

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision
(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

GRIEF to PRAYER to VISION to MISSION!
(Nehemiah 1:11--2:8)

Study #3

Introduction: The waiting game...

Confession time. Often, when I'm winding down at the end of a day, I will resort to watching YouTube sports videos. Much of the time, it's old school basketball or football highlight reels.

Last week, though, it was track and field. I watched a few 100- and 200-meter sprints by some of the all-time greats.

I watched Florence Griffith Joyner (whose 1988 time of 10.49 seconds in the 100-meter race still stands as the world record!), and I watched Carl Lewis and Michael Johnson and (of course) Usain Bolt.

As I watched, I started paying more and more attention to the explosion of the runners out of the blocks. I noticed that the second or two between "Set" and the starter's pistol were intense moments of waiting.

Every muscle was tensed as the racers waited - and then they blasted down the track like coiled springs.

A good use of that brief, two-second wait is critical for the quickest start possible. And most of us would give our eye teeth to only have to wait two seconds, for almost anything.

Waiting is hard. Some of the difficulty of waiting comes from thinking that waiting time is wasted time, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Waiting is one of God's most valuable tools for forging character, building trust, and for preparing us for a great work.

He had Israel wait forty years before allowing them to enter the Promised Land. He led Jesus into the wilderness to wait for food for forty days before launching His public ministry.

And, as the first chapter of the book of Nehemiah tells us, God allowed that man to wait five long months before it was finally time for him to begin his life's mission - and it was while he was waiting that vision was birthed.¹

Nehemiah's wait...

Bad news from his brother Hanani about conditions in Jerusalem left Nehemiah grieving.

One hundred and fifty years after being destroyed by the Babylonian army, God's people were still living in an ungated, unwallled city that invited ridicule.

Nehemiah wept and mourned. His "***weeping and mourning***" soon morphed into "***fasting and praying.***"

For months, he worshiped, reminding himself of the great and awesome God to whom he was praying.

¹ In Herman Melville's great American novel, Moby Dick, there is a scene in which a whaleboat moves across a frothing ocean in pursuit of the great whale. The sailors are laboring fiercely, every muscle taut, all attention and energy concentrated on the task at hand. In the boat, however, there is one man who does nothing. He doesn't hold an oar or perspire or shout. He is the harpooner, quiet and poised, waiting. Melville writes: "*To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not out of toil.*" The harpooner's action will come. When the appointed time comes, he will rise up and throw. But before it comes, he must wait. Do nothing. Sit idle. This quote comes from Eugene Peterson's The Contemplative Pastor, p. 24.

He confessed, admitting his own culpability in the nation's sin. He remembered and reminded God of promises of restoration if His people repented.

It was during these months of prayer and fasting that a vision for Jerusalem's restoration began to form.

He moved from grief to prayer and fasting to vision. And where there is vision, action follows. Vision fuels mission.

The final verse of chapter one's prayer (v. 11) marks a transition from a time of prayer to a time of prayer united to action. What we have here is a desperate and a very specific request.

Over the months that he prayed, there has been a steady progression in Nehemiah's perspective on Jerusalem's problems.

FIRST, he didn't know there was a problem: *"What problem?"*
 THEN, upon finding out that there was a problem, it grew into, *"Somebody needs to do something about this problem!"*
 FINALLY, at the end of these long months of weeping, mourning, fasting and praying, he ended up with, *"I will be that somebody!"*

His grief has become a vision. His vision now involves a mission, and this mission involves a plan. But his plan involves lots of moving parts and its fulfillment will require the cooperation of lots of people.

The same is true for us.

The things you are most passionate to bring to pass, the things that mean the most to you, are ultimately dependent on others' cooperation.

For instance, if you are married, you can't unilaterally decide to have an A+ marriage.

Kathy can decide, unilaterally, to be a God-honoring, loving wife - but she won't have an A+, mutually satisfying marriage if I don't decide to be a God-honoring, loving husband.

