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Plan



When have you enjoyed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

QUESTION 1

Serving God requires intentionality.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

My parents built a new home when I was in high school. The entire family was involved in designing the home. We looked over the plans from the architect, sometimes staring at the two-dimensional renderings for an hour or more. As we planned, we all imagined the look and feel of our new home.

Our old home was tiny, built in the early 1900s. My room was in the renovated attic, and I often bumped my head on the doorframe when I went upstairs. But now we had the opportunity to create a home that worked for everyone. We had a one-time opportunity to get it right, so a lot of intentionality and planning went into the new home. You can't redo a home once it is built.

God gave Nehemiah a "one-time opportunity" with King Artaxerxes. Once Nehemiah learned of a great need in Jerusalem, he prayed and he planned. Everything hinged on how he approached the king. It was a do-or-die moment.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Nehemiah 2:1-5a (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 fear ³ 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 heavens ^{5a} and answered the king.

Many times, when we ask God to do something, we forget about it if we don’t get an immediate answer. Not Nehemiah. When he first heard the news of the grim situation in Jerusalem “during the month of Chislev” (November–December; Nehemiah 1:1), he started praying—and he kept praying for four months, all the way into “the month of Nisan” (March–April; Nehemiah 2:1). Nehemiah wouldn’t let go of this great need in Jerusalem, and so he prayed.

Meanwhile, he went about his daily routine as the king’s cupbearer. He could do his work responsibly, but apparently he couldn’t mask how he felt inside and the king took notice. “So the king said to me, ‘Why are you sad, when you aren’t sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart’”(v. 2).

King Artaxerxes may have been truly concerned for his trusted cupbearer, but he was concerned for himself too. After all, his very life depended on his cupbearer. As cupbearer, Nehemiah protected the king by tasting his wine to ensure it hadn’t been poisoned. He also served as an unofficial confidant to the king, perhaps even offering advice to the monarch. The system of royalty in the Persian Empire was fragile. Revolts and assassination attempts happened regularly, so a sad cupbearer was not a good sign. Had the king’s enemies gotten to Nehemiah? Was Nehemiah covering up something?

Here it was: the opportunity Nehemiah had been praying for. But in this moment, his humanity became clear, and he “was overwhelmed with fear” (v. 2). I doubt Nehemiah was typically a fearful person. The nature of his job was risky and dangerous. But Nehemiah didn’t retreat in fear; instead he spoke boldly—and he prayed even as he spoke.

How can we tell if an opportunity is from the Lord?

QUESTION 2

Nehemiah shows us three things about our own service:

- » **Rely on God in spite of fear.** For Nehemiah, one wrong move or a slip of the tongue could have meant losing his opportunity—or worse, his life—since it might have been interpreted as a challenge to the political power of the king. As king, Artaxerxes had the authority to stop or start any rebuilding efforts in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:19-21).
- » **Act on the opportunity God gives you.** Nehemiah had waited on God for months. Waiting on God is not wasting our time, but when the moment arrives we must be prepared to act. Nehemiah's private prayers compelled him to act in the public sphere. He responded to the king with loyalty—"May the king live forever!" (v. 3)—and honesty. Nehemiah did not hide his motives but shared honestly his concern about the destruction of his homeland.
- » **Keep praying.** The king asked Nehemiah what he wanted, opening the door wide for Nehemiah to make his request. But in that moment, Nehemiah prayed again. After months of praying, his instinct was to seek God once more. For Nehemiah, the confidence of prayer overruled the fear of the moment.

Nehemiah 2:5b-8 (CSB)

^{5b} "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.

How can Nehemiah's example of planning help us approach our own God-given tasks?

QUESTION 3

Every Saturday evening, I set three alarm clocks, staggered by a few minutes each. I know that seems like overkill, but I don't want to miss Sunday morning. I have prayed, planned, and prepared. When God is at work, I want to be ready. And God is at work when we gather for worship on Sundays.

We've seen how Nehemiah prayed, but he also had planned and prepared for God's work. So Nehemiah was ready when King Artaxerxes asked him, "What is your request?" (v. 4). Without a specific plan, Nehemiah's goals would've been merely a pipe dream, but he was ready with the particulars. The goal was simple but bold—rebuild the walls of Jerusalem—and toward that end, he needed three specific things:

1. **Time.** Nehemiah gave the king a definitive timeline of how long the work would take.
2. **Permission.** He requested letters from the king to ensure safe passage.
3. **Resources.** He requested a letter to get timber and raw materials to complete the project.

Amazingly, King Artaxerxes granted Nehemiah's requests. Was it the great plans Nehemiah made? No. "The king granted my requests, for the gracious hand of my God was on me" (v. 8). We plan, but God works. While our plans are important, only God can implement them. God gives what we need when we need it.



Nehemiah 2:17-18 (CSB)

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 arrived in Jerusalem; however, seeing the city in ruins must have been a real shock because he had been there three days before apparently taking any action. But he did take action. Before Nehemiah did anything else or even told anybody what he planned to do, he went out to inspect the city and its walls (vv. 11-15).

After assessing the situation, Nehemiah called the local officials and religious leaders together and shared both good news and bad news. The bad news was the physical ruins were a sign of disgrace; the state of the city wall indicated they were in trouble and defenseless. For outsiders, collapsed walls signified their God had abandoned the city. The good news was that God had not abandoned them! Indeed, His hand was on Nehemiah, and He was ready to restore the people and the city. Their task was more than simply rebuilding a city. It was also a spiritual endeavor, for the rebuilt walls would be a testimony to others that God was with them.

God is glorified when ordinary people come together for His work. When the people started rebuilding the walls together, they were no longer “a disgrace” (v. 17). However, it wasn’t the rebuilt walls that removed the disgrace. The extraordinary work was how everyone came together for the sole purpose of giving God glory. The “good work” in verse 18 was more about their collective desire to obey God than the actual process of placing stone upon stone.

When ordinary people come together for God’s glory, extraordinary things happen. Walls are rebuilt. Communities are reached. People hear the gospel.

When have you seen evidence of God using average people to carry out His plans?

QUESTION 4

Where has God called us to work and minister as a group?

QUESTION 5

"Their task was more than simply rebuilding a city ... for the rebuilt walls would be a testimony to others that God was with them!"

SAM S. RAINER III

TAKE ACTION



When God calls you to a task, how do you respond? Place a check next to the item(s) you do easily and leave blank any items you struggle with.

- I recognize God-given opportunities to serve Him.
- I'm willing and ready to take action to follow God's guidance.
- I'm able to form a plan to carry out what God calls me to do.
- I enlist the support of others to accomplish the task God has given me.

What part of Nehemiah's story so far gives you confidence to face your next God-given task?

LIVE IT OUT

God has a plan for all believers. He desires to accomplish His work through you. Like the stone-by-stone construction of Jerusalem's wall, God's plan for you is accomplished one step at a time. How will you join Him this week in His plan?

- » **Set goals.** Develop a plan for your spiritual growth. Set some goals and include dates by which you would like to achieve them.
- » **Set a time.** Commit a specific time of day to pray for a month. Pray God would reveal opportunities to serve and do His work in the routine of your normal days.
- » **Set an appointment.** Talk to your pastor or group leader about opportunities to serve. Discuss ways you can work with other people in order to see God do extraordinary work. Your group may also want to discuss this, planning ways to serve together.

My parents built a house with intentionality. God has a plan for your spiritual development and service. **Be intentional in following His gracious plan for you.**



My thoughts