



When we moved here we left our spacious 1800 square foot townhouse with four bedrooms and two and a half baths to live in our 1000 square foot duplex, boasting two bedrooms with one bath and, boy, was it a change! After a year of living there, it became clear we needed a bigger place, especially living with three girls! One afternoon I was talking with our neighbor and she told me she was moving. She let me know her mom was planning on selling the house and I asked her if she would consider us to buy it. In the back of my mind I knew we couldn't afford to buy a place here unless God stepped in.

After months of waiting one day my neighbor let me know her mom was actually going to rent the place. Excitedly I asked, "Does she want to rent it to a pastor?" After that conversation, my wife and I prayed multiple times a day for God to allow us to rent the three bedroom, two bath house across the street with a great backyard! We could beg God all we wanted. We could drop hints to our neighbor on how we would be the best tenants. But whatever way you look at the situation, we were not in control. We did not get to make the decision.

There are times like this when decisions are made about our lives that we have no control over. It might be a boss who determines a promotion. It might be a coach determining if we make the team. It might be a politician controlling tax increases. It might be a school determining if our child gets accepted. So how do you handle situations like this? Do you simply pray and leave it up to God or is there some way you can play a part in changing the minds of people in charge? And how does the sovereignty of God fit in? If God is in charge, can people stop His will from being done, for instance in my situation, from the home owner not renting the soon-to-be empty home to me?

Nehemiah found himself in a similar situation. Nehemiah was a Jew living in Persia about 450 years before Christ. When Nehemiah learned about the condition of Jerusalem, it broke his heart. Nehemiah wept, fasted and prayed for the city of God (Nehemiah 1:4). He had a sense God was calling him to do something about it, but Jerusalem was 800 miles away as the crow flies. It wasn't like he could just jump on a plane and head over the next morning. And Nehemiah was a man under authority. He worked for King Artaxerxes as the cupbearer; his job was to keep the king alive if anyone tried to poison him. This is the same Artaxerxes who shut down the restoration of Jerusalem because he saw it as a threat to his kingdom.

Open your Bible to Nehemiah 2 and let's pick up the story there.

Sadness of the Heart

Chapter one ends with a great prayer from Nehemiah, asking God to give him success in helping to restore Jerusalem. When we move into chapter two, we learn Nehemiah has been praying for four months.

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. I had not been sad in his 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."

I was very much afraid, (Neh. 1:1–2).

Nehemiah has had four months to pray, plan and wait on the Lord. Nehemiah reveals to us that he is the cupbearer to the king. This particular situation probably took place during a festival of some sort. Before you think Nehemiah is in a lowly position, like a dishwasher or burger flipper, you need to think again. Nehemiah was a trusted servant of the king. The wine taster played an important role in preserving the life of the king. Some ancient writings claim the family of the cupbearer was more influential than the king's own family.

This was a dangerous situation and it was risky for Nehemiah. The king spotted him while Nehemiah had sadness of the heart. Persian kings didn't like people being sad in their presence; they didn't want anyone raining on their parade. In this situation, the king knew his trusted servant so well that he saw the sadness of heart Nehemiah was trying so hard to conceal for the last four months. There has been much debate if Nehemiah was trying to intentionally look sad in front of the king. I don't think it made sense that he would intentionally look sad. When you go to a restaurant, you expect your waiter to be happy and this is what the king expected from Nehemiah. I think Nehemiah was trying to conceal his sadness. I think in this situation, God revealed to the king that something was bothering Nehemiah. This is a fantastic answer to prayer that the king is the one who starts the conversation.

Can I tell you what I love about Nehemiah? Nehemiah is honest about his human weakness. When the king asks him what is wrong, he doesn't play it off. At the end of verse two Nehemiah writes, "I was very much afraid." This is a translation for "I was scared to death." Some of you are in a situation today and you're

scared to death, you have sadness of the heart. Maybe your marriage is on the rocks. You wake up in the morning and you don't know how your spouse is going to respond to you. You walk on eggshells fearing what one more fight might invoke. Others of you are very much afraid of losing your home. You have a mortgage payment that is just a little too much and every month your finances are strapped. Maybe your situation is different from these two examples, but be honest. Rip a page out of Nehemiah's playbook, let your guard down, drop the false veneer and admit that you are scared to death. Embrace the fact that you can't solve this one.

A Bold Request

Once we accept that we are scared to death, we can respond in faith to the doors God opens. Nehemiah is obviously sad; the king has questioned him about it, and he is scared. So how will he respond?

... but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! 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?" (v. 3).

