

## Nehemiah 2:1-9

## Do Something!

The late Eddie Askew refers to the artistic techniques of Joseph Mallard William Turner in a reflection, in his book, *No Strange Land*<sup>1</sup>. I know hardly anything about most paintings and most artists but I can usually recognise a J W Turner painting. Askew considers them to be breathtaking yet made up of a simple running together of colour, blue-greys, soft reds, pale yellows. Askew says that Turner painted them wet, letting the colours flow into each other. There are few clear edges or defined shapes. Then when the paint was dry, Turner would take a little stronger colour on his brush or pen. "With a few crisp confident strokes," Askew writes, "the blur became a picture, the background colours given meaning and definition." Turner's paintings are no accident. Looking at one you could be forgiven for thinking there is no plan to this, no structure; you would be mistaken. Even the earliest, less defined strokes are all part of the plan, the vision. Hold on to the image of Turner's paintings as we come to Nehemiah.

Today we meet Nehemiah at the royal palace. We are told, in the last verse of Chapter 1, that he is cupbearer to the King, a responsible and extremely dangerous occupation. The King was always open to assassination. One of the most feared and successful ways was through poisoning. Drop liquid poison in his wine glass or sprinkle poison powder on his beans and you've killed him without looking him in the eye, or even being anywhere near him.

The cupbearer counteracted this threat; he tried all the food and drink before it is offered to the king, just to see if it is safe. If the cupbearer is ok, then the food and wine is passed to the king. If the cupbearer dies, then everyone knows that the food was poisoned. An extremely risky occupation; it required putting your life in jeopardy all the time and as a result, the position carried a great deal of esteem. Nehemiah was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia.

Unbearably for Nehemiah, he realized that God moves according to His time and in His way, not Nehemiah's (or ours). Nehemiah was a man of prayer, a man of action, a man who loved his own people and his nation. This time, waiting, must have seemed like an eternity. In Chapter 2 we hear that he was unhappy in the king's presence for the first time and the king noticed. Nehemiah risked the king's anger because he was so sad. It was a dangerous state to be sad at the royal court. People could risk death. But what seemed like a long four months had passed since Nehemiah had heard of the plight of Jerusalem and the Jews and he was still reacting. And he wasn't content just to be sad. He responded to the king's concern for his sadness by loyally saying, "Let the king live forever," followed by: "Why shouldn't I be sad? After all, Jerusalem is ruined."

To utter this comment, in this way, risked, at least a rebuke, if not being fired from his elite job, or the worst, being executed. But no! Nehemiah, despite (maybe because of) his effrontery, courage, stupidity (whatever you wish to label it!) was asked by the king, "What would you request?"

In what could only have been a few seconds Nehemiah sends up what we would call today, an arrow prayer to God. This prayer couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds. It might have been: 'God, give me the words to answer him,' or simply, 'help,' but it was a prayer. Nehemiah realised he had this 'window of opportunity' here and he wanted God to help him make sure he made best use of it. How interesting. He had prayed for four months, day and night, why did he feel he needed to pray at this

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<sup>1</sup> Eddie Askew (1987) *No Strange Land* p16

moment? But Nehemiah was putting a prayer between question and answer, between one statement and another! He was letting God in on the conversation, in on a pressured decision situation, at the time the decision needs to be made. Do you invite the Lord into your everyday conversations? Do you offer up an arrow prayer throughout the day, asking for His guidance and strength?

Quick as a flash he answers the king and makes his famous request: "Send me to Jerusalem to rebuild it." And in Chapter 2 Nehemiah's vision becomes clear. He has a plan; he anticipates the king's questions; he asks for his planned requirements (his travel documents, building materials) step by step. The king agrees, fulfilling, as Nehemiah would realise I am sure, the words of Daniel foretelling the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its wall, even if was to be, in troubled times. Although Artaxerxes was unaware of it, he was fulfilling God's word. Nehemiah knew because he knew God's word. He was praying God's word.

Nehemiah's patient heartache was paying off. Isaiah 28:16, tells us that: 'the one who trusts will never be dismayed'. In a relationship with God we have to learn to be almost superhumanly patient. God works within our heart and that requires us have the patience to wait with assurance for God's answer that we, through our faith, know he will give us. In Hebrews 6:12 the author writes: 'We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.' Nehemiah had been a sad, prayerful and very patient man. He had been genuinely depressed for months and this genuinely led him to want to act to recover God's people and the derelict city of Jerusalem. Now he was to become a man of vision and action, a man of the moment!

And so Nehemiah missed no opportunity to ask for what he wanted and he gets it. He even gets the security of armed guards too. His vision is to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. In these few short verses, Nehemiah's character has become clear. As a great risk taker, he is an opportunist who sees a chance to fulfil a vision and takes it without hesitation. Yet with the pressure on him to speak out, to make decisions quickly, he prays to God. He keeps him in the picture, he involves him in his royal conversation; he asks for God's guidance. He is a visionary with a plan; he has the ideas of how to do it AND the determination to carry it out HIMSELF. Hence his sadness at the palace! Hence his arrow prayer to God and his bold requests to the king! All part of Nehemiah's grand vision for Judah and Jerusalem! Nehemiah KNEW that the king would go along with his scheme BECAUSE God's hand was on him.

And so, back to J W Turner's painting techniques. To Nehemiah, and I am sure to us too, there are times when life seems undefined, ragged. Times when we can only just get on with it and be patient, sometimes with no clear purpose and aim. Then some event, some opportunity, some word, some action draws it all together. We see where everything is leading. The vision becomes clear. God paints those crisp, clearer brush strokes in and everything fits into place. We must not forget, however, that God's paints ALL the strokes of our painting. We must recognize the opportunity when the God's brush strokes amazingly clarify our fuzzy world and open up his vision for us. Are we prepared, then, like Nehemiah, to be the man or woman of the moment?

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