

## Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 2 Praying and Planning (Nehemiah 1:11b–2:8)

February 25, 2007

Pastor Mark Driscoll

*... the good hand of my God was upon me.*

— Nehemiah 2:8

God gave Nehemiah the heart of Jesus for a devastated city and for a devastated church within that city—a church that was supposed to be making God’s name great among the people. Tragically, this sad state of things had lasted for 141 years. Despite many failed prior efforts to revive both the city and the church, God called Nehemiah to lead a renewal effort.

Nehemiah responded by spending three to four months weeping, mourning, fasting, and praying in preparation for the seemingly impossible task that God laid before him. During this time, Nehemiah focused on praying for God’s wisdom and favor. He also focused on developing specific plans to accomplish what God had called him to. The combination of Nehemiah’s prayer and planning is important to note. Sadly, many Christians are prone to be strong on only one account in their personal lives, businesses, and ministries. Some can be overly spiritual and wrongly believe that if they only pray, God will take care of everything; these people fail to plan. Conversely, others are prone to plan without praying for God’s wisdom or blessing; these people fail because without God’s help, nothing we do can be expected to succeed. This great theme of praying and planning is woven throughout the fabric of the entire book; it is a key insight that guides effective Christian leaders.

*Nehemiah 1:11b Now I was cupbearer to the king.*

Nehemiah had risen to a very important position in the foreign court of the king. By his example we learn that there are two ways for God’s people to occupy strategic positions in business and government: 1) They can rise as leaders; 2) They can attach themselves to rising leaders as faithful and trustworthy assistants who humbly come alongside a leader. Nehemiah (much like Joseph at the end of Genesis) is an illustration of the latter. Although Nehemiah is essentially a slave, through his consistent character and loyalty, he has been elevated to the inner circle of the king’s most trusted assistants. Assassination attempts against a king were common, so a cupbearer would ensure the safety of the king. The cupbearer would oversee the purchase and storage of a king’s wine collection. He would also sample the wine before the king consumed it to ensure its safety. This was obviously a dangerous job that required a very trustworthy person like Nehemiah because the life of the king was literally in his hands.

*Nehemiah 2:1 In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.*

Nehemiah had been fervently praying for some three to four months (see 1:4) waiting for God to provide him an opportunity to ask for the king’s permission and support to rebuild the city and church. During this time, there were also others who shared Nehemiah’s love for God and his desire to see the mission

completed. They joined him in constant prayer and fasting (1:11). Even when we pray in God's will, we must persist in it until it is God's time to answer.

Nehemiah's heart was so broken by the defaming of God's name and devastation of God's people that his face showed the effects of sleepless nights and deep sorrow. When God calls and burdens us for His service, we become rightly consumed by the mission He has set before us.

*<sup>2</sup>And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid.*

It was customary for those who were in the presence of the king to maintain a happy disposition, showing that it was an honor and joy to have access to such a great man. However, Nehemiah was so grieved that he could no longer hide his sorrow, and the king took notice of his countenance. Nehemiah was rightly afraid because such a perceived disrespect could result in his execution. Furthermore, with the moment of opportunity now set before him, he had to ask the king's permission and support to leave his job and obey God's call on his life. This too could have been easily seen by the king as an act of treason worthy of death because such a request would have left the king's very life in jeopardy.

*<sup>3</sup>I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"<sup>4</sup>Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?"*

Tactfully and carefully, Nehemiah revealed that the source of his grief was the continued devastation in his hometown and church. The king quickly surmised that Nehemiah wanted to ask him for something and gave Nehemiah an opportunity to make his audacious request.

*So I prayed to the God of heaven.*

Brilliantly, Nehemiah did not succumb to his nerves but rather paused briefly to pray to God, either aloud or in silence, asking God's wisdom and favor. Even though Nehemiah had been praying for many months, we see by his example that we cannot pray too much about important things. Sometimes short prayers in strategic moments are vital for us being best used by God in that moment. In fact, Nehemiah prays no less than nine times throughout the book and he is a man who clearly prays without ceasing as 1 Thessalonians 5:17 admonishes.

*<sup>5</sup>And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."*

Nehemiah boldly asked to be released from his job, and in turn was asking the king to risk his own safety. This also meant that Nehemiah would be reassigned to an even more prestigious job as a city builder in another part of the kingdom. What makes this request even more seemingly impossible is the fact that some thirteen years prior, the same request was made to rebuild the same city and church and that effort was opposed by the very king whom Nehemiah was asking now (Ezra 4:7–23)! Nehemiah the slave was asking nothing less than for the king to change his own policy, release his own servant, and pay to rebuild

a city that would be dedicated to the worship of the God of the Bible above all other kings and kingdoms, including his own!

<sup>6</sup>*And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.*

The fact that the queen was sitting beside the king means that the setting was informal, but that Nehemiah had also taken a great risk in possibly offending the king in front of his own wife. The king wanted to know Nehemiah's plan and how long it would take for its completion. While it is not said in this section, elsewhere in Nehemiah we learn that he was requesting a full twelve years off (5:14; 13:6).

<sup>7</sup>*And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, <sup>8</sup>and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy."*

Nehemiah then proceeded to sketch out his plan for the accomplishment of the task God had set before him. It is apparent that Nehemiah had spent much of the prior months not only praying, but also doing his research and putting together a plan for the mission. Had he not done so, he would have wasted his only opportunity to implore the king's permission and support, and the entire rebuilding effort would have died. Because Nehemiah prayed, God granted him an opportunity before the king, and because he planned, he was able to take advantage of that opportunity.

Nehemiah asked for letters from the king to enable him to travel to Jerusalem; he knew that without the protection of the king he would not be allowed to do so. He also asked the king for very expensive timber from his private forest supply, meaning that the city of God would be built at the expense of the king himself. Nehemiah also understood that he would need a home for himself as a base of operations and so asked the king to build him a personal residence from which to serve God and God's people. In short, Nehemiah's plan was so big that, apart from a miracle of God, it was doomed to fail.

*And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.*

Amazingly, God gave Nehemiah favor in the sight of the king, answering his earlier prayer (1:11). Also, Proverbs 21:1 ("The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will") was proven true; the purposes of God were accomplished by both prayer and planning through the kindness of a pagan king. Through prayer, Nehemiah was both confident and humble. Throughout the book, his confidence comes from God's provision and blessing, and God alone is given credit for any success in the life of Nehemiah (2:8, 11–12, 20; 4:14–15, 20; 6:15–16; 7:5; 8:1).

Too often our prayers and our plans are not of a size that is worthy of our God. Nehemiah's prayers and plans are great, for no other reason than to ensure that God's name is made great among people who did not yet know Him. We can take comfort in the fact that if our aim is solely to make the name of Jesus great,

we can pray and plan big because it is Jesus Himself who tells us to: “And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11:9–10). Furthermore, Jesus tells us, “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14: 14).

**For Further Reading:** J. I. Packer’s *A Passion for Faithfulness*, a helpful commentary on Nehemiah.

**Verses for next week:** Nehemiah 2:9–20