

Nehemiah 2:1-10 Pray, Plan, and Say Please

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www.calvarydcmetro.org

One of the points we have already made is that Nehemiah was not a priest. He was not a paid religious professional; he was the equivalent of a modern civilian employee of the federal government – like many of you. He was probably a GS-13 or 14 who eventually got promoted up to SES. But, he loved God. And the book of Nehemiah shows us how God used both Nehemiah’s prayers and Nehemiah’s position to accomplish something great.

As we have seen in the previous weeks, Nehemiah is living in the capital of Persia, but he’s aware of the situation back in Jerusalem – the homeland of the Jews, and it’s tearing him up. When he heard the news (Neh 1:4): “I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”

When we pick things up this morning, four months have passed by. Nehemiah’s been thinking about things, he’s been asking for God’s forgiveness, he’s been repenting as we saw last week, and he’s been praying about what to do next; now God opens the door for things to change.

2:1 And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before.

Think of Carlson on Downton Abbey – he’s always very calm and void of expression or emotion. You can almost picture this plating out in the dining room with Carlson as Nehemiah and Lord Grantham as King Artaxerxes. Can’t you?

2 Therefore the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.”

So I became dreadfully afraid, 3 and said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?”

4 Then the king said to me, “What do you request?”

So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.”

6 Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), “How long will your journey be? And when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

7 Furthermore I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, 8 and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest,

that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which *pertains* to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy.” And the king granted *them* to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

Nehemiah has been given the green light and a blank check to rebuild a city that was destroyed 140 years prior, not because he was a good negotiator, not because he drove a hard bargain, but BECAUSE “the good hand of my God [was] upon me.”

God wanted the city of Jerusalem rebuilt more than Nehemiah did, so He made sure Nehemiah was in the right place with the right access to ask the right question of the right man at the right time. *God had given Nehemiah this position and this opportunity because of what God wanted done.*

So here’s what I want you to consider this morning - if God had something to do with Nehemiah being there in Susa at that very moment and working for that very king, then you’ve got to ask yourself – does He have anything to do with you being in this city, working for your boss, right now?

Does God have anything to do with you buying or leasing your house, apartment, or townhome next to your particular neighbors? Does God have anything to do with which kids are in your class, which interns you’ll be supervising this summer, or who you keep bumping into in the halls?

And if God wanted to use Nehemiah right where he was in order to take him where God wanted him to be, what does God want to do with you currently, and where might that all be leading?

You see, I’d want to argue that God put you where you are BECAUSE He wants to use you. You might not have thought of that until now, but neither had Nehemiah – if you back things up 6 to 12 months he probably wasn’t thinking, “Oh, God put me here so that one day I could be sent out to rebuild Jerusalem.” We can’t always tell what God is doing with our lives, but we can know *beyond all shadow of a doubt* that *He does want to use us*, if we will submit to Him – to make ourselves available to Him, like Nehemiah did.

And let me say something else about Nehemiah’s position because living here in the nation’s capital, I think it’s important to notice WHERE God put him! Nehemiah was given a high level position in the modern equivalent of a global superpower. He wasn’t serving in some small backwoods government – he was serving the big man of an empire that controlled the entire Middle East extending from Israel and Lebanon, up into modern Turkey and Greece and then back through Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and into the Western parts of India.

And it wasn’t the first, or the last, time God had done something like that. Think of others like Daniel who excelled in both his integrity toward God and his service to the Babylonian empire. Go farther back in history and think of how Joseph served in the court of Pharaoh.

Each of these men were in the upper echelons of major world powers and they had both a reputation for professional excellence AND devotion to God.

But none of them were actual leaders or rulers of empires. You see, sometimes God is looking for someone to lead, but more often He is looking for someone to be a number two, or number three, or even un-numbered, who will be in a position to advise and serve.

And as a Christian, that should be an easier role to fill than for most people. Because it's easier to be number two, when you know that God is really number one. If you gain your identity and approval from the fact that you serve God, what kind of identity and approval do you need from men? Seeking your worth or your pride in the positions of men can be a dangerous thing. Those positions don't last long. Sooner or later you have to retire or move along, or you get passed over or voted out or you're no longer "cool." But if you're focused on serving God instead, it's easier to accept whatever position He assigns.

So, if God has put you in the number two position, or even lower, think about the example of Nehemiah and others, and realize, they were exactly where God wanted them to be, and He used them mightily in their position to be an influence for good and a blessing to many.

So again, how does God want to use you in your position – whose ear or eye has He given you? Think and pray about that - even if that individual isn't saved – we have no indication that Artaxerxes worshiped God, but God was still able to use Nehemiah in his court. Don't ever put up an excuse as to why God can't do this or that. Some of you work or live in difficult places with difficult people (maybe your number two position is in a marriage, not the workforce) but maybe that's why you're there – maybe God has sent you to be His ambassador – a voice for good, for justice, for righteousness where there might not otherwise be one.

You see, I'm asking you to step back and try to look at the natural world with supernatural eyes and wonder what God might be doing around you and how He might want to involve you!

We said earlier that God used both Nehemiah's position *and* his prayer, so let's consider the role of prayer now.

How did Nehemiah know what to do, when to do it, and what to ask for?

The answer is, through prayer--prayer that was essentially woven into the very fabric of his life so that we could say Nehemiah:

- wept and prayed
- wondered and prayed
- waited and prayed
- worked and prayed.

