

PREPARATION: *The Lifeblood of a Leader*
Nehemiah 2:5-20

Introduction:

Preparation Demands Careful Planning (5-8)

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." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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, ⁸ 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." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

Audacious Asks Require Painstaking Plans

Sometimes the stories of Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, can seem more mythical than real. They seem too easy because it is out of context, and we know how the story plays out in the end, without personally feeling the tension. But remember, Nehemiah was a Jewish man serving in the court of the most powerful man in the world, one who had unilateral control over peoples lives, whose word was law, and who could do things for his own whimsical reasons. Not only that, but what he was asking for was nothing short of audacious. On paper, the percentage possibilities that the king would say "yes" let alone listen were in the .0001%, the one in a billion kind of bets. Here is why this request was so audacious:

- **The Length of Time** - The king asked how long Nehemiah was asking to take leave to do what he wanted to do. Remember, it took 4 months of travel to and from Persia to Jerusalem, so he was **at least** asking for a year away (in actuality Nehemiah was gone for 12 years, with probable trips back and forth during that time). No matter what job, profession, or situation we are in, leaving for over a year is a big ask without consequences.
- **The Reversal of Policy** - Back in Ezra 4, Artaxerxes had already ruled *against* the rebuilding of the wall. This had come at the request of people in the land, and the king would have been proactive in trying to keep the peace in all areas of the kingdom, so to reverse this would potentially stir up political problems for him (which he was not inclined to do normally)
- **The Stronghold** - People today are divided on the effectiveness on a wall for a country, but in the time of Nehemiah, there was no debate. A walled city was necessary for peace, prosperity, and order. A walled city was a threat inside a kingdom. To destroy a walled city meant much in terms of manpower, time, and material. This is why the people of the land were so adamant against the building of a wall around Jerusalem: it made Israel a power player instead of a group of spread out discouraged people.

Notice, that when the king asked specific questions, Nehemiah was ready with answers. This was not the result of some divine revelation, this was out of hard work behind the scenes. He knew what was needed to have success. He did not shorten the request, but if he was going to ask big, he went all they way. He asked the King to not only release him, but make him an official governmental delegate, giving him safety in travel. He asked for resources to rebuild the wall, gates, and a residence for himself. This showed he had an understanding of the land, the political situation he was entering into, and the material need when he got there. This necessitated much in research ahead of time. **Proverbs 16:9**

says *"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."* This describes how our planning and God's moving are not opposed to each other but are intertwined.

Do you have a clear understanding and vision for your life? For your family? Your role in this church? Your function in whatever job you have? Have you spent time and sweat equity in prayer before the Lord, searching Scripture and praying His promises, and have you put time into planning to be ready to act? When we neglect either of these sides, prayer/dependency or planning, we are out of tension and will be self-dependant or apathetic.

All Planning Yields Power & Credit to God Alone

Amazingly, the king granted the request, and even went above and beyond (2:9). It is incredibly easy to forget the Lord when something like this happens. Nehemiah could have easily pointed to his planning, his shrewd way of asking, his impeccable timing, and the fact that the King liked him as reasons why there was a positive response. But notice how he quickly responded to the King's answer, **"for the good hand of my God was upon me."** Nehemiah knew this as a leader:

- **God is the one who changes hearts and minds, not us** - *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will"* (Prov. 21:1). This does not mean we do not operate in wisdom, but it means that it takes the miraculous for hearts to move from stone to flesh, for eyes to move from blindness to sight. The only One who can change your spouse, your child, your friends, or our politicians is God alone. And the truth is HE CAN and WILL according to his good pleasure. That means we keep praying for our spouse who is wavering, for our children who are rebelling, and our friends who are rejecting.
- **God is by nature good and gracious** - Yes, God is a God of justice and wrath, but He is also good, who desires to give good gifts to His kids. "The LORD is good to all, and His mercy is over all that he has made" (Psalm 145:9), who gives food in due season and opens His hand to us (Psalm 145:15-16). We trust and pray to a God who desires all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), and appeal to His graciousness when we pray.
- **A leader deflects and attributes success to God** - A leader takes responsibility, even for failures that are not directly his/hers. A husband knows he is responsible for his wife and family, even though the choices they make are not directly his. But a true leader is also quick to point to the true leader, deflecting praise to God, knowing that God does not compete with us for glory. The leader is absolutely dependent on God for all things and desires for God to magnified and for himself to fade into the background.

