not act like some immature Christians who boldly confront their boss at work or their church leaders about some matter because they think God has led them

to do so. He did not rush into the king's room saying God had told him he had to go back to Jerusalem. Maybe he could have done so without losing his head but he would certainly not have gone with the king's blessing and his letters.

It has been suggested that the king was having some celebration when Nehemiah decided to let his mourning heart show – maybe a birthday celebration. On the other hand the queen was with him and she would rarely appear with him in public. We are told, more or less as an aside, that the *queen* (literally: woman of the palace) *was sitting beside him* (2:6). She may well have put in a good word for Nehemiah. Remember how Esther influenced the king with regard to Haman and Mordecai.

We are not told the details; only that Nehemiah was sad before the king and the king noticed. Not only did he notice but he commented. He knew that Nehemiah was not sick. He was not in physical pain but emotional pain. He had some sorrow in his heart (2:2). Nehemiah had not expressed his concern for his people before the king until this time.

Although he had prayed and planned for this moment he was shocked and scared when the king did notice his demeanour. But he had earnestly prayed for this moment and he was prepared. He may well have rehearsed what he would say. But still he was depending on the Lord as his 'arrow' prayer of verse 4 shows.

'When you are brought before kings and governors do not worry what you will say for I will give you words and wisdom' said Jesus (Luke 21:15). Let us remember this promise so that we do not become speechless when asked to give a reason for our hope. We have all probably been in the situation of shooting a quick prayer to the Lord for the right words to say – if not then go to Africa or Asia and try to cross some state or national border.

Nehemiah answered the king with the usual polite address and then a carefully worded explanation of why he was sad. He was honest but carefully avoided words that might carry unfavourable associations e.g. Jerusalem. Remember this king had received a complaint about this rebellious city and order the rebuilding of the walls to cease *until the command is given by me* (Ezra 4:21).

Nehemiah told the king he was mourning because the city of his ancestor's graves was in ruins and its gates burned with fire (2:3). There is no suggestion of deception on Nehemiah's part. The king would have known the city he was referring to, but better the name left unsaid. Moreover Nehemiah was not confronting the king with a political or religious dilemma. He was making a personal request.

I mentioned the challenge of dealing with government officials in Africa or Asia. To get a magistrates signature on a return visa to India took us at least a week and numerous visits to the court under normal circumstances. Yet when I went to them saying I needed to return home for my father's funeral I got the magistrate's signature the same day – even if it was 11pm.

## Approval

'What is it you want' the king said to Nehemiah (2:4)? Nehemiah could not believe his ears. The king who noticed his sad face could have sacked him on the spot, or worse, but instead wanted to help Nehemiah in this time of sadness. 'How can I help you' he said in effect?

‘The good hand of my God is upon me’ Nehemiah said in his heart as he immediately turned to the Lord in prayer. The Lord granted him mercy in the sight of the king as he had asked. Now to put into words for the king what he had persistently been praying for – persistence that continued to this very moment.

Here we see that in addition to praying Nehemiah had been planning how he could help his fellow Jews back in Jerusalem. It was very delicate situation if, as was probably the case, the rebuilding of the walls had previously been stopped by this king. But in the strength of the Lord, Nehemiah made his requests centring upon the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Firstly he asked the king to give him leave to go to Judah to rebuild the city walls – still avoiding the name Jerusalem. Nehemiah was personally committed to this task and the king took notice. We can only speculate as to the outcome if he had asked the king to send someone else or just send money. ‘Are you really committed to this task’ the king might have asked? But Nehemiah, like Isaiah, said ‘here I am, send me’ (Isaiah 6:8).

Few people in the church today are ready to say ‘here I am Lord, send me’. Some are not even ready to cross the road to speak to their neighbour about Christ. ‘If God wants people to come to church he will bring them’ they say. There are even those who pray for the church to grow but do not even come themselves. How personally committed are you to the things you ask for in prayer? How committed are you to the building up of this fellowship – if that is something you mention in your prayers?

Nehemiah asked for leave to go and the king approved – after asking how long he would be gone. Nehemiah had an answer already calculated. He is unlikely to have asked for the 12 years total which he spent in Jerusalem (13:6). His second request was for letters he could give to the governors of the region beyond the River. With these official letters these governors who were hostile towards the Jews would have to give him safe passage and freedom to do what the king sent him to do.

His third request shows just how much Nehemiah had been planning this work as well as praying. He asked for a letter to the keeper of the king’s forest from where he would get timber beams for the gates to the city, and the palace, and his own house (2:8). The king gave Nehemiah all he wanted and Nehemiah gratefully acknowledged the good hand of the Lord upon him.

It was right for Nehemiah to give thanks to God for this amazing answer to his prayer. God is good. God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. God promises to hear the humble and sincere cry of his children. Yet we have also seen that Nehemiah made detailed plans. Prayer does not preclude careful planning on our part. Nehemiah made plans not because of any lack of faith but because of his faith in God; faith that God would answer his prayer.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*