Parents do not unilaterally determine their children's outcomes, spiritually or otherwise. Yes, you want your kids to be successful and to walk with Jesus. But from a very early age, they make personal choices that contribute to the course they follow.

So, in order to see his vision become reality (Jerusalem become a great city), Nehemiah will need to have the cooperation of the Jews back home in Jerusalem, of the governors between Susa and Palestine, and even of the ruler of the Persian Empire, King Artaxerxes.²

Most of all, though, he would need God to go before him. If God didn't pave the way, his plans didn't stand a chance. So, he prayed.

[1:11] "O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man."

This is a very specific request, and it is time-sensitive. He's praying for his time with the king TODAY. He begged God for help because, on the face of things, the odds don't look great.

Nehemiah's position: Cupbearer³ to King Artaxerxes

[11b] Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

If his job title doesn't sound all that appealing, I understand. ***"Cupbearer to the king"*** is not a post to which most of us would aspire.

The cupbearer's job was to taste the king's food and to drink of the king's cup before it touched the king's lips. That way, if someone tried to poison the king - well, no more cupbearer, but, ***"Long live the King!"***

² Artaxerxes was the son of Xerxes, who died in 465 BC. Xerxes was the king who defeated the Spartan force of 300 at Thermopylae and later destroyed Athens. Artaxerxes was the 5th king of the Persian Empire. Some believe that Queen Esther was Artaxerxes' wife, but it is more likely that she was the queen of Xerxes I.

³ The job also brought financial security, social status and daily interface with royalty.

In other words, Nehemiah's life was on the line at every meal.

One of the (maybe, the only) benefits of being the king's cupbearer at every meal was the relationship of trust that developed between him and the king.

In the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign, in the springtime of the year (Nisan corresponds to mid-March to mid-April), the internal pressure that had built up within Nehemiah's soul over the months of waiting became unbearable - and obvious to the king Nehemiah served.

Drama in the Court of the King (2:1-8)

Nehemiah - Sadly Serving (vv. 1-2)

Nehemiah's faultless service (v. 1)

To this point, Nehemiah had been a model servant in the king's court. You didn't serve long in the court of Artaxerxes if you didn't serve with distinction.

Things were different, though, on this day.

[2:1] And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

If those last words about Nehemiah not having been sad in the king's presence seem odd, here's the deal.

It was a royal obligation to be joyful in the presence of the king. The thought was that simply being with the king should gladden anyone's heart. To be sad in the king's presence was an insult to the throne and was punishable by death.

Before this day, Nehemiah had been able to mask his grief over the conditions in Jerusalem.

Ever since Hanani had delivered the awful news about the state of Jerusalem, Nehemiah had done a good job of hiding his grief and pasting on a smiley face while he was with the king. Not today.

The king noticed and asked a question that probably sent shivers up Nehemiah's spine.

The king's scary observation (v. 2)

[2:2a] So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart."

Artaxerxes wasn't being polite and he wasn't being sensitive. He was accusing Nehemiah of committing a capital offense.⁴

That's why we read, ***[2:2b]...Then I was very much afraid.***

So, what will happen next? How will Nehemiah play this one?⁵

Well, he could have opted to mask his true feelings one more time, tell the king a good "Knock-Knock" joke and carry on as if everything was fine. Instead, he told the king he was sad and why.

Nehemiah - Compassion from the King (vv. 3-4)

Nehemiah pleads his case (v. 3)

[2:3] I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

Nehemiah is exposed.

To be sad in the presence of the king was insulting. To not apologize for being sad was more insulting still. To justify the sadness was a real slap in the face.

⁴From historical records, Artaxerxes was usually described as fickle and arrogant.

⁵ There is a similar scene in the book of Esther. Queen Esther chose to visit the king, uninvited. Had the king not extended the royal scepter to her, she would have been put to death. But, convinced that she needed to speak up for her people, she took the risk and marched into the King's court.

King Artaxerxes had every right to be furious. But, he isn't angry at all. In fact, of all the responses the king might have given, the one he actually gave is better than Nehemiah could have dreamed.