Preparation Overcomes Overwhelming Odds (9-16)

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.¹⁰ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah, the Ammonite servant, heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.¹¹ So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days.¹² Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode.¹³ I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.¹⁴ Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass.¹⁵ Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.¹⁶ And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

Circumstances surrounding the rebuild

Prayer that leads to clarity that leads to risk taking faith does not mean things will be easy, nor will they be without landmines along the way. In fact, once risk has been established and a step of faith is taken, the hard parts are still to come. Nehemiah had risked it all, his position, reputation, and life in order to see the King green light this venture of returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding a wall. The King had set him up with everything he asked for and more: Nehemiah was also given a military escort, including officers and horsemen, which would have established the regality and support of the kingdom. We remember that God has the ability to answer our prayer and ALWAYS to go above and beyond what we ask.

Ephesians 3:20-21 *Now to him who is able to do far **more abundantly than all that we ask or think**, according to the **power** at work within us,²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

What Nehemiah faced when he arrived was nothing short of enormous, with odds stacked against him. But we see that he did not function on a “wing and a prayer”, but put actions to his prayer before and when he arrived. Here is what he found when he got there:

- **The task itself was immense**

Though there are incomplete archaeological findings, there is a vast description of the situation of the city, gates, and walls when Nehemiah got there. Remember, a walled city offered protection from outside nations, where many people could have homes and farms outside of the walls, but when advancing forces would advance, they could all enter for protection. Inside the walls would be a water source and food supply to outlast a siege (King Hezekiah had built a tunnel bringing an outside spring of water into the pool of Siloam inside the walls).

Though the dimensions given here are smaller than what had been before, it still was an immense task. Builders would have to put up between 1 ½ to 2 ½ miles of wall, moving enormous stones up embankments, maneuvering around rubble, managing a work force with a diverse number of skills needed. Looking at these renderings of the city and walls you will notice changes in elevation, ravines, and many different gates to allow traffic in and out. This was a huge task for the most experienced wall builder, let alone a government official.

- **He came into a situation with a history of defeat**

This was not the first attempt to rebuild the wall. Nehemiah arrived in 445 BC, but the process had been started in 538 BC, more than 90 years earlier. The first wave under Zerubbabel had good intentions, but it took them 15 years to get the Temple built, and ran out of steam. When the walls were finally given attention, the opposition from neighboring governors who appealed to Artaxerxes and the effort was extinguished, just 13 years before Nehemiah rode in. So the project had no leadership, no movement, and no momentum. You can imagine the conversations of the generations left in Jerusalem, “We’ve tried this before and it did not work. What makes us think it’ll work this time.”

- **He had to lead a discouraged group of people**

Not only had the work stopped, but the people were inevitably unmotivated. It’s always easier to start something new rather than direct discouraged people who still have the taste of defeat in their mouth. This meant that no “rah-rah” speech was going to be effective. Any glimmers of hope and spark of passion had been snuffed out, and it would take careful preparation and awareness to turn this group into a unified force.

- **He faced fierce and growing opposition**

Besides the internal problems, the venture faced external ones. The surrounding nations or city-states did not want this project to happen nor succeed. They were ok with a group of practicing religious people to be their neighbors, as long as they were willing to integrate with the other nations and pose zero threat. A walled city of passionate worshippers, however, was very problematic. The governors of Samaria and Ammon, two neighboring countries, were represented by Sanballat and Tobiah. Later they brought in Geshem the Arab to join a three-headed monster. We will see that their tactics will become more overt and insidious, they expressed their displeasure by an age old and effective tactic: *they jeered and ridiculed the work and the workers.*

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words they never hurt me" was either written by someone who could not hear or was simply ignorant. What people think of us and how they respond to us matters. It's that part of our humanity that makes us wary of saying certain things that will upset others. Its why things like Cyber-bullying are effective and devastating. We are prone to whither, to close up, or worse, believe the jeers of those who spew venom from their mouth or social media platforms. Jesus Himself faced mocking along with beatings (Luke 22:63-65). The martyrs of our church ancestors faced torture by faith, and that torture was listed as flogging, stoning, imprisonment, sawn in two, and killed with sword, which all are physical and horrible, but also listed was *suffering mocking* (Hebrews 11:36-38). Words can devastate, and can destroy as easily as steel. This is why James called the tongue a fire, a world of unrighteousness (James 3:6)

So Nehemiah faced a daunting situation to rebuild something he had never done before, to unify a group of discouraged and unmotivated people in the midst of ridicule from all their neighbors who they had done business with and lived with for decades. Prayer kept Nehemiah dependant, but preparation allowed him to lead.

