

SEND ME

SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH

by Steve Zeisler

One of the most curious of Jesus teachings is in Matthew 10:16:

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."

I've often thought this verse would be a good theme for a *Wild Kingdom* episode. But the Lord's instruction was not primarily about animals and their ways. He was declaring something about our condition in the world. In fact, he went on to explain himself in verses 17-20:

"Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

Doves and sheep are essentially defenseless creatures. They can't move fast enough to get away from the predators that attack them. They have no thick, pachyderm hides to defend them against attacks. They have no claws or fangs or other strengths that would allow them to fight back. Jesus was saying that the Christian life would have that sort of defenselessness about it. There will be times when those who aggressively seek ill for believers will drag us into court and elsewhere to harm us. We'll be brought before kings and governors and others in positions of authority, and the only opportunity we will be given is to say the words that the Spirit gives. Our responsibility in those settings is not to meet violence with violence or power with power; our calling is to speak the words of God. Jesus promised that the Spirit would give us words when we need them and enable us to say what needs to be said.

The observation, though, that we are to be wise in this responsibility deserves further consideration before we turn to Nehemiah. I used to think that Jesus was saying that when we were in the moment of crisis, the Spirit would supernaturally give us ideas and words to say, completely out of the blue, almost in the same way that the Spirit gives unknown tongues, that we would be allowed to make utterances that had no connection to anything in our lives before. But that's not what wisdom is. Jesus said we're to be as shrewd, or wise, as snakes. Wisdom is the accumulation of a life's experience of trusting God, learning the Scriptures, taking risks, dwelling on lessons, being willing to go deep inside and struggle with the Lord regarding what we find there, making the effort to change where the Lord indicates.

Wisdom and maturity are very closely related. Becoming mature makes you wise, able to see things as they really are. What Jesus is saying is that the person who will be called in the critical moment to say the critical thing is very likely the person who has been the best prepared over a lifetime to say that. When you're called on to speak for the Lord, you will draw on what he has taught you and encouraged you with from previous crises. You'll know something about human nature with its failings and its longings.

I'm sure that that was Nehemiah's experience in chapter 2 of the book of Nehemiah. This was a crisis moment. He was before the king, and he took an enormous risk. But he did so with the deep wisdom of someone who had been with God and had thought long and hard about what to say and how to say it. The great ministry of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and its preparation for the coming of the Messiah finally, was advanced because

Nehemiah had been prepared by God for the moment when the Spirit would give him words to say.

By way of review, we observed in chapter 1 that Nehemiah had wrestled with God for four months over the tension between his high station in the Persian empire and his brotherly connection to the exiles who had returned to Judah. He wondered what God would require of him, so he spent a long time weeping, mourning, praying, confessing, wrestling with God. At the end of that process, in verse 11, Nehemiah said to the Lord, "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." This day he would go into the presence of the king differently than he had before. His prayers and his walk with the Lord had made clear to him that he was going to have to put himself on the line. He was going to ask for permission himself to go where the need was.

There are three scenes that make up chapter 2: Nehemiah's conversation with King Artaxerxes in the throne room, his joining the Jews in Jerusalem, beginning the process of being governor and builder of the walls, and then finally his confrontation with the enemies Sanballat and Tobiah and the pressure they begin to exert in their efforts to undermine the things of God.

Let's read the first scene in verses 1-8.

Words of honesty in the face of danger

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! 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?"

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.

There are wonderful subtleties in this, and I want to point out some of them. This frightening moment when Nehemiah stood before the king began when he decided to be honest. For four months he had been weeping in the presence of God, mourning the sorrows of his people. God had seen his tears, but the king had never seen them. Like most individuals who have absolute authority in the world in which they live, the king never permitted anyone to bring their difficulties into his presence. If the king were to have a moment's indigestion, everybody in the room ought to feel the indigestion. If the king were to have concern about new gray along his temples, then everybody should be concerned about it. If there was a chill in the air, then all should rush to meet the needs of the king. He shouldn't be uncomfortable for even a moment. But no one was allowed to walk into the king's presence with their own heartache, their own need, their own weakness. Why should the king care about anyone else? He was the sun in the sky, the only personality that mattered. So it was a breach of convention to go to the king with a puffy face and red eyes, obviously having been crying.

