

SESSION 2

PLAN

The Point

Serving God requires intentionality.

The Passage

Nehemiah 2:1-8,17-18

The Bible Meets Life

Whether we attend to every detail of an assignment or prefer to “fly by the seat of our pants,” we would do well to evaluate our plans and ask ourselves, *Is this the most effective way I can carry out this task?* After praying about the situation in Jerusalem, Nehemiah devised a plan for accomplishing the work before him. And, as he planned, he bathed those plans in prayerful dependence on God. Nehemiah’s example gives us a strategy for our own acts of service.

The Setting

About the middle of the fifth century BC, a Jew named Nehemiah, who was a servant to the king of the Persian Empire, heard distressing news about the ruins in his ancestral homeland of Jerusalem. He spent many days mourning, praying, and fasting, seeking God’s guidance for how he should respond to the run-down condition of the city’s walls and gates. After that time he stepped out in faith as prayer led to plans and then to action.

What does the Bible say?

Month of Nisan (v. 1)—Nisan was the first month of the Jewish calendar as the Jews reckoned time after the exile; it's equivalent to our time of March/April. Passover was celebrated in this spring month.

Nehemiah 2:1-8,17-18 (CSB)

¹ During the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was set before him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had never been sad in his presence,² so the king said to me, “Why are you sad, when you aren’t sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.” I was overwhelmed with fear³ and replied to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should I not be sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”⁴ Then the king asked me, “What is your request?” So I prayed to the God of the heavens⁵ and answered the king,

“If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, send me to Judah and to the city where my ancestors are buried, so that I may rebuild it.”⁶ The king, with the queen seated beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you return?” So I gave him a definite time, and it pleased the king to send me.⁷ I also said to the king: “If it pleases the king, let me have letters written to the governors of the region west of the Euphrates River, so that they will grant me safe passage until I reach Judah.⁸ And let me have a letter written to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, so that he will give me timber to rebuild the gates of the temple’s fortress, the city wall, and the home where I will live.” The king granted my requests, for the gracious hand of my God was on me.

¹⁷ So I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned. Come, let’s rebuild Jerusalem’s wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace.”¹⁸ I told them how the gracious hand of my God had been on me, and what the king had said to me. They said, “Let’s start rebuilding,” and their hands were strengthened to do this good work.

Nehemiah 2:1-5a Commentary

Verse 1: Nehemiah had prayed and planned about how to address the state of the walls of Jerusalem. Then when God opened the door for his next step, Nehemiah was ready to take action. It was now Nisan, the first month of the Jewish calendar. About four months had passed since he first heard the disturbing news about Jerusalem. During that time he had diligently prayed and planned, asking God for favor with his master, King Artaxerxes. Nisan was the beginning of the calendar year in Persia, which included festivities and events marking the new year. During some special feasts Persian kings were especially generous; this may have been one of those occasions and thus the motivation behind the timing of Nehemiah's bold move. While Nehemiah had mourned over the condition of Jerusalem for months, he apparently had masked his distress as he did his job: He had never been openly sad in the king's presence.

Verse 2: On this day, however, the king noticed a change in Nehemiah's countenance. So the king asked Nehemiah why he was sad when he wasn't sick. The words translated "sadness of heart" can be translated to indicate a sense of depression as here, but are sometimes used in reference to an evil or wicked heart. The king's response could have quickly brought an end to Nehemiah's life. It's no wonder he was overwhelmed with fear. Of course, he could also have been nervous and afraid because he was about to make a bold request to possibly the most powerful man in the world.

Verse 3: Having courage does not mean living without fear. Rather it means moving ahead despite the fear. The time had come for Nehemiah to speak since the king initiated a conversation. Nehemiah began by asserting his loyalty to the king with the phrase, "May the king live forever." While Nehemiah wasted no time in responding, he was skillful and diplomatic in his response. He answered the king's question with a question of his own, perhaps to kindle the king's interest. He did not initially mention Jerusalem, nor did he say anything about the city walls that had been destroyed many years earlier. Instead, Nehemiah spoke vaguely of the ruined state of the city where his ancestors were buried; he particularly noted the condition of its gates. Most ancient cultures and especially monarchs had a high regard for the burial places of their ancestors, so Nehemiah likely was hoping the king would be concerned about such desecration.

Verses 4-5a: The king must have sensed Nehemiah had more he wanted to say, so he asked his servant directly what request he wished to make of the king. Perhaps instinctively, Nehemiah prayed to the God of heaven. This was not an extended time of prayer. Rather, it was a silent, lightning prayer like most of us have prayed when something unexpected happens. Nehemiah had a plan in mind but knew it was useless apart from God's direction and participation.

