

GAME ON | WEEK 1 | GAME PLAN

INTRO:

FALL KICK OFF — GAME ON SERIES

- I love football season, sports, and sports analogies.
- Something great about sports is that there are a lot of life lessons embedded into them.
- We can even find lessons of faith and biblical connections.
- Over the next 4 weeks, we'll be looking into the Book of Nehemiah, but with an eye for some football illustrations.
- Today, I want to start with the idea of having a solid game plan.
- It's vitally important in sports, but also in life and faith.

POSITIVE COACHING EXAMPLE

- January 27, 1991. Super Bowl XXV. Buffalo Bills and New York Giants.
- The Bills were a machine. The K-Gun no-huddle. Fastest offense anybody had ever seen. In two playoff games they put up 95 points. Fifty-one of them on the Raiders in the AFC Championship.
- The Giants showed up with a backup quarterback. Phil Simms broke a bone in his foot in December. In came Jeff Hostetler, who had been a backup for seven years and had started two games in his entire career.
- Vegas made Buffalo a seven point favorite. Nobody thought this was close.
- Now, the Giants had a defensive coordinator. Thirty-eight years old. Not famous yet. Bill Belichick.
- And that week, Belichick walked into a room full of grown men and told them the plan.
- He said: we are going to let Thurman Thomas run for a hundred yards.
- Thurman Thomas. Best running back in football. Future Hall of Famer.
- Let him run.
- Linebacker Carl Banks said, and I am quoting him, "I thought it was a collective brain fart. Like what the h*** are you talking about."
- But here was the thinking. Every time Buffalo hands the ball off, that is one less throw to Andre Reed. That is one less throw to James Lofton. And running the football burns clock. The no-huddle does not.
- So Belichick took his defense apart. Formations they had never shown all season. Sometimes only two down linemen. Sometimes six defensive backs. Extra linebackers underneath to hammer anybody coming across the middle.
- He gave up the run to take away the pass. On purpose. In the Super Bowl.
- Here is what happened.
- Thurman Thomas ran for 135 yards. The plan invited it, and he did it.
- And Buffalo went one for eight on third down. They held the football for nineteen minutes and twenty seven seconds. The Giants held it for forty minutes and thirty three seconds. Still the record.
- Final score. Giants 20. Bills 19.
- The Giants did not have the better roster that day. They did not have the better quarterback. They did not even stop the best player on the field.

- They had the better plan.
- One more thing. Go to Canton, Ohio. The Pro Football Hall of Fame. That defensive game plan is in there. On display.
- Not a trophy from that game. Not a jersey. A piece of note paper with a coach's handwriting on it and a section at the top that says "no-huddle adjustments."
- Somebody decided the plan was the thing worth keeping.

WHAT'S YOUR GAME PLAN?

- There's a lot of challenges we face in life, there's an opponent actively scheming against us.
- What's your plan to make sure you're successful in the areas that matter most?

SETTING UP NEHEMIAH

- Babylon conquered Israel and carried the people into exile. Then Persia conquered Babylon, and the Persians let the exiles go home.
- The first wave returned under Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and they rebuilt the temple. Finished around 516 BC.
- Later, in [Ezra 4:7](#) to 23, there is another project. They start rebuilding the city and the walls. Their enemies write a letter to King Artaxerxes accusing them of rebellion, the king issues a stop order, and the work is shut down by force. Many scholars believe that is the rubble Nehemiah hears about.
 - So this is not a people who never tried. They tried. They got flattened. And nobody picked it back up.
- Now we come to Nehemiah.
 - It is 445 BC, nearly a century after the first exiles came home.
 - The walls are still down. The gates are still burned.
 - And here is the part you cannot miss. Nehemiah serves Artaxerxes. The same king who signed the order that stopped the work.

Enter Nehemiah.

MAIN SCRIPTURE READINGS:

Nehemiah hears of the ruin:

Nehemiah 1:1-4 NIV

¹ The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. ³ They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." ⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah then prays:

- He prays prayers of confession and repentance
- He reminds God of the Lord's steadfast love
- He reminds the Lord of his promise to regather his people.