Nehemiah receives mercy, not judgment (v. 4a)

[2:4a] Then the king said to me, "What would you request?"

Not, "Off with his head!" but, "What can I do to help, Nehemiah?"⁶

Certainly, King Artaxerxes appreciated Nehemiah's service. You've got to have some appreciation for a guy who risks his life for you at every meal. But, what we don't want to miss in hearing the king's response is that God is in this thing!⁷

The King's response is exactly what Nehemiah had just prayed.

So, given the king's question, he's going to make the requests necessary for the fulfillment of his vision, a vision that he has prayed over and rehearsed for months.

But, before this vision sees the light of day - before he casts his vision before the one man who, humanly speaking, could make or break his plan - he does the one thing that, by now, we expect him to do. He prayed.

A priceless moment frozen in time:

[4b] So I prayed to the God of heaven.

⁶ This is all the more amazing in light of what Artaxerxes did only a few years earlier, when Ezra the scribe made the identical request. He, too, wanted to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. The king nixed Ezra's plan. The background is that King Cyrus had authorized work on Jerusalem. However, during Ezra's time, Israel's enemies had sent a letter to Artaxerxes, who was, by then, the Persian king, telling him of Jerusalem's rebellious past. Because of the enemies' complaint, Artaxerxes ordered the work of wall rebuilding stopped. (cf. Ezra 4:6-23)

⁷ **[Proverbs 21:1] The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.**

His prayer is a declaration of dependence on God, born of months of prayer.

Now, it is almost certain that he didn't drop to his knees. He probably didn't call for a prayer meeting or leave the room to spend a protracted time with the Lord.

But, since this moment was prepared by God after months of prayer, it is fitting that Nehemiah should stop and pray, now.⁸

This moment - the moment of prayer - is the launch of a vision.

It is at this exact moment that I want to take a break from Nehemiah's story and consider your story, mine, and ours.

We have just watched Nehemiah get to the point of finally launching out to do what was on his heart to do for God.

And it is this - you doing what is on your heart to do for God - that moved me to want us to move through the story of Nehemiah together.

You, on mission

Looking at the wreckage...

Two Sundays ago, I urged that we each take a look at the wreckage all around us, just as Nehemiah was forced to look at the wreckage that was Jerusalem, when his brother, Hanani, gave the report.

I mentioned some of the wreckage in our world on that Sunday: spiritual, physical, psychological. It's all around us and you see it as clearly as I do.

Last Sunday, I urged us all to turn to God in prayer (and fasting) as we faced the wreckage.

⁸ As we will see so many times in this book, Nehemiah prayed at the drop of a hat for guidance, wisdom, and for God's active intervention. Here is proof positive that prayers don't need to be long to be effective.

There was a reason I was asking you to look at the wreckage.

It is because you are uniquely gifted by God to enter the wreckage and to restore glorious wrecks for God.

You, a priest to God, gifted to meet needs in Jesus' Name...

One of the outcomes of the Protestant Reformation was the doctrine of the Priesthood of the Believer.

The idea that every Christian is a priest to God comes straight from Scripture (1 Peter 2:9) and it ran very counter to the prevailing model in the European church of the 1500's where the ordained clergy ran all the religious shows.

The teaching of the Priesthood of the Believer gave dignity and it lavished value on every Christian. If affirmed that every Christian:

- could study and interpret the Bible for him or herself.
- could pray directly to God.
- had a special call to ministry. ("a" ministry, not to "the" ministry)

It's this third point that I want to highlight now. That third point is why we're looking at Nehemiah.

I know what your calling is in Jesus - and you know what my calling is in Jesus. We each have the same calling. We are to "**walk worthy**" of Jesus (Ephesians 4:1 and elsewhere). We are to follow Jesus. We are to take next steps with Jesus into faith and obedience.

But, the Priesthood of the Believer says that you have a ministry calling - and I do NOT know what your unique ministry in Jesus will or should be.

That's because you are unique, and God has gifted you for a uniquely "you" ministry.

