

Prayer and Action

Nehemiah 2:1-20

God often calls His servants in some **surprising places**.

- **Abraham** is from “Ur.” **Where you from again? “Ur.” (Wow, he’s destined for success).**
- **Joseph** was an innocent suffer in an *Egyptian dungeon*. God used him to deliver a nation.
- **David** was young shepherd in the hills of Bethlehem would become Israel’s most famous king. “God sees not as man sees.”
- **Gideon** was a terrified-farm worker that God used to lead Israel to forty years of peace.
- **Elijah** - we don’t even know where Tishbe is! He’s the Tom Brady of the prophets.
- **Esther** finds herself in the king’s palace, wins a beauty pageant and saves her people
- **Ruth** a foreigner, **Rehab** the prostitute, **and Bathsheba** are in the family line of Jesus.
- **Mary** was an unwed teenager from a small town, will give birth to the Son of God.
- **Jesus** grows up in a dumpy little town of Nazareth, lives a perfect life, dies a substitutionary death, rises from the dead, and now reigns of the Lord of all.
- **James and John** were fiery fishermen, who became leaders in the church...
- **Paul**, persecutor of the church, becomes leader of the early church’s church planting movement

God raises people up in both poverty and plenty.

You never know where the next great leader or servant may come from.

- **The next great spiritual leader might be in a children’s home right now!**
 - He may be the rebellious church kid....
 - He may be smoking ECigs at high school...
 - He may be the Freshman Ag student at State...
 - Maybe a little kid down at Cedar Point...
 - He may be the hipster at North Hills...

Nehemiah is in a Persian palace. We know nothing of his background. But here he is - the right hand man of an unbelieving king. **He**

- Chapter 2 is about his big moment!
- He is about to ask the king for permission to go rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
- Have you ever had to make a big ask that made you very nervous? You can identify with Nehemiah then.

In Neh 1:11, he simply identifies himself as “a servant.” We see seven marks of this godly servant that is both instructive and inspiring.

7 Characteristics of a Godly Servant

#1: God’s Servant Waits (2:1)

We learn several valuable lessons from this first scene...

Learn from Nehemiah's patience, prayer, and his planning...

1b: "I had not been sad in his presence" – that's not a good idea to be *all down* when you're with the king.

- Some of you have bosses like this; they expect you to be excited? "How are you?" I'm good! Love my cubicle!
- It's really not good to be downcast when sampling the King's food/drink!

1a: "One day in April four months later" (2:1, Living Bible paraphrase)

- It has been **3-4 months** since he first heard of the walls, and was broken over the state of the people.
- He didn't act immediately. His prayer for success "today" in **verse 11** indicates that the time was apparently not right for Nehemiah to make his bold appeal.
- The mention of the queen in **verse 6** may indicate that this was a private dinner occasion... It wasn't customary for the Queen to appear at a formal banquet.
 - He may have waited on a particular occasion.
 - And it seems like the Queen has some role to play; her presence influenced the King's decision.
 - **Some things never change! Sometimes it just takes the look!**

Does waiting come easy for you?

- The fruit of the Spirit is.... "patience"
 - Do you say, "I don't like that fruit, I like oranges."
 - It is a fruit of the Spirit and it is a **characteristic of God**.
 - **God is patient**. You are like God when you are patient.
- Examples of my impatience:
 - **Grocery Lines**
 - **Driving**
 - **Healing**
 - **Airports** – I count the people, and I look for children... TSA Pre-Check
 - **Rental Car** – Preferred Member – feel so superior
 - "Internet is so slow!" - I used to dial up! And before that, Al Gore hadn't invented it!
 - "That drone took forever to deliver my groceries!"
- **How much time, energy, and effort do we spend on not waiting?**
- I would submit that **waiting didn't come easily for Nehemiah either**.
 - He's a **doer**. He wanted to get on with it.
- **But we need to wait on the Lord**.
 - The mission of the church began with.... **waiting Acts 1-2**.
 - For about **6 weeks** they did **what Jesus told them: wait**. They waited on the promise of the Father.

What do we do as we wait? What did Nehemiah do? What do we do in the gap?

