

Nehemiah, Lesson #2

Good Questions have groups talking

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Creative element

Ask everyone to get out their Lego block. Remember: God's plan for Nehemiah was to rebuild a wall. God has a plan for your life too. Let this block remind you to pray about finding it.

This week, bring a box of freshly sharpened pencils. Ask each one to take one and put it someplace where you will see it each day—perhaps near where you brush your teeth. Let this sharpened pencil remind you of the importance of careful planning.

Nehemiah 2.1 - 18¹

ACCOUNTABILITY

- What three fellowships do we have schedule for the next three months? Who will invite every member? Who will help invite every prospect? Who will help plan the party?

OPEN

- Let's each share your name and what kind of calendar you use for personal planning—if any.

DIG

1. **As we read through this passage, look for evidence that Nehemiah has done some thinking/ planning over the last several months.**¹
2. Nehemiah had been praying for months. Why not just keep praying (and not act)?²
3. When is it time to stop praying and start doing?³
4. Do you think most err on the side of praying to long or acting too quickly without enough prayer?⁴
5. The NIV has this in the month of Nisan. When is that?⁵

¹Since "Nisan" spans parts of our March-April, four months had passed since Nehemiah received news from Jerusalem. He had been praying and planning during these four months so that he would be ready when the opportunity arose. – New American Commentary - New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

²Three statements in Scripture have a calming effect on me whenever I get nervous and want to rush ahead of the Lord: "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord" (Ex. 14:13); "Sit still...until you know how the matter will turn out" (Ruth 3:18, nkjv); "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). When you wait on the Lord in prayer, you are not wasting your time; you are investing it. God is preparing both you and your circumstances so that His purposes will be accomplished. However, when the right time arrives for us to act by faith, we dare not delay. –Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

³I am not sure it is really right to say Nehemiah stopped praying. This verse, later in the book strikes the balance, and is one of my favorite: But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. Nehemiah 4:9 (NIV)

⁴Overall, I'd say most err on the side of acting more and praying less. Still, the point is to strike a balance and do both.

⁵The easiest way to work that out is to look in the New Living: One day in April, four
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6. End of verse 2. Why was Nehemiah afraid?⁶
7. Verse 3. Why do you think Nehemiah didn't mention Jerusalem by name?⁷
8. Verses 4 - 5. In chapter one we read of a summary of a prayer that Nehemiah prayed for four months. In contrast, how long is this prayer?⁸
9. Can short prayers be as effective as long prayers?⁹
10. Why did Nehemiah ask permission of the king? Why not just quit and leave?¹⁰

⁵(...continued)

months later, as I was serving the king his wine he asked me, Nehemiah 2:1 (TLB)

⁶Eastern monarchs were sheltered from anything that might bring them unhappiness (Es. 4:1-2); but on that particular day, Nehemiah could not hide his sorrow. "By sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken" (Prov. 15:13), and Psalm 102 certainly describes Nehemiah's feelings about Jerusalem. Perhaps each morning, Nehemiah prayed, "Lord, if today is the day I speak to the king about our plans, then open the way for me."

The king noticed that his cupbearer was carrying a burden. Had Artaxerxes been in a bad mood, he might have banished Nehemiah or even ordered him killed; but instead, the king inquired why his servant was so sad. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water He turneth it whithersoever He will" (Prov. 21:1). World leaders are only God's servants, whether they know it or not. "O Lord God of our fathers, are You not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in Your hand, and no one can withstand You" (2 Chron. 20:6, NIV). – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

⁷"May the king live forever" was the common formula for addressing the king as we see in Dan 2:4. Nehemiah went on to say he was sad because of the condition of the city "where my fathers are buried." Such a description showed both Nehemiah's respect for his ancestors and also his sense of shame at the condition of his native city. Nehemiah's request no doubt touched the sentiments of the king. He carefully avoided raising the king's suspicions by mentioning Jerusalem by name and so reminding him of his earlier decree, though of course the king knew Nehemiah's background. Nehemiah showed his great ability in communication and delicate diplomacy. He first had to get the king's sympathy before going on to details. – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

⁸The king had said to Nehemiah, "You evidently want to make a request of me. What is it that you want to ask me?" So Nehemiah shot up a prayer to the God of heaven. It was a brief prayer and I think it was something like, "Oh Lord, help me say the right thing. I am in a very tight spot!" Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

⁹As he was accustomed to do, Nehemiah sent one of his quick "telegraph prayers" to the Lord (4:4; 5:9; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). But keep in mind that these "emergency prayers" were backed up by four months of fasting and praying. If Nehemiah had not been diligent to pray in private, his "telegraph prayers" might have gone unanswered. "He had only an instant for that prayer," wrote George Morrison. "Silence would have been misinterpreted. Had he closed his eyes and lingered in devotion, the king immediately would have suspected treason." – The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁰Nehemiah could not leave his post without the approval of the king, nor could he work in Jerusalem without the authority of the king. Pressure from local officials had stopped the work
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11. Look at the king's question in verse 6. Imagine Nehemiah had answered by saying, "I have no idea. I hadn't thought about it. I am sure that it will all work out." What kind of response do you think he might have received?¹¹
12. What role does careful planning have in following God?¹²
13. Has lack of planning ever cost you? Who has a story?¹³
14. How does careful planning benefit us personally?¹⁴
15. Verse 11. Why do you think Nehemiah waited three days to act?¹⁵