We have known for a long time that we all have unique fingerprints.

More recently we have discovered that we also have unique voices, heartbeats, and even body odors (but let's not go there...) A single strand of hair can provide decisive DNA evidence in a court of law.

You are the first and last version of you that will ever be. And, during the time that you are here on earth God has a unique work designed just for you.

That's my understanding of Paul's words, [**Ephesians 2:10**] ***For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.***

That's what's in view when he called out Archippus, a member of the church in Colossae, and told him, [**Colossians 4:17**] ***"Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."***

There are arenas of need in the church, in San Antonio, and in the broader world that are fit for your unique passions. When you serve in Jesus' Name in these arenas you will thrive and the work of God will go forward.

So, you look at the wreckage. You see brokenness. Your heart cries out for God to move somebody, somewhere to do something. And as you cry out to God, it dawns on you that you could do something. You could be that somebody.

In fact, you want to. The motivation God gives is "want-to" not "ought to". So, you move. You do it. You volunteer. You start something. That's Nehemiah's story.

That was Chuck Colson's story. As Special Counsel to President Nixon, Colson never considered serving prisoners until he went to prison. Behind bars, he saw the need, was possessed by an irresistible "want-to" - and began Prison Fellowship.

In the coming weeks, we're going to see the work of God move forward in Jerusalem through the efforts of Nehemiah and the Jews who lived there. They all pulled together and succeeded, each one doing his or her part to restore the city.

Because you and I are each a priest to God, we each have a vital role to play in moving God's work forward here at church, here in San Antonio, and beyond.

The story told in the book of Nehemiah is compelling because no one is excluded. Everybody gets involved in the work.

And, in that, the story perfectly pictures our call to be "on mission" for Jesus. (or, as Nehemiah would say, "*On the wall!*")

Northwest: A launch pad, not a destination...

There are endless possibilities for service because there is an endless list of needs, out there and here.

- The physically and mentally disabled are under-served at church.
- San Antonio High School drop-out rates are troubling.
- Food insecurity is a real thing.
- People in many, many countries have no piece of the Bible in their heart language.
- Children need loving shepherds in Sunday School classes here.
- Fostering and adopting are huge needs in our community.
- Addictions of all kinds are big problems.
- Christians in large swaths of our world need assistance when they suffer persecution for Christ.
- The immigrant population in San Antonio needs hospitality - and Jesus.
- Teens in San Antonio are growing up divorced from an experience with a faith-in-Jesus community.
- Teens at our church need adults to serve, teach, mentor.
- The invisible homeless population becomes visible when Jesus-followers lavish value on them.

And we could keep listing areas of need all day long.

Nobody can do everything - or should. No church can - or should - try to do everything.

But each of us can stop and look at the wreckage. We can all allow our hearts to be pierced by the wrecks around us and weep and pray and fast and wait.

Over time, we will each find our hearts moved by a need that we can uniquely serve. Our passions will be stirred by some piece of the wreck. The Holy Spirit will touch us with regard to this person.

You are Nehemiah. God moved in his heart to give himself to restore Jerusalem. God has a work for you to do and He will move in your heart, too.

It may be that as of today, you don't know what to do, how to respond. Not a problem.

Still waiting...

You're still waiting. After all, you only heard the call to look at the wreckage a couple of weeks ago. And you've only been urged to pray and fast for a week. Give it time. It took Nehemiah five months.

Waiting may still be the word of the hour for you.

If you're waiting, you're in good company. The best of God's servants spent time waiting. The time spent waiting may feel like a waste of time. It's not.

In fact, a couple of very important things are happening while we wait.

The work that happens while we wait...

***The vision is maturing in us as we wait.

Time waiting allows us to distinguish between *good ideas* (there are millions of good ideas) and a *vision* worth throwing ourselves into - lock, stock, and barrel.

Don't try to rush it. You cannot rush the development of a child in the womb and you cannot rush the development of a vision.