- He **Prayed** – four months.
 - It the waiting time, you need to be before God in worship/prayer.
 - We can't have the strength of an eagle (Isa 40:31) if we don't wait... and how does that strength come, but by being in God's presence.
 - You can be active externally; but inwardly waiting, worshiping, contented, trusting, praying...
 - You get a sense that Nehemiah's heart was prepared.
 - If you are waiting, tend to your heart. That's always the right thing to do.
- If you are waiting on a spouse, a leadership position, a promotion, or children, then the one thing that will make you ready for that experience if and when it happens is that you are clean and close (to Jesus).
- **He Planned** – Later in this passage we see that Nehemiah had a plan.
 - Planning is not unspiritual!
 - He did research. He had prepared his speech.
- **He Served (1b)** He didn't stop serving for 3-4 months. He was active and alert.
 - He was a good worker (never sad). He was aware of what was going on...
 - He wasn't isolated...
- **He trusted in the sovereignty of God.** This is evident throughout the whole book.
 - Knowing that God is in control can enable you to wait on his timing.

But see here that trusting in God's sovereignty doesn't mean being passive or fatalistic. **Nehemiah is praying, planning, and serving.**

- Pastor friend, "Guy came up with philosophical questions about the sermon.... You should go hang out with that group of guys and gals, they're going out to eat... "No I'm waiting on the Lord." Okay, well, why don't you wait where the girls are? He said, "God brought Eve to Adam?" Really man.
- I'm not encouraging any kind of creepy behavior; only saying that a belief in God's sovereignty doesn't mean you become passive in something that you want to pursue.

Waiting time is not wasted time – if you're praying, listening, planning, and serving...

2: God's Servant Prays (2:2-4)

2 – "Why is your face sad?"

- "Is it the food?" "No"
- "It's a girl, isn't it?" "No."

2b: Nehemiah admits his fear. This is like his personal journal. A great human touch.

- **John Wayne:** "Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway."

- Why is he afraid? A few reasons...
 - He could die! – he's risking his life here.
 - He sensed God had raised him up for this moment.

Nehemiah trusts in God in this moment and goes for it!

3: Before speaking, he displays loyalty, “May the king live forever.”

- **If you want to gather honey, don't kick over the beehive.**”
- “The city ... father's graves... gates destroyed...” He expressed his grief – on a personal level.
- He draws attention to the graves.
- He garners the king's sympathy. Nehemiah is very wise.

Nehemiah's whole interaction shows us that **God's grace comes in the moment of need.**

- We are rarely given resources in advance.
- God meets us in the moment of need.

4: “What are you requesting?”

Before *he answers* Nehemiah thinks it is necessary to first talk to someone else.

- “Then I prayed”
- Last week I said that Nehemiah's prayer life will challenge us with his substance and his ceaselessness. Constant communion with God. Do you do that?
- When you drive, as you walk, when you prepare to speak to someone?
- “It is possible to move men through God by prayer alone” - Hudson Taylor

Nehemiah shows us:

- He shows us the **necessity** of prayer.
- He shows us the practice of **unceasing** of prayer (1 Thess. 5:17).
- He shows us the **intimacy** of prayer. Notice he prays to the God of heaven; this is not a distant God, but a **caring Father**.
- He shows us the **confidence** of prayer. Since he was praying to the **God of heaven; he had no need of fearing a king on earth.**
- He shows us the **effectiveness** of prayer. The God of heaven answers his request and gives him success.

#3: God's Servant Speaks (2:5a)

V. 5: After a quick, quiet prayer, he goes for it...

- You don't waste time with important people; you lead with the ask!
- This takes great faith! Nehemiah is risking his life!
- You wonder how he said it. Reluctantly? Quickly? Nervously?
- You ever been nervous when making a big ask?

- It's one thing to ask something that's light hearted, but something that has great ramifications, is another.
- Simple conversations can change lives.
- Don't despise taking on "little tasks."
- *Look for daily opportunities to speak* whether they seem big or small
- Zechariah when prophesying to the people in their exile, who were discouraged with the type of work they were doing said, "do not despise the days of small things" (4:10)
- This little conversation had big time ramifications!!!
 - At the gym, the store, work, on the bike trail...
- Simple acts of faith are huge.

#4: God's Servant Plans (2:5b-8)

Nehemiah believes not only in dependent praying but also deliberate planning.

Some people don't understand that planning is spiritual.

Praying should lead to planning. These two go together.