Nehemiah 1:11 NIV

¹¹ 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.

Nehemiah presents his request to the king:

Nehemiah 2:1-8 NIV

¹ 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, ² 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, ³ 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?" ⁴ The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵ 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." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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? ⁸ 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.

Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem:

- Goes to the province and delivers the letters from the king to the governors.
- Certain men, Sanballat and Tobiah, are displeased by Nehemiah's mission and presence. These men aren't Israelites.
- Nehemiah then goes out at night secretly to personally inspect the walls (v12-15)

Nehemiah communicates his plan and vision:

Nehemiah 2:17-20 NIV

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." ¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work. ¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you

are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?” ²⁰ I answered them by saying, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.”

BRIDGE:

Nehemiah heard about the ruin

Nehemiah prayed for his people

Nehemiah recognized what needed to be done

But before Nehemiah could rebuild the walls, he needed a plan.

- What you won't see Nehemiah do... is just wing it. He's a tactical strategist.

He's like the coach who:

- Understands the game and what's at stake
- Puts in the time and effort preparing a game plan
- Makes sure that game plan is detailed and thorough
- Communicates the plan and diligently ensures the plan gets executed

Those 4 ideas that we see in Nehemiah's response is going to shape our outline today.

1: SEE THE BIG PICTURE

A good coach sees the whole program and their own role/responsibility.

- He understood the broken walls and gates left God's people vulnerable to their enemies.
- As a leader, seeing that broken condition broke his heart.
 - What do you see and feel when you see brokenness?
 - Are you moved to get involved.
 - Seeing is the first step.
- He understood God's plan for restoration.
 - He didn't just have a hope for restoration.
 - He had God's word on the matter.
 - But he knew that God's plan involved people.
- He understood his role
 - There's a providential tone to how chapter 1 ends.
 - He recognizes that he's been placed as cupbearer to the king — for a reason, God's reason.
 - 2:12 notes that “God put this into his heart to do”
 - He has access and opportunity that most others don't have.
 - NOTE: When God allows you to see something that needs to change, you need to recognize your responsibility to respond.

- In an organization or a family unit — you have a role and responsibility. Leaders get this and get to work.

2: TAKE TIME TO PREPARE

A good coach takes the time to game plan.

- First response was to pray
 - Serious prayer. Wept and mourned, fasted and prayed.
 - He took his grief, anger, frustration to the only One who could make a difference.
 - Note that this first prayer response went for days before he gets into his longer prayer that's recorded.
 - I wonder what those secret prayers contained.
- Prayer and planning go together
 - These aren't contrary actions.
 - He prayed. Then he planned. Then he prayed some more. Then he reworked his plans.
 - Prayer (talking with God) is vital for seeking counsel and guidance in our lives.
 - God knows better than we do — prayer puts us in a spot to hear from Him. It IS hearing from Him.
- Time was involved (4 months)
 - It's easy to miss this part, but Nehemiah notes the months of the report given and when he finally approaches the king.
 - 4 months separate ch1 and ch2
 - He's not sitting idle and he doesn't just wing it when ch2 opens up.
 - He's putting the time in

3: THINK THROUGH THE DETAILS

A good coach is in the details.

- He knew when and how to approach the king
 - He didn't just rush in the moment he first heard
 - Some scholars note the timing — the queen was with the king and its possible she favored Nehemiah or was sympathetic to his cause.
 - He didn't just blather out his request, he showed his emotion and waited for his opportunity.
 - Once again we see he tosses up a prayer (on top of all that he had already prayed)
 - He didn't make a request without first knowing what was needed
 - He had a plan for getting authorization from the king.
- The king authorized and resourced it (He had an investor — the king bought in)
 - This is one of those 'small miracles' in the Bible.