We've seen over the past two weeks how Nehemiah wept and prayed. We remember how he "sat down and wept, and mourned for many days... fasting and praying before the God of heaven." And we've all been there before, right? Something tragic happens, and even the least religious people you know suddenly are talking about how they're praying for the situation.

But it usually stops there. We move on, we recover, the event fades from our memory slowly and it's not such a big deal anymore. But this wasn't one of those situations for Nehemiah. Instead, he went on to wonder and pray. During those "many days" of fasting and praying, Nehemiah kept thinking about the situation - he couldn't shake it. (By the way - that's a pretty good indicator that you're being called to do something about the situation.)

What happens when we wonder and pray? Well, often we think through the situation better and try to figure out exactly *what* we should pray. This happened to a friend of ours this past week.

Last Sunday, at a Crossfit competition in Orange County, a man was hit in the back by a 235# barbell. It severed his spinal cord and left him paralyzed. Right there, in front of everyone, he went instantly from the peak of physical fitness to being profoundly physically handicapped, most likely for the rest of his life. Several of our friends know the man, and they struggled with how to respond to the situation.

One of them, a highly decorated national champion weight lifter, who also loves Jesus, wrote the following on his blog:

"In most of the tragic circumstances I've encountered...the Word of God, Christ's work on my behalf, and my theology have been a comfort. [But] When I thought about Kevin and the road ahead for him and the tragedy of the situation, I was lost. I didn't know where to turn,[or] how to even begin to ask God for help, and any sense of comfort or peace was replaced with helplessness and nausea. That's why I have waited for so long to write this post. I had no idea how to approach his situation."

Our friend spent several days wondering and praying about everything and then wrote the blog post to share his thoughts with others:

"...I want to write this because for the first couple [of] days after Kevin's accident I had no idea how to pray for him. People kept asking me to pray and telling me they were praying, but I was lost as to how to approach God with this situation."¹

Have you ever been there, where you don't even know what to pray? That's where we begin to wonder and pray - we start by just sitting before God and telling Him, "God, I don't

¹ For the complete story: <http://spencergarnold.wordpress.com/2014/01/16/kevin-ogar-how-to-pray/>

know why this happened, or what to do. God, I don't know what is going on here or where it's all going. Can You help?"

And sometimes, as you do that, over and over again – not just one time, but you keep coming back to it, sometimes you start to see things and understand. You talk to others who love God and ask for their help and perspective – that's how we learned of the accident – our friends called and emailed me and Mady to ask, "what do you guys think, how do we respond?" And you turn to the Word and start to look at what God has already said - you look at His unchanging promises and sometimes things begin to sharpen a little. Bit by bit they come back into focus.

And through it all sometimes God begins to show you how to respond – what to do, what to say, where to go.

Sometimes He gives you a crystal clear, totally complete, understanding. But most often, He just gives you an outline – kind of an idea about what to do. That's what happened with Nehemiah. In all that time of wondering and praying, God began to clarify a vision for him – he was the one burdened by the condition of the city – he needed to be the one to go back and rebuild. But how could that happen, how long would it take, what kind of things would he need? He wondered and prayed his way through all of that until he had a general idea – not a total snapshot, but a basic outline – enough to get started and so he had answers when the king asked questions. More details would come as he progressed.

As Nehemiah wondered and prayed, he was also waiting and praying. It's one thing to know God's *will*, but then you also have to have God's *timing*. Nehemiah knew what to do, but he also needed the right opportunity to ask – and finally, after four months, it came and Nehemiah had to take a leap of faith and open his mouth.

Before he did that though, he shot out another prayer, a quick, "Oh God, help me" prayer right there, in the moment.

You know, you can do that too. It fulfills the command to 'pray without ceasing' and it brings God into your daily life where He wants to be – you know God wants to saturate your life, right? He wants to be there with you as you face all the challenges and stressors of daily life. So let Him in. Pray those quick prayers, and see what He wants to do.

Nehemiah wept and prayed, he wondered and prayed, he waited and prayed and then the day came when he needed to work and pray. He needed to get out and take action based on his prayers. He needed to stretch the legs of his faith and see what God had in store. So, he packed up and set off.

9 Then I went to the governors *in the region beyond the River*, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.
10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard *of it*, they

were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.

How true is that? You pray and pray about something and it looks like it's all going to come together, and then you hit a speed bump. It turns out that not everyone is thrilled about what God wants to do through you. But that's OK. Because in the process of waiting and praying and wondering and praying you're growing in your sense of conviction and calling and you're learning to lean more heavily upon God so that when opposition comes, you know how to respond – by prayer, and then action. You hold on to what you know God has called you to do and you press on.

As Paul writes in Galatians 6:9-10, “let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

We're going to stop here this morning – next week we'll pick things up with Nehemiah in the city of Jerusalem and we'll see the things he's been praying about finally start to happen.

The question I want to leave you with though, is this: if God's hand is upon you like it was with Nehemiah, and I believe He wants it to be, then how does God want to use you? What does He want to accomplish through your position and prayers? Have you surrendered your position to Him? Have you asked Him to help you see things through His eyes and asked Him to help you know what to pray? Personally, I want to see what God wants to do, *I want to see what only God can do*, and I want to be a part of it – even if there is opposition.

So let's pray and offer ourselves to Him today.