His response is in humility and reverence to the king. He answers the king with the appropriate response; "Let the king live forever..." There is also a great deal of tact in his response. Nehemiah doesn't just dump the misery of Jerusalem on the king. Nehemiah treated the situation as a matter of personal grief and his personal response touched the sentiments of the king. Let me say that again: Nehemiah treated this as a matter of personal grief and it touched the king's heart.

Let me explain this more. In ancient kingdoms there were deep connections to ancestry and respect for a person's native city. For Artaxerxes to know his trusted cupbearer's sadness of heart was related to family matters would have invoked some emotion in the king. Notice Nehemiah's tactfulness in his communication. He never mentions Jerusalem by name, he simply leaves the city name out. Artaxerxes was the one who stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and kings weren't known for changing their minds.

Now that Nehemiah has shared about his sadness, let's look at the king's response.

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and 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" (verses 4–5).

Artaxerxes asks him what he wants, but before making a bold request Nehemiah sends up a text message prayer. A text message prayer is a quick prayer to God. It's a quick, "God please help me." It's not an email prayer, one that you can draft out and have time to look over. It's not a phone conversation prayer when you take

more time to leisurely talk with a good friend and catch up on life. This was a text message prayer. Nehemiah didn't have much time and he desperately wanted God to guide him.

Now that he's sent a quick text prayer to God, look at how he answers the king. Once again Nehemiah shows his great skill in communication and honesty. He shows his respect for the king in his desire to please Artaxerxes by calling himself a servant. He doesn't want to leave to start a rebellion; he's the king's faithful servant. Once again, Nehemiah doesn't mention Jerusalem by name but refers to it as his hometown. And finally the request is presented to rebuild the city where his family is from and where his ancestors are buried. In chapter one Nehemiah received news of the state of Jerusalem and it broke his heart, but he didn't know yet he would be the one to rebuild it.

Nehemiah just asked a Persian king to change his mind. He humbly and respectfully laid out his desire to rebuild Jerusalem. It couldn't be much clearer. Nehemiah eliminates the room for surprise in their conversation. James Montgomery Boice once said: "Here is a secret: if you want to be successful with your boss, don't surprise him."

Think of the great faith it took for Nehemiah to make such a bold request. Nehemiah was wrecked when he heard about Jerusalem. He wept, fasted and prayed. He had prayed for four months this opportunity to come. Day in and day out Nehemiah prayed. While he was praying he was planning, and he waited for God to open the door. Finally he was able to act in such faith to make this request to the king. I like what Christine Caine says: "When we feed our faith, we starve our doubts." Nehemiah had been feeding his faith for months in prayer and now it was time to act in faith.

There is a story involving Yogi Berra, the well-known catcher for the New York Yankees, and Hank Aaron, who at the time was the power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves. These two teams were playing in the World Series and Yogi was keeping up his chatter to pep up his team and distract the batters. When Aaron came up to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying: "Henry, you're holding the bat the wrong way. You're supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark." Aaron didn't say a word but hit a home run on the next pitch. After rounding the bases Aaron said, "I didn't come here to read." Aaron had a plan. His plan was to hit the ball. We see here that Nehemiah had a plan, and God had laid it on his heart during the last months of prayer.

Request Granted

The king saw Nehemiah's sadness of heart and questioned him about it. Then Nehemiah presented his bold request to return to the city of his ancestors. Will King Artaxerxes grant him permission to leave?

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and

when will you get back?" 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?" And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests (verses 6–8).

Yes! He is granted permission to leave, and not just permission, but the king takes care of him! There is a new detail revealed here—the queen is sitting next to the king. We don't know why the queen is mentioned here. In fact, scholars have differing opinions on why she is mentioned. Maybe she was there because it was a large banquet. Was it in Nehemiah's favor to have her there? Some suggest Nehemiah mentions her because the queen had influence on the king. Men, doesn't your wife have influence in your life? She might have leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

The king reflects on Nehemiah's bold request to leave and restore the wall of Jerusalem. He wants to know how long Nehemiah will be gone. It seems the king doesn't want to lose Nehemiah for too long. We begin to see the character of Nehemiah; he was a diligent, faithful worker. Artaxerxes was a better man for having Nehemiah on his staff. The king wanted to know how long Nehemiah would be gone before he was going to say "yes."

During these four months of waiting, Nehemiah wasn't just praying, he was also planning. Look at verse 6. When the king questioned him on his time table, Nehemiah was able to give a clear response. Too often Christians fail to have a plan. They say things like: "Well, God is just calling me so I don't need a plan!" Knowing Nehemiah had a plan made it easier for Artaxerxes to send him.