This is true, I think, for powerful people everywhere. Prima donna athletes and performers are used to having

everyone jump and cater to their whims, and are astonished when anybody else has concerns or problems or needs. It's true of self-impressed, powerful corporate executives, political leaders, and every other sort of person who imagines himself or herself to be at the center of everything. Probably the literary figure who best makes the point is the Queen of Hearts in the story *Alice in Wonderland*. When she didn't get what she wanted, her cry was, "Off with their heads!"

King Artaxerxes, an absolute despot, had things exactly his way. But on this day Nehemiah walked into the king's presence, and he hadn't used a cool cloth to reduce the puffiness of his cheeks and hadn't wiped away his tears. He went in with his broken heart obvious on his face. He was very frightened. Nehemiah was a sheep in the presence of a wolf, a dove that couldn't defend itself. All he had were the words of God, if the Spirit would give him words to say. He had nothing else to protect him.

Then the king said, "You're not sick. What I see surely must be sadness of heart. Tell me about it." And wonder of wonders, the door of opportunity opened.

Again, there are significant subtleties in this. Nehemiah had thought very carefully about how to answer the king when given the opportunity. First of all, Nehemiah never mentioned the name of the city to which he was referring, Jerusalem. He called it "the city where my fathers are buried" and "the city in Judah." Jerusalem's history of independence and its strategic importance might have turned the king's thoughts toward questions of politics and national security if it had been mentioned by name.

What Nehemiah did say was, "I want to honor the burial place of my fathers." Now the Persians, like the Egyptians, worshipped the dead and built shrines to them. The notion that one's forebears should lie in an honorable grave made sense to the king. Nehemiah was using the wisdom that God had given him for serving in the court, all of the instincts about how to talk to a man in power. The Spirit was giving him utterance, but the Spirit was also drawing on all the things that Nehemiah had learned over a lifetime of trusting God and living in the court of the Persian king.

Verse 3, "May the king live forever," is probably an ordinary honorific. But kings don't live forever. And it was good for Artaxerxes to have a man serving him who wanted to honor the memory of those who had already died. That reference might have even been Nehemiah's way of indicating to this king that just as he was concerned about his father's grave, he would be concerned about the king's, if that day were ever to come.

The response of the king was positive. Nehemiah hadn't asked for personal fortune or power. He was asking about something that suited Artaxerxes, and so permission was granted. "How long will you be gone? What do you require?"

Verse 4 offers a good pattern to follow: "I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king." Nehemiah must have prayed, "O Lord, I'm jumping off the cliff. Help me!" He didn't say it out loud, but he spoke with an attitude of prayer underlying what he would say to the king. And as Jesus promised, the Spirit gave him words to say.

I'm impressed by another example Nehemiah set for us. Through the four months in which he wrestled with God, he did not conclude that someone else should go. God did not permit him to. It's often the case that someone else should go, that you or I should stay put, that the place we occupy is the right place, that our energies are being focused on the right things, and that the jobs and families and neighborhoods and responsibilities we have are the right ones. But sometimes it's time for you or me to go. The conclusion of four months of wrestling with and seeking God was, "Send me." The Lord wanted this man, with all his gifts, capabilities, and background, to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. And Nehemiah didn't back away from the responsibility.

Furthermore, he had thought through what would be needed. He needed letters of permission for the governors of Trans-Euphrates. That is, he needed the authority to quell the political storms that would surely arise. He needed a letter to the keeper of the forest to get timber. He was organized, decisive. And once again we see the Spirit give him words, but the Spirit was also drawing on strengths that had been there all along. This was a man who knew how to lead, and God had put him in the right place. At great danger to himself he exercised his gifts at the right

moment.

I'm convinced the Lord will do the same thing for us. All through our lives he will make us the right person for the critical time to say what will serve his purposes. So here are some important questions to ask: What is God doing right now? What struggle are you going through now? What study of the Bible should you be making now? Are you learning how God thinks? What lesson can you learn from the things that are going wrong? Should you be learning something about when to speak and when not to speak? Have you been in settings of counsel and personal renewal in which you figured out why you struggle the way you do, what it is about your interior life that makes you prone to certain problems; and have you let God minister to you there? Could you explain to someone else someday what you've been through, how your suffering has led to something good, so you can comfort them with the comfort that you've received? If so, you'll know what to say because the Lord has taught you lessons throughout a lifetime. The Spirit is doing the teaching and giving you the words for the moment. He gets the credit.