***We mature in preparation for the vision as we wait.

Joseph envisioned a glorious future while he languished in an Egyptian dungeon. It took Moses forty years to grow into the vision that God had for him. David hid from King Saul in caves before he sat on the throne of Israel. It was many months for Nehemiah. It was fourteen years for the Apostle Paul from conversion to First Missionary Journey.

God goes to work IN YOU to prepare you for the **“good works”** He has prepared FOR YOU. (Ephesians 2:10)

So, wait. And don’t despise the waiting. God is at work in the waiting, developing vision.

Aristotle is credited with saying, *“The soul never thinks without a picture.”* And the soul’s picture is what we call “vision.”

Vision develops when we’re wrecked by the wreckage. It’s an image of what could be, what must be, because what is, is broke.

Vision is powerful. It’s what prompts a man or a woman or a teen to put their neck on the line. And that’s exactly what Nehemiah did after his prayer of *“Help!”* when King Artaxerxes asked, *“What do you want?”*

Nehemiah, the cupbearer, took charge of a conversation with the king of the Persian Empire.

Nehemiah leverages opportunity (vv. 5-8a)

Nehemiah: Send me to my homeland to rebuild the city
(2:5)

[2:5] I said to the king, “If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.”

Of course, Artaxerxes knew Nehemiah was talking about Jerusalem. But he didn’t want to have to hear the name.

So, it was politically savvy to ask permission to go to his ancestral home to rebuild the city and to NOT use the name of the city. Jerusalem had quite a reputation of being rebellious against foreign rule.

Since Nehemiah was a trusted and valuable servant, the king was open to his request to be sent to Palestine.

But, since Nehemiah was so valuable, Artaxerxes didn’t want to lose him forever. So, he has questions. Nehemiah had answers.

King: Give me some details (2:6)

[6] Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, “How long will your journey be, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.

Then, with permission granted, Nehemiah asked more favors. He wanted letters from the king guaranteeing safe passage (like a passport or a visa today).

Nehemiah: Here’s what I need... (2:7-8a)

[7] And I said to the king, “If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River (i.e. - the Euphrates), that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah...”

To travel from Susa to Jerusalem, Nehemiah would have to pass through eight hundred miles of hostile territory.

He would have to travel through Media and Syria, lands where Jews weren’t welcome.

If he had tried to pass through the territories without letters from the king, they no doubt would have turned him back. But, with the letters in hand, it will be a different story. The king’s letters give him diplomatic immunity.

And Nehemiah also asked for a letter from the king allowing him to take a supply of lumber for the building projects he has in mind for Jerusalem.

[8a] “and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest,⁹ that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go.”

Nehemiah thought of everything while he was with the king. Which doesn’t mean that he was just really good at thinking on his feet.

These requests didn’t come to him in a flash. He had rehearsed this conversation for months, had envisioned it. He knew exactly what he would ask from the king if he ever got the opportunity.

Nehemiah was **prepared**. The Lord had prepared him.

Conclusion:

The obvious hand of God...

At so many points along the way, even to this point, the wall-rebuilding venture could have been squashed.

- The king might have killed Nehemiah on the spot for sadness.
- The king might have denied Nehemiah the opportunity to go to Jerusalem.
- The king might have denied him letters of safe passage, or of the supplies or the military support he needed.

But, Nehemiah tells us why these “squash points” were successfully negotiated: ***[2:8b]...And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.***

Nehemiah knew that the ultimate decisions about his plans would not be made by the governors of the provinces or even by the mighty king of the Persian Empire, but by the great and awesome God he served.

The fruit of prayerful waiting, then and now...

This is an exciting time in the life of our church. Specifically...
 Encuentro’s maturing and development
 ESL’s blessing from God
 Use of the proceeds of the land sale.
 Children are blessed each and every Sunday morning
 Faith Growth Gatherings this summer
 Youth trip to Challenge
 Care Groups
 Trip to Chile this coming Fall.
 You - praying and waiting as God develops vision for your next steps with Jesus.

⁹ This lumber might well have come from the same forests which supplied the wood used for the construction of Solomon’s Temple.