

Holy Ambition--Holy Preparation
Nehemiah 2
Feb 3, 2019

Welcome guests. We started a new series last week called Holy Ambition. We are studying together through the book of Nehemiah. We said this is going to be a challenging and eye-opening study for all of us. Whether you are interested in history or politics or leadership or whether you want to have a greater sense of clarity on what God would like to accomplish through your life, this book has so much to teach us!

What we learned last week was that in the year 586 BC the Babylonian Empire conquered the Jewish people, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and deported them into Exile. This is recorded not just in the Bible, but in the history books. This is a well-documented fact that all historians, no matter their religious beliefs, agree on. After being in Exile for dozens and dozens of years, the Persians defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return home. Not all the Jews did return home to Jerusalem, but those who did return, ended up facing great hardships. Their town was destroyed. The city's infrastructure was in disrepair and the people were in disgrace. In chapter 1, Nehemiah, a Jew serving in a high-ranking position in the Persian Empire, learned about the needs of his people. He wept and fasted and prayed and asked God to use him to do something about it.

We talked last week about what it means to have a holy burden, to see a need in the world and care so much that you refuse to continue sitting in the stands or on the sideline. You are finally ready to get in the game and allow God to use you to do something about it. When we catch a vision of what could be and compare it with what is, and see an enormous gap, we want to be the sort of people who live lives of actual consequence and actually close the gap. One of the things we said was that **new information**, accompanied by **divine revelation** often leads to **personal obligation**. Nehemiah learned new information, God moved in his heart, and he knew he had to do something about it. Jon Tyson says, "**Passivity in the face of God-given opportunity is ungodly.**" The Book of James puts it this way: "**If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.**" James 4:17 When Nehemiah learned this new information, he had to do something! Today, we are going to see the practical steps that Nehemiah took to prepare for the work he was called to do. Remember, in chapter 1:11 Nehemiah says, **I was cupbearer to the king**. Being cupbearer to the king was the ancient equivalent of being head of the Secret Service. The king literally trusted his life to this person on a daily basis. Nehemiah had as much influence and personal interaction with the king as anyone in the entire kingdom. Think about what an exceptional leader Nehemiah must have been to be entrusted with this role as a foreigner!

As we pick up in chapter 2, this is what we see: **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.** It is the month of Nisan (they were on a lunar calendar), which means that it is early Spring, and it's been about four months since Nehemiah first learned of the plight of his people in Jerusalem. He's been wrestling with this burden for more than 100 days. And during this time, you know he's praying constantly, asking for God to make a way, asking for God to miraculously open a door. And then, God miraculously opens a door: **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."** The king took note that there was a shift in Nehemiah's

demeanor, which would have terrified him at first. In ancient customs, if you were sad or mopey in the presence of the king, it was considered an insult and you could lose your life. So understandably, Nehemiah tells us **I was very much afraid, 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?”** He tells the king exactly why he’s so distraught.

And he has clearly earned favor, because the King responds by saying **“4 The king said to me, “What is it you want?”** So the most powerful person in the world (someone who did not need to get things approved by the House and the Senate and the Supreme Court. He could literally do whatever he wants!) says to Nehemiah, “Tell me what you’d like.” And Nehemiah has the best response possible - **Then I prayed to the God of heaven.** He took a moment right there in his heart before saying anything to ask God to give him wisdom and guidance.

This is such a helpful step to take. Pray before responding. I remember just a couple of months ago when Keren was about eight months pregnant. She was having trouble bending down to tie her shoes, so I would often get down and do that for her. I was doing that one day and I was having trouble getting the shoe on. Women’s feet get a little larger during pregnancy. Keren was watching me struggle and then innocently asked, “What’s the matter?” That’s when I should have stopped and prayed to the God of heaven to tell me what to say. Instead I whispered the first thing that came to my mind, “Somebody’s not Cinderella anymore.” To be fair, I thought that Keren would find that funny. I was wrong.

Nehemiah had the wisdom to stop and pray! Then after praying **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.”** This is a big request. Do you know why this is such a big request? Because this is not just any random city in Judah that he wants to rebuild! This is a city in Judah that was previously being rebuilt, and this very king decided to discontinue the project. So Nehemiah, in effect, is looking at the king and saying, “Most powerful man in the world, man who has the power to kill those who disagree with him...I think you missed the mark on this one. I think you got this decision wrong. I want to ask you not only to change your mind, but also to give me an extended leave of absence to see to this matter myself.” And remember, it’s not like he’s the dishwasher asking for a couple extra days off. He’s not a groundskeeper. This is the point man who is ultimately responsible for the king’s safety and he’s asking to be gone for a long time. This is a bold request.