Cautious Consideration of the Cost

- **Personal assessment allowed for realistic expectations**

Facing these seemingly impossible odds did not cause Nehemiah to shrink back or throw up his hands. Instead he began to formulate, implement, and communicate a plan that could be executed clearly. He arrived outside of the city and spent 3 days getting settled. On the third night he mounted a horse and took a few men and went around the city walls inspecting the damage and estimating the cost, both of time and manpower, it would take to rebuild. He had not rallied the troops, had not rolled out plans yet before he knew what it would take. This principle in leadership is crucial. Leading without considering the cost means inevitable failure and deceives people into action.

Jesus called His followers to this principle:

Luke 14:28-30 *For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'*

But Jesus was referring here to salvation, where following Jesus is costly. Grace and forgiveness are freely given in Christ in the sense that we could never earn these, but it will cost us everything to follow:

Luke 14:25-27 *Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he **cannot be my disciple.** ²⁷ **Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.***

We are saved from our sin but saved **to** reconciled relationship with God in Christ. Christ is now our Lord. He has and always will be Lord, but now we are awake to that reality. He owns our life, and that is the ultimate freedom.

- **Shrewd & discerning communication avoided unneeded conflict**

Notice how Nehemiah went about the collection of data to plan out his next step. He came to town with letter and a military escort, but he **did not announce why he was there** (12). He did not tell his enemies or allies what the plans were, and he went out to inspect the walls at night so that there would be no undue attention put on him. This was not lying nor was it dishonest. It was **shrewd**. There would be enough opposition and struggle when they actually started. He avoided inevitable conversations until he was equipped and prepared with enough information to give a clear picture to his people. This is how wisdom plays out in hostile environments.

This is exactly how Jesus commissioned His disciples to operate when He sent them out into hostile regions:

Matthew 10:16 *"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."*

In times of war and opposition, wise (shrewd) maneuvering is a must. As we operate in a culture that sees absolute truth as a threat and anyone who speaks it as the enemy, we must be able to operate both shrewdly and innocently, both with wisdom and integrity. Remember Jesus Himself was shrewd in dealing with His enemies, never compromising the truth but not needlessly giving up ground.

Preparation Allows to Properly Motivate Others (17-20)

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision."¹⁸ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"²⁰ Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

Leadership, by definition, means someone is following you. A leader with no followers is simply a person taking a walk. In order to accomplish the clear plan that God had directed, Nehemiah had to motivate an apathetic and discouraged group of people. **Arnold Toynbee**, English Historian, said:

"Apathy can only be overcome by enthusiasm, and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things: first an ideal which takes the imagination by storm and 2nd a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice."

So with all of his planning and preparation, Nehemiah was ready to direct the minds and hearts of his countrymen, those that would move from discouragement to achieve the impossible in 52 days!

Preparation Created Definitive Action

- **Identified with the people, rather than above them**

A good leader will identify with those he's leading, since he is by nature a servant. The analogy the Bible uses often is that of **shepherd-sheep**, where the shepherd works among his sheep, knowing them, caring for them, understanding each of their tendencies. Nehemiah could have arrived and pointed to letters

from the King, or years of government experience, or anecdotes of past accomplishment, or the fact that he had soldiers that accompanied him as collateral in a discussion. Yet as he gathered the leaders and people, he appealed to them in a different way: *“You see the trouble **we are in...Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem.**”* This was not leading from far away or dictating by force (physical or personality). It was simply saying to the people that their leader would be there with them, that this would be a together project, that he was going to get his hands dirty as well. Isn't this the glorious case of our Leader? Jesus is the head of the church, and when He calls husbands to lead, He says to look at His example (Eph. 5:25-26). When He calls us to endure suffering, or to live with a hard spouse, He calls us to follow how He endured (1 Peter 2:21-25). This is how Jesus has credibility to be our High Priest, our go between us and God, since He was tempted in every way, yet He was without sin (Heb. 4:15). A leader is willing to lead among, not above those that he cares for (see 1 Peter 5:1-5).