Not planning is presumption.

- Luke 14 – building a tower, consider how much it costs first
- Very practical for me and Kimberly right now, looking to move closer to the building...

Some of you love to pray, but may not be very organized; you have no plan/direction.

- "I would like to lose weight, finish college, get a job, evangelize, change the world –
- "What's your plan?" --- "Uhh, I don't know."
- As soon as Nehemiah was asked the question, he revealed his plan.

How many of you are planners? You go to Office Depot and you get all excited. You got files, notes, OCD. You love charts, graphs. They're like a blanky. But do you pray? Do you just pray after you jacked up everything you planned? Or do you say, "here's the plan God – do it!"

Of course, God may redirect our planning along the way... "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps" (Prov. 16:9)

But we should still plan. Nehemiah's got one shot with the king.

"What do you want?" "I don't know." "Okay, hit the wine and tell me if it's okay."

Nehemiah had an idea of the basics prepared:

- His Purpose (5b)
- Nehemiah is focused. "I want to go rebuild a wall."
- He's a man with a mission.
- He knew what he was on about.

- “Why’s your face sad.” The city is a mess; I need to fix it.
- Yogi Berra was a talker behind the plate. In the 1958 World Series, Yogi kept telling Aaron to **'hit with the label up on the bat'**. Finally Aaron turned and said **"Yogi, I came up here to hit, not to read."**

• His Timetable (6)

- So I gave him a time.
- In Neh 5:14, Nehemiah is the governor in Jerusalem for twelve years.
- **He surely didn't ask for twelve years off! Can you imagine doing that with your boss?**
- Kidner is prob right: Nehemiah reported back within the year, when the wall was rebuilt, and then his appointment as governor happened.
- At any rate, he's got a calendar.
- There's nothing unspiritual about a calendar.
- My wife and I have calendar dates because stuff keeps coming in; keep evaluating...

• His Paperwork (7)

- He's not just thinking on his feet. He knows what he needs.
- He needed letters for entry and safe passage, especially since Artaxerxes had previously stopped the building project! (Ezra 4:17–22).
- You try to travel today, you need papers. On the way to the airport, **“Does everyone have their passport?”**

• His Needs (8)

- I need a letter to Asaph, also because I need lumber... (wood was used inside the walls)
- Nehemiah was so prepared that he knew who was running the lumberyard! It was the king's private reserve...

Here's what Nehemiah does: He prays for God to change the heart of the king and he gets his ducks in a row, and he's ready when it happens.

• His House (8b)

- Nehemiah has to live somewhere.
- Where am I going to live? I'll get some wood from Asaph.

#5: God's Servant Testifies (2:8b)

8c: “And the king granted my request”

Changing hearts is God's speciality.

God worked in the heart of this king to accomplish his purposes!

Nehemiah recognized that, and so he testifies: **“the good hand of my God was upon me.”**

Nehemiah's purpose isn't autobiographical; it's doxological.

He draws attention to the hero of the story: His invincible God.

Nehemiah understands that what has happened is a sign of God's activity.

The practicality of Nehemiah's story is displayed in the fact that there are no burning bushes, no parting of seas, no suspension of the laws of nature, no walking on water.

It's just the quiet hand of the sovereign God at work in preserving his people.

Never mistake the lack of the spectacular for the inactivity of God.

His quiet hand is always at work.

Nehemiah knows where the credit goes: GOD.

God likes to use wingnuts and misfits like us because only He gets glory...

The Hand of God: God's hand, favor, blessing in the Bible is used as an expression to the sovereignty of God, favor of God. (Exodus wonderings)

Nehemiah - 1:10; 2:8; 2:18

Ezra 7:6

⁶ this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, **for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.**

Ezra 7:9-10

⁹ For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, **for the good hand of his God was on him.** ¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Ezra 7:27-28

²⁷ Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, ²⁸ and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, **for the hand of the LORD my God was on me,** and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Ezra 8:18

¹⁸ And **by the good hand of our God on us,** they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen...

8:21-23

²¹ Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. ²² For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, **"The hand of our God is for good on all**

who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.”²³ So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

8:31

³¹ Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. **The hand of our God was on us**, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.

Are you asking God for his hand to be upon your life? Are you seeking Him?

There are no miracles in Ezra/Nehemiah; but His hand is at work!