6 Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” The only thing the king wanted to know was how long he would be gone. **It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.** And Nehemiah could tell that God has opened the heart of the king, so he decided to expand the nature of his request: **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. 9 So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.** This is the absolute best-case scenario. Not only does the king say, “Yes, you can rebuild the city.” He gives Nehemiah an extended leave of absence,

hands him a blank check to fund the project, writes official letters of approval, and provides him with a military escort. How did all this come about??? **Because the gracious hand of my God was on me.**

So with personal protection, a permission slip, and the king's credit card, Nehemiah leaves the capital city of Susa and travels to Jerusalem (**MAP**). That's about a 1,000 mile trip. Well over a month long journey. But they finally make it there. And as soon as he did, Nehemiah realizes that the real battle has just begun. **10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.** And now you are beginning to see why Jerusalem was in such bad shape. There were government officials who were actively opposing the Israelites, keeping their city in ruins and their people in disgrace. Because of the opposition, Nehemiah knew he had to approach things with wisdom and discretion.

11 I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days 12 I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. He's turning this into a covert operation. This is a secret mission that he's doing under the cover of night so that no one sees and catches on to his plan. And the reason he's keeping his cards so close to his chest is because he doesn't want people to oppose his work. The Super Bowl is happening later today. Earlier in the week, the Rams didn't give the Patriots their playbook! (The patriots may have stolen it; that certainly wouldn't be surprising). We understand that there are times when you need to keep things under wraps.

13 By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. 14 Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; 15 so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. (The word for **examining** is the same word in Hebrew that was used to describe the doctors analyzing parts of the body to try to diagnose an ailment. Nehemiah is doing an intense, careful investigation.) Imagine officials after the earthquake in Haiti, or Katrina in New Orleans, or the Fires in California - they have to move throughout the area and inspect where the needs are. **Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the Valley Gate. 16 The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.** So he's keeping it secret until he can survey the scope of the project. After discovering what needed to be done, he gathered all the leaders together, **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.** So he shares his plan with the leaders of the people. He draws attention to the plight of their situation, casts a compelling and clear vision of the future, and reminds them that God is with them. **They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.** And the city that had lain in ruins for 150 years began to be rebuilt.

There are three words I want to use to highlight the movement in this text. The first is **Clarity**. Nehemiah had clarity on what he wanted to see accomplished. When the King said, "What would you like?" Nehemiah made a very precise and specific request. And what I would

encourage you with is this: if we want to see breakthrough, we need clarity. We need to have specific goals. Don't say, "I hope to get a little healthier. Say, "I want to work out four times a week and cut out desserts so that I can lose this much weight or drop this many cholesterol points" Don't say, "I want my finances to be a little better. Say, "I want to be debt free by this time, I want to have this amount of money in saving by this exact time." Once you know the goal, and it is precise, you can chart the path to get there.

Now I know a lot of people who have clear and specific goals when it comes to weight loss or finances or professional development, but let me ask you, do you have clear and specific goals for the ways you want God to work in and through your life? Do you have goals for the type of person and Christ follower you want to become? For the kind of spouse you want to be? For the kind of marriage you want to have? Do you have clear and specific goals for personal holiness? Goals for giving? Goals for serving? Do you have goals for this church being a bigger and better place because you are a part of it? Do you have a goal to join us this summer as we do an all night prayer and worship event? Do you have goals for how many people you'd like to share your faith with and lead to a saving relationship with Jesus? Do you have a goal to get into a small group and start growing as disciples with other people? When it comes to the work you want God to do in and through your life, do you have clarity? Once you know what you really want (and God has confirmed that as his will for your life through the Word, prayer, counsel, and opened doors) then you know the path to take.

When you read through the gospels, do you know how many questions Jesus asked people? More than 300 questions! As a Rabbi, he always wanted to solicit active engagement and responsiveness from his listeners. And do you know what question he asked more than any other? Not, "Do you believe in me?" Not, "Do you want to go to heaven when you die?" The question he asked more than any other was this: "**What do you want me to do for you?**" Think about that right now. How would you answer that question? What do you want God to do?! If we are going to live lives of consequence and see God accomplish great things through us, we need clarity.

Once you have clarity, then you need a **strategy**. Everything Nehemiah did was strategic. He waited four months to pray. He didn't demand an audience with the king; he waited for the king to initiate the conversation. When he got a chance to make his request, he was purposeful and precise - I need time off, finances, and approval letters so that those who live a thousand miles away will know this project has your blessing. I need a military guard. So strategic. Nehemiah knew the first phase of his plan needed to be in secret so that his enemies wouldn't thwart him. He not only had clarity; every step he took strategically moved him toward his goal. He didn't deviate with sideways energy to the left, then to the right, and back again.