Let me illustrate in a small way the sort of thing Nehemiah experienced. My wife Leslie's father is the most loving, open-hearted, accepting person I know, and her mother was the same way when she was still among us. But when I asked Leslie to marry me, I didn't know them very well. I was twenty-two years old when on a particular weekend I asked Les to marry me, and she agreed. The realization soon dawned on both of us then that her parents were leaving for Europe the following Tuesday, and they had invited me to their home for dinner Monday night. If I didn't ask her father for permission to marry his daughter that night, they were going to be gone for six weeks, and we wouldn't be able to tell anybody else that we were planning to get married; we needed to do her parents the honor of including them first.

So Monday night came, and I was like the cupbearer coming into the presence of the emperor. Everything was on the line as I was going to have to make this request of Leslie's father. I can remember what we had for dinner--mashed potatoes and peas were included--because I spent the whole night staring down at my plate. I couldn't make eye contact with anyone because I was so nervous. The image of that dinner is indelibly imprinted on my mind. Finally at the end of the evening I said, "Fred, could I have a moment alone to talk to you about something?" We stepped outside, and trembling, I prayed, "Lord, give me words." I asked if we had his permission to get married, and of course he was wonderful (as always). We came back in and they raised a toast and said, "God bless you." The Lord answered my prayer as he had Nehemiah's.

Let's look at the second scene, which takes place after Nehemiah made the long journey to Jerusalem.

Words of hope in the face of discouragement

Verses 9-16:

So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the

Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

This scene is also visually impressive. Presumably it was a moonlit night. Nehemiah was examining the situation in detail, circling the walls on horseback in the middle of the night, looking at great mounds of broken stones and mortar and burned gates. No one living could remember Jerusalem in any other condition. The Jews didn't have the heart to build the wall again, and most of their neighbors had strong interest in seeing them not succeed in getting the job done.

Then Nehemiah had this interaction with the leaders of his people in verses 17-18:

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

Once again, what we see is the Spirit giving Nehemiah the thing to say to the people at the critical moment, but we also see a man who was a leader, who understood the psychology of a beaten people. Some of these folks had lived there for two generations. No one had rebuilt the wall yet. They had lived in disgrace for a long time.

Nehemiah could have said, "I've got letters from the king, soldiers, and money. Things will be different from now on. Get on with this wall-building!" But he didn't do that. He waited three days. He rode around and absorbed the difficult predicament. He saw how much it must have hurt them every day to look at the broken city that should have honored God. And he said, "*We've* got a really hard job to do. [Not *you*.] But let me tell you what God has already done." And he told the story of the king's permission, of the hopefulness of the letters that he had brought with him. He identified with them, encouraged them, gave reasons for hope. They heard God speaking to them, and they began the work.

The third scene highlights the opposition of those who, as they were described very clearly in verse 10, "were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites."

Words of faith in the face of opposition

Verse 19:

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

For the third time, Nehemiah was in a situation that required him to say something from God. He had enemies who were well organized and very capable. They mocked and ridiculed. And for the third time, the Spirit would give Nehemiah words to speak. Verse 20:

I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

He declared, "You will not stop us, and you will not co-opt the process. The God of heaven is going to give us success." This word of faith was exactly the right answer by the man of God to their mocking and ridicule.

At no time in any of these settings did Nehemiah have anything more to offer than the words the Spirit told him to say. The Spirit drew on his lifetime of faith, and he applied thoughtful, godly, powerful statements to each situation.

I'm convinced that Jesus meant what he said. There's going to come a time when we, as his disciples, will face problems and opposition, when we're called to be like doves or sheep, having nothing but God's words as our

defense and as our advance. We're called on to hear what the Spirit has taught us over a lifetime, and at the moment we have to speak, we'll know what to say and how to say it, what influence to bring to bear. Rather than observing the world's power and authority and ways, we will use God's words, and everything will change. The God of heaven will give us success.

So it's really worthwhile learning the lessons God is teaching us, inviting God's insight into the things that are going on in our lives right now, learning the Bible, embracing fellowship that's real and interactive and life-changing. God will use all the means by which he is carving and changing and strengthening us in ways that we can't predict now. And we'll thank him for that in the end.

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Catalog No. 4613
Nehemiah 2:1-20
Third Message
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June 13, 1999

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