Never mistake the lack of the spectacular for the inactivity of God; His hand is always at work.

Let me show you something: The walls are built in **52 days**.

- Nehemiah spent **more time in prayer and preparation than building the walls.**
- **God's hand on your life is what matters.**
- **Basketball — in the hands of LeBron James it goes to the all-star game!**
- NT Parallel: The Church in Antioch: “And the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord... When Barnabas came and saw the grace of God, he was glad...” (**Acts 11:21, 23**)
 - This church in Antioch was a model church in many ways.
 - The secret? God's hand upon them.

#6: God's Servant Leads (2:9-18)

Nehemiah makes it to Jerusalem, perhaps for the first time; he faces challenges and meets them with exemplary leadership.

9-12 – Nehemiah traveled through rough terrain, some 9-10 miles per day.

- It may have taken around 4 months... camping at night.
- He rests in Jerusalem before doing anything else. You can't be exhausted and lead. It leads to weakness, anxiety, loss of perspective and more. After resting, he begins the work...
- It has now been about 8 months of planning and travel....

A. Leaders face Opposition (9-10)

Who are these guys?

- Sanballat was the governor of Samaria to the *north*.
- Tobiah, whose name is Jewish (“Yah is good”), ruled the Ammonites to the *east*.
- Geshem (19) was the leader of the Arabs to the *south*.

- These are all the power players. They all opposed a fortified Jerusalem because it threatened their political positions. It also threatened them financially; a rebuilt Jerusalem meant trade would run through Jerusalem. They were very displeased and joined together to ridicule the project.
- We will read a lot about these guys in the coming week.
- **Their opposition will escalate...**

B. Leaders do good research (11-16)

- A Few Good Men (11-12). Nehemiah is not rolling solo.
 - Like Nehemiah, we too need one another in the Lord's work.
- He goes at night, not attracting too much attention. Spies may have been sent by his enemies. He doesn't want a lot of chatter in Jerusalem among the Jews either.
- He does a vision trip to investigate (13-16)

C. Leaders can build a team and can motivate them (17-18)

- He shares the burden and the mission (17). We're not given the details, but somehow, he gathers a much larger group now. It's quite remarkable that a newcomer could gather such a team.
- He inspires confidence by drawing their attention to God. (18)
 - No gimmicks, no tricks, no puppet ministry; just a God-centered vision!
 - Last week: **Vision Trip - A couple of soldiers with Ben... Yes sir.**
 - Nehemiah isn't a one man army. He's got a squad.
 - Chapter 3 gives us a list of guys that contributed. Nehemiah wasn't a one man team.

#7: God's Servant Trusts (2:19-20)

When opposition returns, there's a confidence in God that is displayed.

The taunting trio first engage in **mockery**, and then to begin to question Nehemiah's **motives**.

Jesus told his disciples that we will face persecution, and we will have to endure all manner of "evil things" spoken against us (**Matt 5:10-12**).

Nehemiah doesn't "wrestle with pigs" as they say. It's only fun for the pigs. He stays focused, and expresses his confidence in God.

"The God of Heaven" — The Sovereign God will make us prosper.

"You have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem" — God's name dwells here. This is not just any people, any city....

Nehemiah reminds me of another patient, trusting, praying, working servant, who set his face to Jerusalem some four hundred years later: Jesus Christ.

- Like Nehemiah, he was sensitive to the sufferings of his people.
- He left a palace and got on his animal, a little colt, and rode into Jerusalem.
- The hand of God was upon him in a unique ways.
- He too faced on onslaught of criticism and persecution, which continued to escalate, until they finally put him to death, nailing him to a cross.
- Nehemiah's work in Jerusalem was important work; but it wasn't the most important work in Jerusalem. For another would come to Jerusalem to do the most important work. He would take our place on the cross, and rise from the dead.
- Death would not hold him. The God of Heaven, His Father, would make Him prosper. He would not abandon his soul to sheol. He would raise His Son, as the Lord Jesus would rise as the vindicated and victorious Son of God.
- He's not building walls, his building a church.
- Through Christ, we can experience the gracious hand of God on our lives.
- Through Christ, we can know the comfort of the Lord; we can be part of the body of Christ, and we can put our strengthen our hands for good work to the glory of God.