Strategy matters. Indulge me for just a moment, but I think about cooking a good brisket. I have a few friends who love to cook Brisket. One of them sent me an article on how to do it. And I'm not kidding. This is a direct quote: "**Cooking brisket is complicated. It's like a long-term relationship...Treat each time that you and the brisket hang out together as a new day.**" The rest of the article goes on to talk about prepping the brisket the day before cooking with trimming and oil, then spices, then smoking it wrapped for a few hours at 165 degrees. Then you unwrap it and cook it at 250 degrees. Then you end up with **this**. But it's still not ready to eat. You have to let it rest for two hours and then slice it just the right way. Now, anyone who has had really, really good brisket can appreciate the strategy and the step by step process that leads

to this tasting perfect. But let me ask you, if that's the amount of strategy it takes to get a brisket right, how much strategy do you think it takes to get a life right?

How much strategy do you think it takes for you become the sort of person God wants you to be? How much strategy do you think it takes for you to accomplish the sort of things God wants to accomplish through your life? No matter what it is you really want to see accomplished - being a great husband or wife, being a truly content and joy-filled single person, leaving a legacy as a parent, making an impact in the marketplace, giving extravagantly, transforming your community, whatever it is, if you ever talk to anyone who is an expert in their field, someone who is world class at what they do, and ask them, "How did you get to where you are?" You will never, ever hear, "It was an accident. I put in no effort and it just kind of happened." If we want to see something significant accomplished through our lives, we have to have a strategy! If you want uncontainable joy, life-giving relationships, a strong family, healthy finances, or spiritual breakthrough - none of those things happen by accident. They come from having clarity on what we want to see accomplished and developing a strategy to help us get there. But we can't do it alone. Ultimately, we need a **community**. That's our third word.

Nehemiah understood that he had absolutely zero chance of seeing his vision become a reality alone. He got all the leaders together and said this 2:17, "**You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire.** Josephus, a Jewish historian, tells us that Nehemiah actually gathered everyone together for this talk in the temple courts. And if you recall, this is the temple that when people who saw the original temple looked at this rebuilt temple, they wept, because it was just a shadow of what once was. This shabby, rebuilt temple was so embarrassing, that it caused grown men to weep. And from there where all the people have a 360-degree, panoramic view of the city, they can see the devastation all around them, Nehemiah says: **Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.**"

This is one of the most essential aspects of vision casting: Helping people come to a deep conviction that it's not ok for things to stay the way they are. As people, we so easily become habituated to our environment. Something in our personal life, or our marriage, or our family, or our church may be really unhealthy, and at first we may have been scandalized by it. But if it stays around long enough, eventually we get acclimated to it and it becomes our new normal. I have a friend who for a few years lived in a small town in Delaware that processed hundreds of thousands of chickens a day. The entire town smelled like dead birds. He could barely breathe when he first moved there. But what do you think happened after a few months? He got acclimated to it.

This happens to all of us in all sorts of areas. We get lulled into believing that it's not that big of a deal...that it's just the way it's always going to be. And oftentimes we need someone to come in from the outside, speak into the situation and say three simple words: **Here is horrible.** You may have gotten acclimated to this over the course of months or years or decades, but here is horrible. Why would we want to stay here any longer, in the mire of mediocrity?! Maybe it's a pornography addiction that is seven years and counting, or coping with alcohol for as long as you can remember, or a lack of true unity with your spouse, or a job that you hate. For our church it's millions of dollars of debt that is two decades old. It could be a hundred different things, but in order for things to really change, we need a deep seated belief, a conviction, that here is

horrible. We need to leave this place behind and experience what God has in store for us. (Elaborate and give examples...)

After Nehemiah cast the vision, the people said: 2:18 **“Let us start rebuilding.”** Through instilling a holy discontent with where they were, through casting a clear vision and laying out his strategy, Nehemiah got the people on board. Here’s what Nehemiah knew about every worthy venture. It is such an important truth: **“We can’t do this alone.”** No matter how hard Nehemiah tried, he couldn’t rebuild the wall around the entire city by himself. If he lived until he was 100, he couldn’t have done it all alone. He needs other people. We see this same principle all throughout the Scriptures. Think about the Apostle Paul. He didn’t try to do mission work by himself. He said, “We can’t do this alone” and recruited Timothy, Luke, Titus, Barnabas, John Mark, Epaphras and dozens of others to help him in his work. Even Jesus didn’t try to do it alone. His first order of business was to find 12 disciples and share in the work together. Community was essential to see true change. It was true for Nehemiah, for Paul, for Jesus, it’s true for us as well. We can’t do this alone.

We are at the same place as a congregation: Freedom...our number one goal...100% participation. We are all in this together! Our secondary goal...to eliminate debt and upgrade our buildings and technology. This is about becoming a stronger, healthier church together!