

“Mission”
Nehemiah 2:1-8
Nehemiah: Rebuilding a City & People for God
Mercy Hill Church | February 5, 2023

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. ² And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. ³ I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” ⁴ Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” 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, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.” ⁶ And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. ⁷ And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, ⁸ and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

Big Idea: A mission is birthed out of conviction and comes to fruition through prayer, planning and action under God’s sovereignty.

Recap of Nehemiah 1

- In the opening chapter of Nehemiah, we see Nehemiah’s conviction for God’s purposes (vv.2-4a) and his conviction to pray (vv.4b-11) in response to the latest report from his brother concerning the poor condition of the walls of Jerusalem and the people of God. Nehemiah’s grief leads him to fast and pray. In Nehemiah’s prayer we see his convictions of who God is (vv.5-6a), his convictions of corporate and personal sin (vv.6b-7), his convictions of God’s promises and redemption (vv. 8-10) and his conviction of God’s power and righteousness (v.11).
- Big Idea: The start of anything significant always begins – continues, and ends – with prayer. Prayer is a (spiritual) response and a reflection of our convictions.

1. Pray -- Continue to Pray (vv. 1 & 4)

- cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Romans 12:12, Colossians 4:2, Luke 18:1
- Approximately 4 months (cf. Nehemiah 1:1, month of Chislev, to Nehemiah 2:1, month of Nisan) have passed since Nehemiah first broke down in tears and prayer, v.1 Month of Nisan (20th year).
- Nehemiah started to pray (1:4-11) prayed and continued to pray. Even though the passage is primarily a conversation between Nehemiah and King Artaxerxes, the king of the Persian empire, there’s another conversation occurring between Nehemiah and the King of kings, Lord of lords – God!
- In Nehemiah 1:5-11, we’re given a detailed account of Nehemiah’s long(er) prayer to God. In Nehemiah 2:4b, all we know is Nehemiah prayed a quick prayer to God. Whether long(er) or short(er), Nehemiah’s propensity to turn to God in prayer – not just once but continually in all circumstances -- is clearly evident.
- Dave Hansen, *Long Wandering Prayer*: “How can short prayer solve the problem of long worry? It took a long time for anxiety to grip our guts; only long prayer can release that power.”
- Paul Miller *A Praying Life*: “We forget that helplessness is how the Christian life works...strong Christians do pray more, but they pray more because they realize how weak they are. Weakness is a channel that allows them to access God’s grace.”

- Nehemiah's conviction regarding rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and restoring the people of God didn't go away, but grew as he continued to pray (and fast and wait). And this conviction gives birth to a clear(er) mission – and action: Nehemiah is going to help rebuild the walls of Jerusalem!

2. Take Prayerful Risks (vv.2-3, 4-5, 6, 7-8)

- cf. Luke 5:1-10, Matthew 14:29, Acts 14:19-21, 2 Timothy 1:7, Numbers 13, Joshua 1:9
- In the face of fear, true convictions stay and remain. They don't run away or change.
- As Nehemiah goes about his daily duties as a cupbearer, an unexpected opportunity arises (vv.1-2)
 - The office of cupbearer was a trusted and close role to the king. Part of his duty was to guard the king's cup (and food) from poison – sometimes required to drink the wine before presenting to the king. In some instances, cupbearers were even considered (informal) advisers to the king.
- How does Nehemiah respond to the king's concerning question about Nehemiah's sadness?
 - Fear – Nehemiah understand that his life is at the hands of the king.
 - Reassurance of his loyalty -- Nehemiah understands the political climate and concerns of the king regarding – as well as the king's former orders to cease the rebuilding of the Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 4:17-24)
- But more importantly, Nehemiah takes a prayerful risk in sharing not only his heart but his desire to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
 - Nehemiah risks his life by asking the king to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and he risks all the stability, security and comfort he has a cupbearer to go himself.
- "The average man doesn't want to be free. He wants to be safe."
- Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* foreword:
 - *We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares. But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another — slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in Brave New World Revisited, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.*

- John Piper *Risk is Right*: “Risk defined as an action that exposes you to the possibility of loss or injury. If you take a risk you can lose money, you can lose face, you can lose your health or even your life. And what’s worse, if you take a risk, you may endanger other people and not just yourself...Will a wise and loving person, then, ever take a risk? Is it wise to expose yourself to loss? Is it loving to endanger others? Is losing life the same as wasting it?” We cannot avoid risks even if we want to...“The myth of safety and security.”