But that is not all Nehemiah asked for. Look at verses 7 and 8. Once he saw God open the door, he revealed the rest of his plan. He is no longer responding to a question; Nehemiah is beginning to take initiative. Nehemiah had a carefully thought out plan; he knew exactly what resources he needed and what letters he needed. He didn't expect God to just let him bypass the bureaucratic channels; he would need letters to the various rulers. He would need visas to pass through different regions on his journey. He also thought of the supplies he would need to accomplish his job of rebuilding the city once he arrived in Jerusalem. He's thought through all the details, even down to the place he would live. He knows the name of the park ranger who would supply him with lumber to build his house. This guy is amazing! My mom always said: "You don't know if you don't ask." I'm starting to think she got it from Nehemiah!

When it's all said and done who does Nehemiah give the credit to? Nehemiah gives all the credit to God. Nehemiah doesn't boast in his planning or his own ingenuity; he knew it was God behind the whole thing. It was God who turned the king's heart.

Be Prayed Up

I want to take the rest of our time this morning to apply what we learn from Nehemiah to our lives. The first lesson we learn from Nehemiah is the need to be prayed up. Nehemiah heard a report and it broke his heart. He was weeping before God in tears, that's how much it affected him. Instead of becoming calloused to the despair around him, he went to the only One who could solve it. "*Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.*" I was cupbearer to the king" (Neh. 1:11). He prayed for a day. No open door. He prayed for two days. No open door. He prayed for a week straight. No open door. One, two, three months straight and no open door. I think Nehemiah was faithful in prayer for the four months he waited. Charles Swindoll says: "The prayer warrior quickly learns the patience of waiting."

What is the one thing that is breaking your heart right now? You might be able to give me a list of seven things, but narrow it down to one thing you can focus on and pray for. I think Nehemiah gave up something to pray more. It's easy to pray for one or two days, but on the third day, after a long week, this is when it gets difficult. This is when we want to just sit on the couch and watch Hulu. This is when it's easier to zone out on your phone. This is what tests our commitment to prayer. Will you identify one area in your life that you can pray for and commit to praying for it? You might say, "Well, Nehemiah just prayed a quick prayer and it worked." Someone once said, "Quick prayers are possible and valid if one has prayed sufficiently beforehand." Nehemiah challenges our commitment to prayer.

Create a Plan

During your commitment to prayer, begin to jot down a plan for what you will do when God answers your prayer. Nehemiah isn't the only person in the Bible who we see act in such faith, even if their lives could be in danger. Do you remember another dispersed Jew living in Persia? This woman was a queen and her life was in danger. There was an edict written for her destruction and the destruction of all her people. It was signed by the king and there was no way to repeal it. As the queen, she wasn't even allowed to enter the presence of the king without being summoned. Look how she responded. "*Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish,*

I perish" (Esther 4:15–16). Esther asked all the Jewish people to pray for her. They called for a time of fasting and praying. Once the three days were up, she took a step of faith, risked her life, and entered the presence of the king. She created a plan and placed her life in the hands of a sovereign God.

Wait on God

The last lesson I think we learn from Nehemiah is the hard part. After praying and creating a plan, now you wait. Nehemiah had to wait for God to open the door. This is the hardest part because in our culture we want everything now. You want a hamburger, so you drive over to In-n-Out right now. You want a coffee so you walk down to Peet's right now. You want to look at inappropriate images, so you pull out your phone and satisfy your desires right now. You need something so you go on Amazon, but a week isn't quick enough so you sign up for Amazon Prime and get it in two days. Waiting on God is difficult. The Psalms are full of examples of waiting on God. My favorite is Psalm 5:3, *"In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly."* Waiting on God teaches us patience. It changes us. Most of us, though, are not good at waiting. I think as Nehemiah waited on God for the four months, it changed him; it changed his heart and his priorities.

In conclusion, we looked at Nehemiah's commitment to prayer. He made a bold request to the king and God granted the request. Instead of just thinking about what Nehemiah did, think about what God is asking you to do. Identify the one thing that is breaking your heart and start praying diligently for it. Create a plan on how you can respond and then wait for God to open the door.

Charity and I prayed for the three bedroom, two bath house with a great backyard across the street for almost six months. The day we got the lease, we were ecstatic! Our landlord gave us a great deal on rent, our daughter was able to attend the same school, and God knew that three weeks after moving in my wife was going to get pregnant, and now our son has his own room. When God is on the move, no one can stop His plan!

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

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