- **Gave a realistic and honest assessment, not smoke blowing propaganda**

Sometimes leaders need to bring encouragement through speeches, and rally troops through a rousing and passionate appeal (like Braveheart or Henry V). But that was not going to be enough for this group. They needed a dose of hope that was based in reality. Nehemiah pointed out what they faced. Jerusalem was in ruins and the gates were burned with fire. He gave a realistic picture of what they faced without wavering. There was no allusion to grandeur or trying to avoid the fact that the venture was possible, but was going to be difficult, more difficult than what they had faced before. Its interesting that this is always the best way to lead people. Most are not looking for false bravado or artificial excitement, but someone to give the truth, no matter how bleak it looks. In our culture, people are craving wisdom, and though we are all prone to false motivation (we all love inspiration), it is the truth ground in reality that actually lasts. Inspiration tends to leave as quickly as it comes.

- **Committed to definite action (even when he did not have all the answers)**

This is such an important principle. Preparation and planning DO NOT MEAN we have all the answers or know **HOW** everything will fit together or turn out.

“It is doubtful that God had told Nehemiah how exactly he was to accomplish the task of rebuilding the wall. For that Nehemiah was asked to exercise his own judgment, trusting that the Lord was in the decisions he would make. Knowing that God is sovereign did not cripple him into inertia, but motivated him to act prudently and wisely”¹

Surety in life and leadership means we are able to move forward without all the answers, knowing that we have the most important questions answered already. In other words, leading a home does not mean you know how to answer every question from your child nor how everything will turn out. Leading your business means you will have to risk without being able to control or predict every factor. Leading in the church means we don't always know how decisions will turn out. And the reality of all of these is this: *most times it turns out differently than we thought or planned.* But leading without all the answers means we walk by **FAITH, trusting the leading of the Spirit and able to move forward, knowing God is in control of it all.** I've been asked if I/we have a “master plan” for this church, and usually that leads me to chuckle a bit. I get the sense people think there is some hidden map or document that has specific plans for people, or more churches, or something. The truth is we walk by faith, we pray, we plan, and we make a decision as wisely and with as much counsel as we can, and often what we thought something was going to be turns out to be much different, and most times better, than if it had been up to us.

¹ Derek Thomas, “Ezra-Nehemiah”, p. 231.

- **Used his personal testimony of God's grace to assure confidence**

A leader also does not simply operate in the realm of potentiality and theory, but can point to experience to bring confidence. Its hard to empathize with someone who is suffering if you yourself have never suffered. Its hard to lead someone to trust God through tough circumstances when you yourself have never exercised that kind of faith. Nehemiah could point to his own testimony, how he had seen and experienced answered prayer, that the hand of the Lord was on him for his good, and that he had seen the providential as the King decided in his favor. In other words, we cannot lead people in ways we ourselves are not walking. Parents, we cannot lead our children to cherish Christ when we ourselves do not. We cannot give them a deep love for the church unless we ourselves demonstrate it. We cannot impart the wisdom of risk unless they see it in us first.

- **Pointed to who they were to motivate them in what they would do**

Nehemiah identified and understood the people he was leading. He simply stated the purpose of rebuilding, ***"that we may no longer suffer derision."*** The people were walking not only in failure but also in shame, which is this culture was helplessly egregious. The people who came back had come to restore worship, to become the light to the nations that God intended, to show the nations around that YHWH, the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God who redeems and forgives, is THE ONLY GOD to be worshipped and adorned. In this way, Nehemiah was motivating the people from the **inside out, starting with WHO THEY ARE and moving to WHAT THEY SHOULD DO**. This is still what should motivate us today.

In Colossians 3:1-15, Paul gives a list of moral imperatives: become heavenly minded, put to death sin like anger, foul talk, and lying, and putting on Godly character, like compassion, kindness, and patience. But all of this action was not an act of ***moral renovation in order to be raised with Christ***. The whole argument is that **BECAUSE THEY/WE have been raised with Christ, we are motivated to be what we already are by grace**. A Godly leader will motivate people they influence in this order, because this is the power of the gospel. God changes us from the inside out based on what Christ has done, and then calls us to work, change, and grow from that.

Preparation Points to the Sufficiency of God

Finally, Nehemiah pointed out to his opponents and his people that God was sufficient motivation to accomplish what they set out to do. Even though he had done all the preparing and planning, it was still a venture by God, for God, and through God. Nehemiah had a vision of leadership that was full and immersed in the greatness and glory of God. A vision that falls short of a goal of God's greatness falls short and is too small.

Conclusion: