



Here we are at the start of summer and I'm sure most of you already have your vacations planned. But I read an article recently that still may be of some help to you. It's called, "Five Ways To Ask Your Boss For Time Off." I thought it had some good advice.

- First, start with your successes. When you meet with your boss to ask for time off, start with telling him how hard you've been working.
- Second, plan ahead and ask early. The more notice you give your boss, the more likely you'll get a yes.
- Third, time your request carefully. In other words, watch for the right mood and moment.
- Fourth, phrase your request without demands. Be sure you're requesting, not demanding.
- Finally, ask in writing, so your boss won't feel pressured.

That all makes sense, but we all know the reality is we can do everything right but still be denied. It reminds me there are situations in life where we just aren't in control; when higher-ups make decisions about our lives we have little say over. It can be a boss granting you time off, a potential employer deciding if you get a job, a bank deciding if you get a loan, a coach deciding if you make a team, or a college determining if you get admitted.

This becomes even more challenging when you feel God is the One calling you to do something. Back in college, after sitting out my junior year, I felt God calling me to play football my senior year. I had a deep conviction he was calling me to get back on the team not because they needed my talent but because they needed Jesus. But I had no control over whether or not the coach would allow me back on the team.

How do we handle a situation like that? Do we just pray and leave it all up to God? Or do we play an active role in getting what we believe God wants? On the one hand, we might say, "God is sovereign. If he wants something done, he'll get it done, regardless of what I do." On the other hand, we might say, "Listen, God helps those who help themselves. It's up to us to do whatever we can do to make it happen."

### Background to Nehemiah

Last week we began a study on the book of Nehemiah, and it was a situation like that Nehemiah was in. He was a Jew living in Persia about 450 years before Christ. When he learned about the ragged condition of Jerusalem it broke his heart. The place

God had chosen for his name to dwell was in shambles. The walls were broken down and the gates were burned with fire so it was indefensible. The Jews who'd returned from Persia to rebuild the city had given up. The place was a disgrace. When Nehemiah learned about this it was like someone kicked him in the gut. He wept, mourned, prayed and fasted. As he did that he began to get a sense God was calling him to do something about it. But Jerusalem was 1500 miles away. It's not like you could hop on a plane and be there in a couple of hours. More importantly, Nehemiah was a man under authority. He had a boss, a higher-up, who happened to be the King of Persia. His name was Artaxerxes.

In the very last line of chapter one Nehemiah reveals he was the cupbearer to the King. For Nehemiah to have reached this position was a significant achievement, especially as a Jewish exile. He had direct access to the King. By the way, this would also mean he was a eunuch, as any man with close contact to the King's harem would be. But here's the deal: unless his boss allowed the "time-off" his desire to rebuild Jerusalem was a pipe dream. To make matters worse, this is the King who just a few years earlier had shut Jerusalem down because he saw it as a threat! Persian kings weren't known to change their minds!

So the question is, would this higher-up stand in the way of God's plan for Nehemiah? And how did Nehemiah handle that? Did he sit back and wait for the King to suggest he take a little trip to Jerusalem? Or did he try to use his position as an insider to get what he wanted?

### Nehemiah Gets Permission to Return to Jerusalem to Rebuild the Walls

#### He waits

Nehemiah himself tells us what happened in chapter two. Let's pick up the story in verse 1a,

**"In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king."**

The month given tells us close to four months passed since Nehemiah heard the bad news about Jerusalem. During that time we know he'd spent a lot of time in prayer. It's significant at the end of his prayer in chapter one he asks the Lord, **"Give you servant success today in the presence of this man"** (1:11). So he's praying God will give him success "today" but over 100

"todays" have passed since he started praying! So you might say the first thing he does is wait. He's ready, he's on the lookout for an opening. Any day might present the opportunity, but he has to wait. This reminds us even though we might be praying diligently about concerns God himself has laid on our heart, he may still keep us waiting. Whatever is broken in your world may not get fixed today. It's not always enough to weep and pray, we must also wait and pray.

There are three statements in the Bible that can help you wait and pray when everything in you wants to rush ahead of the Lord: Exodus 14:13 says, **"Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord."** Ruth 3:18 says, **"Sit still...until you know how the matter will turn out."** And finally, Psalm 46:10 says, **"Be still, and know that I am God."** Stand still! Sit still! Be still! And, as we'll see, when we're waiting, praying and being still God is at work. Time isn't being wasted. He's working both in us and in our circumstances to accomplish his purposes.