- The king didn't have to do it, but he did.
- Why?
 - Because he genuinely loved/cared for Nehemiah?
 - Because it was a benevolent deed that would gain favor with the people in that province? (political and strategic)
 - Because it would make his queen happy?
 - Because it would accomplish all the above?
- He knew what to ask of the king (resources & letters of authorization)
 - Essentially these letters addressed to the corresponding leaders guaranteed cooperation and provision.
 - I'm sure somewhere along the way a budget was involved.
 - This detail reveals that he didn't just live by the seat of his pants.
 - He had done his homework on what was needed.
 - COACH DETAILS:
 - It's one thing to give a simplified plan
 - It's altogether different when you teach the technique required and the 'what if' scenarios so that your players are prepared
- He was aware of the challenges and opponents
 - As he arrives in Jerusalem he notes who the challengers are.
 - He's not just seeing through rose colored glasses.
 - In your life/situation, do you know where the challenges are going to come from? Do you know what they'll probably look like.
 - How does your plan/strategy account for those details.
 - Nehemiah had them noted.
- Upon arrival, he secretly and personally inspects the walls
 - He takes the time to see it for himself.
 - He doesn't just rush in, guns blazing.
 - He personally inspects the conditions of the wall to see what was needed.
- When we get to chapter 3, we'll see how the plan actually gets implemented.
 - It's worth noting here that each family would build up the wall nearest their home.
 - It was a practical plan.
 - It could be done
 - People would be motivated to protect their families
- He anchored the plan in the Lord. It was dependent on Him.
 - He had seen the need.
 - He had God's word to go with.
 - He had spent time in prayer.
 - He knew that God had put this into his heart.
 - He was trusting God to bring it about — but he would be faithful to diligently do his part.

- This is really the key.
 - This message isn't just think through your life better, BUT rather:
 - What is God's plan for your life?
 - What steps do you need to take as your part/responsibility/cooperation with God's plan?
 - If the game plan you come up with, excludes God's involvement, wisdom, mercy, provision, guidance, and power... it's probably not on point here.
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4: COMMUNICATE THE PLAN

A good coach can cast the vision, communicate, and execute the plan.

- He communicated the plan to the right people in turn.
 - He didn't just broadcast it everywhere to anyone prematurely.
 - He kept his cards close and when it was necessary, he shared.
 - Even when he gets to Jerusalem with officers and horsemen from the king, he doesn't share his business until it was time.
- His team heard it and believed him
 - Eventually he shares the plan with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (nobles, priests, officials, and all who would do the work)
 - He accurately states the need/condition: 2:17a "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned."
 - He shares the mission: 2:17b "Come let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision."
 - He shares the how: 2:18 "And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good and also of the words the king had spoken to me"
 - The people buy in: 2:18c "And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good work."

NOTE A GOOD GAME PLAN:

- Shares the need/opportunity/condition (THE WHY)
 - Shares the mission (THE WHAT)
 - Shares the HOW — reasons to believe
 - IS actionable — it wasn't just good thoughts and intentions (this is seen in the next chapter how they practically accomplish the mission)
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APPLICATION | RESPONSE:

WHAT'S YOUR PLAN?

- Drift only goes one way (nothing drifts toward order on its own) — FAILURE TO PLAN IS PLANNING TO FAIL.
- So how are you going to grow in your faith?
- How are you going to make sure your family stays on track—not just in life—but in the faith, with God—eternal perspective.
- How are you going to make sure your marriage is healthy?
- If you're dating, what's your plan for honoring God in the relationship?
- If you're single, how are you going to honor God in this season?
- What's your plan for reaching your world for the Lord?
- on and on... what's your plan?
- Do these things belong to God or not?
 - If they do, you should have a God-honoring plan for them.

WHAT DOES A PLAN ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE?

- Recognizes a need (struggling marriage) — SEE THE BIG PICTURE
- In prayer come up with attainable action steps — TAKE THE TIME TO PREPARE, THINK THROUGH THE DETAILS
 - Reset priorities that reflect God's order of marriage. (pray together, go to church, small group)
 - Date your spouse. Refuel the fire.
 - Honor your spouse in your thoughts, words, and actions.
 - Better communication.
 - etc
- Communicate them lovingly to your spouse. — COMMUNICATE THE PLAN
- Put the plan in action.