Nehemiah 2:5b-8 Commentary

Verse 5b: Nehemiah had a vision of what needed to be done in Jerusalem and realized a prompting from God to give leadership to the project. He had prayed and waited for the Lord's timing. He did not wait passively, however; during the previous four months he had been actively planning for the work to which God had called him.

Nehemiah was humble and respectful in his response. He did not assume anything, but began with the first element of a conditional statement (if . . . then). "If it pleases the king" refers to the project Nehemiah was about to reveal, which would only happen with the king's approval and support. Nehemiah added a second condition before laying out either the big picture or the details of his plan—if Nehemiah as the king's servant had found favor with the king. This refers to Nehemiah's history of faithful service to the king. The king certainly knew of Nehemiah's loyalty and admired his service through many years.

Next came the second part of Nehemiah's conditional statement (which assumes an understood "then" in the sentence). Rather than simply asking for the king to let him go, Nehemiah spoke in terms of a mission authorized by the king: "Send me." What better way to carry out his calling than on an assignment from the king? Nehemiah then revealed the general area that was the object of his concern: Judah. Even so, he still did not mention Jerusalem directly.

Verses 6-7: Like any good leader, King Artaxerxes wanted more information, he wanted to know the specifics being proposed. While Nehemiah gave the king a definite time he would be away, we do not know how long he expected to be gone. Later in his memoirs he noted serving for twelve years as governor of Judah (Nehemiah 5:14), which likely was not what King Artaxerxes originally anticipated. Even so, the noted time frame pleased the king, thus Nehemiah was allowed to undertake the mission.

Nehemiah wasn't quite ready to go, however. For months he had planned his anticipated needs for the project, so he boldly yet politely petitioned the king for those crucial resources. He asked for official letters written directly to the governors of the region west of the Euphrates River. The letters Nehemiah requested would prove his mission was from the king and would grant (or assure) him safe passage until he reached Judah and the home of his ancestors.

Verse 8: The requests continued as Nehemiah also asked for a letter written to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest. Nehemiah would need wood for three projects: the gates of the temple's fortress, his plans to rebuild the city wall (This was the first time he had mentioned anything to the king about the protective wall), and his own house where he would live while he was in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 2:17-18 Commentary

Verse 17: Like any good leader, Nehemiah knew that a great project would require the support and assistance of other people to bring it to completion. After making the trip from Susa and resting for a few days, Nehemiah surveyed the city by night to know exactly what was needed (2:11-15). As a leader with a vision, he needed to know the present reality before guiding people toward the preferred future.

After seeing the city's true condition he gathered the Jews, priests, nobles, officials, and others (v. 16) who already lived in Jerusalem to share his vision and enlist their help. Nehemiah considered himself one of them, as noted in the fact he mentioned the "trouble we are in." Undoubtedly the people had seen the ruins of the city and knew, maybe better than Nehemiah, the challenges to the city. Perhaps without official approval they had been afraid to do anything about it, or possibly the task was so overwhelming they didn't know where to begin. Possibly they had lived with the deteriorated condition so long they had learned to ignore the need. Whatever the case, Nehemiah first called attention to the deplorable conditions of the walls and gates that left the people defenseless. He then challenged them to join him in changing the situation so they would no longer be a disgrace. In a very real sense the state of the city was a reflection of the Jewish religion, so to outsiders it must have looked very unappealing and the God of the Jews must have seemed either unconcerned about them or incompetent to help them. Nehemiah wanted to change this reality and its accompanying perceptions. He included himself when he spoke of the work they should do together and the resulting respect they could share together.

Verse 18: Nehemiah then shared a testimony of the key events that had brought him to Jerusalem. He assured those gathered of God's involvement in the mission, noting how the Lord's gracious hand had supported and guided him. This was seen in the detailed planning he had carried out and the incredible opening he had experienced when he approached the king with his requests. Nehemiah also confirmed the king's support for the project, noting what the king said to him and probably mentioning the resources Artaxerxes authorized.

Nehemiah's motivating words were right on target. The people responded with a resounding, "Let's start rebuilding." They didn't have to think about it or gain a group consensus. They were not going to settle for the status quo nor were they going to let the past failures of rebuilding attempts derail the future possibility of restoration. They were ready to get going immediately and were encouraged to do the good work Nehemiah had challenged them to join him in doing. Just like the events of months earlier in the king's palace, the people's response was also evidence of God's involvement in the mission to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah's intentionality and his dependence on God had been rewarded with the approval and support of both the king and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