Finally the day came when an opportunity presented itself. Notice what he says next,

**"I had not been sad in the King's presence before, so the king asked me, 'Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart'" (verses 1b-2a).**

So all that time, while Nehemiah's heart was breaking over Jerusalem, he didn't let on. This was important because back then kings didn't want anyone to rain on their parade. How could anyone not be overjoyed by his royal presence? Failure in this was considered treason, an insult to the crown, and punishable by death. There's good evidence here that all this took place during one of the King's big drinking parties, so it was even more important to be happy! But Nehemiah couldn't hide his sadness any longer. I don't believe he planned this; a troubled heart will inevitably show itself in our countenance. The King knew him well enough to see his heart was troubled, and so he asks about it.

### He trusts

And now, perhaps his four months of prayer for favor in the presence of the King is being answered. He'd asked for an open door; now the door has opened a crack. But this is dangerous stuff. Nehemiah says, "I was very much afraid." He's not just afraid, he's very much afraid; he's petrified. Don't you love his transparency? There's no false bravado, no super-spiritual "I could never be afraid" attitude. Maybe there was suspicion as much as concern in the King's voice. Nehemiah's response is critical. Will he retreat or move forward and give an honest answer? Look what he says in verse 3,

**"but I said to the king, 'May the king live forever!'"**

That's a good way to start! But he doesn't stop there. He goes on,

**"Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"**

He tells the King exactly what's on his heart, but he does so tactfully. Nehemiah is no fool. He doesn't bring up old wounds by naming the city (Jerusalem) that 13 years ago this very King shut down. He shares his concern in a way the King could empathize with. He's personal, not political. Jerusalem is where his ancestors are buried. Ancient kings had a soft spot in their hearts for such things.

### He prays and asks

Still, Nehemiah hasn't asked for anything, but the King pursues it further and the door opens up just a little bit more.

**"The king said to me, 'What is it you want?'" (v. 4).**

Isn't that great! At this point Nehemiah could have just dove right in, but look what he says next,

**"Then I prayed to the God of heaven..."**

I doubt he said, "Excuse me, King, I need to go spend some time in prayer before I answer your question." No, this is like an arrow prayer, a brief text message to God. I'm sure it wasn't audible, but God hears our heart. What did he pray? "Lord, give me the right words." Or, "Lord, here we go. Be with me." I love how this man who'd been diligent to pray and fast in private for four months can also just shoot up an arrow prayer.

But then, with no time to waste, he jumps in head first and makes the big ask:

**"I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it'" (v. 5).**

Again, notice how tactful he is. He calls himself the King's servant. He's not leaving to start a rebellion. He's still subservient to him. But he's also straightforward. He spells out what he intends to do. He wants a leave of absence to rebuild the city. Again, his interests are personal, not political. This is where his ancestors are buried.

### He plans

But the King still has one concern. Look at verse 6,

**"Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, 'How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?'"**

Many have wondered why Nehemiah mentions the Queen was there. You get the feeling this was significant. It's likely the Queen had a favorable influence on the King in this matter. It's been said, "The husband might be the head, but the wife is the neck." Perhaps Nehemiah was someone she cared about; maybe he was a favorite of hers. The King's question even reflects this.

He wants to know how long he'll be gone. It seems Nehemiah was the kind of man the King didn't want to lose for long.

Again, Nehemiah's response is critical.

**"It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. I also said to him, 'If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?'" (verses 6b-8a).**

What I love about his response is he's totally prepared. He doesn't say, "Time? Well I'm not sure. I'll just follow the Lord's leading. I'll be back when he says to come back." No! Right on the spot he gives a definite time. He's able to because he's thought it all through. During the last few months he's not only prayed, but he's planned. Notice also, with the door wide open, he makes some bold requests. It's like after experiencing the heart stopping moment of not knowing if the air will support him, he's jumped off the hand glider's cliff. Now he's gliding along and he's so confident he begins to do flips. He makes two requests: one for protection and the other for provision. And again we see evidence of forethought and planning. He knows he'll need letters to give to the governors. He's thought through the supplies he'll need to rebuild the city. He's thought through all the details, including a place for him to live. He even knows the name of the Park Ranger who keeps the King's forest and could supply him with timber.

#### He sees

But when it's all said and done, look what he says at the end of verse 8,

**"And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests."**

He saw the hand of God in all of this. He doesn't give credit to his ingenious planning, but to the God who's behind it all. It's God who turned the King's heart.