3. Prayerfully Plan (vv.5-8a)

- cf. James 4:13-15, Acts 15:22, Romans 15:22-29
- Nehemiah doesn’t just pray and take a risk but it’s clear he made and had a plan. During those 4 months of fasting and praying, his conviction to rebuild the walls and restore God’s people became a clearer mission – and through the furnace of prayer, a plan had been forged.
- Nehemiah’s plan clearly involves a “who” – Nehemiah himself (v.5), a “when” – not specified but Nehemiah had an answer to the king (note: according to 5:14 ends up being 12 years), and a “what/how” – requested royal letters for safe passage and raw materials for the rebuilding of the gates, walls and house (of Nehemiah) (vv.7-8).
 - Nehemiah was able to answer all the king’s questions and concerns. Nehemiah had a plan he had thought and prayed through – and clearly and compellingly presented it to the king.
- We see in the life of the Apostle Paul often strategized and made plans (cf. Romans 15:22-29) – all the while being sensitive and obedient to the leading and guidance of the Lord’s Spirit.

4. Acknowledge God's Work (v.10)

- (cf. James 4:13-15, Psalm 90:17, Philippians 2:12-13)
- Nehemiah readily recognizes the favorable response of the king to his requests are not just because of all he did (i.e. his prayers, his risk-taking, and his planning) – it was God’s hand at work.
- Nehemiah acknowledges two (2) aspects of God’s work:
 - 1. God's Sovereignty: God's work through others
 - Nehemiah simultaneously acknowledges, “the king granted me what I asked” AND “the good hand of my God was upon me.” (cf. Philippians 2:12-13) While the king is powerful, the Lord is all-powerful – and works through the king.
 - 2. God's Grace: God's goodness
 - Nehemiah acknowledges that God’s answer to his prayers was God’s grace (undeserved favor) and due to God’s goodness. The picture is not of a reluctant cruel father who begrudgingly gives his child a gift, but a Heavenly Father who while sovereign is also gracious and good.

Christ Connection

- Nehemiah who was in a position of comfort, security and power, chose to leave the palace, his place and his position for the purposes of God, to be with his people, to rebuild the walls and restore God’s people. This reminds us of Jesus, being God Himself, leaving heaven, to come to this world, becoming fully human, to be with us, and ultimately to die on the cross for your sins and mine, to take on the guilt, the shame, the burden and the eternal consequences of our sins through his death and resurrection, to satisfy the wrath of holy and just God so He could rebuild and restore us back to God as we were created and meant to be!

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Reflection Questions

- What are some things, situations or people who've you've stopped praying for but perhaps need to continue in prayer for?
- When it comes to risk, are you more risk-averse or a risk-taker? Why? What about when it comes to following God and living out your faith? Are there areas of laziness, comfort or control you need to acknowledge and confess?
- Do you tend to be a planner or not? Why? How do you balance planning/working and trusting God?
- What are some situations where even though you "played a part" yet it was still clear that it was ultimately God's hand at work? How have you seen God's hand at work in and through the lives of others here at Mercy Hill?
- If you are not a Christian, what's preventing you from taking that step of faith? If you are a Christian, consider how you came to saving faith and trust in Jesus. In what ways do you see God's hand at work in leading you to Him?
- What are some areas in your personal life (and/or family) where the Lord is perhaps calling you to take prayerful risks in faith, community and/or mission?
- How does Nehemiah's life point to Jesus in this passage?