¹⁰(...continued)

once before (Ezra 4), and Nehemiah didn't want history to repeat itself. He asked Artaxerxes to appoint him governor of Judah and to give him the authority he needed to rebuild the city walls. He told the king when he expected to return, but we don't know what that date was. According to Nehemiah 5:14, Nehemiah spent twelve years as governor. He went back to Persia briefly to report to the king, but then returned to Jerusalem to correct the abuses that appeared during his absence (13:6-7). – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹¹Not only had Nehemiah prayed for this opportunity, but he had also planned for it and had his answer ready. During those four months of waiting, he had thought the matter through and knew exactly how he would approach the project. His reply to the king can be summarized in two requests: "Send me!" (Neh. 2:4-6) and "Give me!" (vv. 7-10) – The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹²Spontaneous activity may lead to a few short-term gains, but the secret to consistent, long-term progress is to develop a well-conceived plan and to carry it out. The plan should reflect all that has been gleaned through the early stages of the process: the ministry context, the ministry calling, the ministry resources and the ministry opportunities. — Church Marketing

¹³Would you allow a building contractor to construct your church buildings without having a plan completed and approved before starting construction?

Would you encourage your son or daughter to take a random series of courses at college, without selecting a major, or determining the courses needed to graduate, or mapping out a plan for which courses to take each semester?

If you elected to drive cross-country for your two-week vacation, what are the odds that you would wake up on your first vacation day, jump in the car and drive on whatever open roads you encountered? It is more likely that you would first take the time to identify your ultimate destination and the special stops en route. Then you would develop a travel schedule, select the highways and other roads you would take, and accumulate the resources needed to successfully complete the trip. — Church Marketing

¹⁴The experience of business leaders in our own century is no different. Whether you examine the practice of brilliant upstart companies, such as Steven Jobs's Apple Computers and Bill Gates at Microsoft, or the outstanding performance of mature companies such as Walt Disney Company in the 1980s under the leadership of Michael Eisner, the result is the same. Each of these companies got to where they are today by patiently and carefully surveying the landscape, recognizing unique opportunities, understanding their customers and competitors, and following an intelligent plan to get where they thought they could be. — Church Marketing

¹⁵After his long difficult journey, Nehemiah took time to rest; for leaders must take care of themselves if they are going to be able to serve the Lord (Mark 6:31). He also took time to get
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16. Verse 13. Why do you think he examined the situation at night?¹⁶
17. How was Nehemiah able to motivate these people who rebuild the wall that had been in ruin for so long?¹⁷
18. What keeps people from embracing new challenges?¹⁸
19. Why couldn't the people have just rebuilt the wall themselves? Why did they need Nehemiah?¹⁹

¹⁵(...continued)

“the lay of the land” without arousing the concern of the enemy. A good leader doesn't rush into his work but patiently gathers the facts firsthand and then plans his strategy (Prov. 18:13). We must be “wise as serpents” because the enemy is always watching and waiting to attack. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁶Leaders are often awake when others are asleep, and working when others are resting. Nehemiah didn't want the enemy to know what he was doing, so he investigated the ruins by night. By keeping his counsel to himself, Nehemiah prevented Tobiah's friends from getting information they could pass along to Sanballat. A wise leader knows when to plan, when to speak, and when to work. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁷Nehemiah was able to discern the proper time to present the building project, and he knew how to motivate the leaders and the people. He used four incentives: (1) He identified with the people; he spoke of “the trouble we are in.” (2) He stressed the seriousness of the situation. A leader must be realistic and honestly assess the facts. People will have confidence in such a leader. (3) Nehemiah was committed to taking definite action. (4) He used his personal testimony of God's grace to assure them of God's favor on the project (v. 18). A Christian leader must encourage trust in God by leading in faith as well as in action.

If we analyze the social processes in Nehemiah, we can see that chaps. 1–2 describe the “innovation process.” When Nehemiah was in Susa and heard of the situation in Jerusalem, his anguish over the deplorable condition of God's people and his desire for God's glory resulted in a spiritual experience that gave him a new vision of what God desired for his people in Judah. He set about to transform his vision into social reality. Part of that task was sharing his vision with the community and motivating the people to work together to change the situation. – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

¹⁸Christian leaders today face these same two obstacles as they seek to lead God's people into new conquests for the Lord. How often we hear, “We're content the way things are; don't rock the boat by trying to change things.” Or, “We tried that before and it didn't work!” – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

¹⁹It is worth noting that God sent the Jews a leader from the outside. Nehemiah came into the community with a new perspective on the problems and a new vision for the work. Too often in a local church, new members have a hard time “breaking into the system” because the veterans are afraid of new ideas that might lead to change. Since most of their leadership comes up through the ranks, parachurch ministries must also beware of the “dosed corporation” attitude. New workers from outside the organization might open the windows and let in some fresh air. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

20. What do we learn about following God from this chapter? What can we apply from this study?²⁰
21. How can we pray for one another this week?

1.1 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 fathers 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 fathers 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 king's forest, 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 upon 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.

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.

11 I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days 12 I set out during the night with a few men. 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.

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. Finally, I turned back and reentered 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.

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 upon me and what the king had said to me. Neh 2:1-18 (NIV)

²⁰In every gathered group there is always a creative tension between Scripture as the historical Word and Spirit as the present Word. How God is active right now in the group must always be weighed against the measure of Christ in Scripture. But a group must be free to look and reflect upon God's immediate action and their sense of God's immediate presence. There must be a strong and growing existential sense of God's communal presence as the group wrestles with the meaning of the biblical text. This ambivalence is one reason why groups often avoid investing substantial time in the "application" phase of inductive Bible study. They lose the connection between their current life together and the biblical record of God's faithfulness. – Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrative Approach.