When God calls us to do something, he'll open doors, but we must also be willing to step out in faith. You see, when God's on the move and he calls us to do something no higher-ups can get in his way. He'll move even in the most godless heart to accomplish his purposes. Proverbs 21:1 says, **"In the Lord's hand the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him."** That's true of every leader of every nation on this planet, and it's true of those who make decisions that impact our lives. Sometimes we wonder if God is really concerned with the details of our lives—whether my daughter gets the teacher I want her to have for first grade; whether I make the team or get the job or even the time-off. By the way, that coach I talked about; the one I had to approach about rejoining the team; he

not only let me back on the team, a few months later he called a meeting so I could share my faith story with the whole team!

You see, God does care and God is as active in the hearts of your higher-ups. The psalmist says if you were to count God's thoughts about you they'd outnumber the grains of sand on all the seashores of the world. When God's on the move and he's calling you to do something, he'll open the right doors and no one can thwart his purpose. The impact of our life won't be determined by people in high places, but by the One who holds their hearts in his hand.

But the question is, what part do we play in this? Do we just sit back and do nothing? Or do we have a part to play in the process? And if we do have a part how do we play our part without losing sight of who's in charge? Consider Nehemiah. God chose to use him as an active participant in accomplishing his will.

One of ways he did this was by his faithfulness and integrity as the King's servant. If the King had any doubt about that, he'd never have given him permission. It's worth asking, could the same be said of us? Would the higher-ups in our lives say, "I can trust him. He'll do what he says. He's proven that to me"?

He employed tact and courtesy. There's a great lack of this among Christians today. We think since we know the true King we don't have to play by the rules of tact and protocol others must follow. But we should be respectful and employ tact towards those in authority over us.

He also planned and prepared. We might think, if God is in it, why should I plan? We often think the less planning we do the more the Holy Spirit will take control. That's baloney! Sure we can over-plan and not stay flexible to the Spirit's leading, but God uses our planning. The soldiers of the Revolutionary War used to say, "Trust God and keep your powder dry." Trusting God and being prepared go hand in hand. A lack of planning isn't a sign of faith but a pious way of putting God to the test.

We also see his active involvement in his bold requests. I remember when we were trying to build this auditorium. We had to find a way to get more parking in order to build it, but we had no room. Then we came up with the idea of a parking garage. But everyone said there's no way the city will allow you to build a parking garage on that property! But we made a bold request, and they said yes!

When God is on the move and he calls us to do something, no higher-ups can get in his way, but he uses us as active participants and we must be willing to step out in faith.

But how do we participate actively yet leave room for God? How do we know we're not rushing ahead of God? Consider Nehemiah. He did a few things to keep God in the mix. For four months he prayed and waited for an opening with the King. He didn't make one single move without some indication the door

was opening. There are times in dealing with higher-ups when all we can do is pray and wait. God forbid we act on our own in those times.

Nehemiah also remained dependent on God. When the door began to open, he didn't rush in; he shot up an arrow prayer. He acted in dependence on God. So often, when we see we have an opportunity to get what we want, we move ahead and leave God behind.

Finally, Nehemiah recognized the hand of God and gave him the credit. He could have attributed this whole thing to human factors, "Oh the king wanted to keep the Jews happy so he threw them a bone." But in the end he said, "This all happened because God's hand was on me." Do you give God the credit, even when human factors are at work?

Most of us saw the movie *Forrest Gump*. There are probably 100 interpretations of that movie, but I think it had something to do with the floating feather that just happened to land on Forrest's shoe as he sat on the park bench. Why did the feather land on Forrest's shoe? Was it destiny or was it Forrest's own compassion and loyalty and knack for being in the right place at the right

time that determined the course of his life? His mother told him her opinion. She said, "Forrest, you make your own destiny." But as we watch Forrest's life unfold, we're not so sure. Yes, Forrest made choices. He was an active participant, but it does seem there's an unseen force at work in his life. Hollywood calls it "destiny," but for the Christian, it's the sovereign and gracious hand of God. When God's on the move, no one can get in his way. But he still uses our choices. We're still active participants in this process.

The theme of this whole study on Nehemiah is rebuilding your broken world. Many of you identified an area of your inner or outer world that needs rebuilding. How will this happen? Is it us or is it God? And what if we're not even in control? What if there are higher-ups keeping us from rebuilding our broken world? What do we do? We wait. We pray. We plan. We look for open doors. And when they come, we're ready. We jump off the cliff and move out in bold faith. When God's on the move and he calls us to do something, he'll open all the necessary doors, but he uses us as active participants and we must be willing to step out in faith.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*