

## Nehemiah had a plan

- Nehemiah 2:1-8
- Four months of Nehemiah's prayers have passed since chapter 1. Now we are going to see how God begins to answer his prayers. We will see also how Nehemiah has been planning, not just asking God for favor but asking God for wisdom and taking the initiative to prepare a plan for going to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. It is now the month of Nisan, which would be March/April, winter has passed, and it is time for him to take the next step. Let's look at this text today under these three headings: the Day, the Request, and the Plan.
- **The Day**
- What do we know about Nehemiah on this day? He is sad. Or at least, his face is showing sadness. What we don't know is whether this was calculated on Nehemiah's part, that this day sadness was on the menu, or whether it was a natural response to four months of grieving for his people and their condition and crying out to the Lord. One thing we know for sure: Nehemiah had never shown sadness to the king before. He tells us that in verse 1. Why would Nehemiah have not been sad ever before at work? For one thing, because the Persian kings wanted their subjects to be happy, because that reflected on their leadership abilities as a king. Happy subjects, good king! Those who are in management know that is true as well. Leadership affects company morale, so managers or bosses who are surrounded by more than the typical number of grumblers and complainers may need to look in the mirror to find the answer to the problem. Isn't it the same in a marriage? If a wife is unhappy all the time, it may be that she enjoys being unhappy and her biggest thrill every day is finding something new to complain about. But most wives are not like that, and neither are most husbands. So the problem may be found in the attentiveness of the spouse, or lack thereof. The second reason why the king had never seen sadness before in his cupbearer was because it would not be good for Nehemiah's health: punishment for sadness could be swift and permanent. That's why Nehemiah's reaction to the king's question was to be "very much afraid."

The king picked up on Nehemiah's sadness immediately, and knew that his cupbearer was not sick, so it must be "sadness of the heart." He was a Perceptive Persian, but you didn't stay alive long in those days unless you could read people well. The king was making sure that Nehemiah wasn't sad because of a plot to kill the king.
- Nehemiah immediately reassures him with, "Let the king live forever!" Or translated, "You're not going to die from THIS wine, O king." And then he answers the question in a very interesting, and I think calculating way. Look at **verse 3** and the question he asks. I think this is clearly an appeal to emotions. What man would not react emotionally to hearing that a friend's father's grave has been desecrated? Nehemiah was making a powerful appeal to the desire we all have to honor our loved ones who have gone before, and the hopes that we have that when we die, we too will be honored. And the gates, burned? The gates were the place in an ancient city where business was transacted, decisions were made, counsel was given, and community happened. To have the gates destroyed and burned with fire was perhaps the greatest shame to a city and a people. Notice that Nehemiah is touching the heart of the king in a personal way, not in a political way. He is appealing to his emotions in an honest way, not manipulating his emotions. **Story of college freshman**

Manipulation is always shrouded in deception of some kind.
- **The Request**
- The Perceptive Persian again recognizes that Nehemiah is not just lamenting the fate of his people, but he is coming with more than that. "What are you requesting?" he asks.
- Nehemiah sends up a flare prayer, or some call it an arrow prayer, as he says, "So I prayed to the God of heaven." Two things about that. First, we would miss the picture entirely if we don't connect this arrow prayer to the last months of intense prayer that followed several days of weeping and mourning and fasting. Prayer is not to be an event, but a lifestyle. Second, though it is

an arrow prayer, the arrow is aimed at a good target. The God of heaven. In fact, it was directed at the only target who could answer! You see these sad pictures of Hindus with bloody knees punishing themselves by walking for miles on their knees to get to the temple, thinking that their 'gods' will hear them for their sacrifice. But there's no one home at the end of those prayers. You think of the 450 prophets of Baal who were challenged by Elijah to a "prayer-off," and may the best God win. The Baal enthusiasts prayed, and cried out and eventually cut themselves until the blood gushed out. But 1 Kings 18:29 says it all: "No one answered; no one paid attention."

Nehemiah prayed to the God of heaven, who was and is there to hear the prayers of His people.

- After Nehemiah prayed in his heart to God, he began to speak to the king. "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah..." (**Verse 5**) The humility with which Nehemiah asks is understandable: he is asking the king to overturn his own directive. You can read about it in Ezra 4, but a letter had been sent to Artaxerxes 13 years earlier asking that work on rebuilding the wall be stopped. The letter said that if the wall were rebuilt, the Jews (who are "rebellious and wicked") would not pay taxes any more, and that would hurt the bottom line, and the king would have no possession beyond the river. Artaxerxes had agreed with them, and sent a letter that the work on the wall was to cease and desist. That may have been why Nehemiah had reacted the way he did when he heard from his brother that the walls were still broken down and the people were still living in the rubble and in shame. But now the request is coming from his trusted cupbearer, and again Nehemiah uses emotional appeal, that he wants to rebuild the city of his fathers' graves. He was direct and he was honest. That's the best kind of request.
- **The Plan**
- If you read verses 6-8, it is clear that over the past four months of praying, Nehemiah had worked out a single fixed goal, and a plan to make it happen. Remember what we said two weeks ago: effective leaders do first things first and one thing at a time. His single fixed goal was to rebuild the wall. I read a story recently about Yogi Berra, the famous catcher for the New York Yankees in the 1940's and 50's, and Hank Aaron, who at that time was the famous power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves. The two teams were playing each other in the World Series, and as was his habit, Yogi kept up his banter with the batters when they came up, in an attempt to distract them. Hank Aaron came up to bat and Yogi said, "Hey you're holding the bat wrong. You're supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark." Hank Aaron didn't say anything; he just hit the first pitch into the left field bleachers. After rounding the bases for the home run and stepping on the plate, Aaron looked at Yogi Berra and said, "I didn't come up here to read." He knew his goal, and he didn't let Yogi Berra distract him. Nehemiah also had a single, fixed, attainable goal and he had worked out a plan to make it happen.
- By the way, before we look at the plan, notice the king's response (**verse 6**), with the queen beside him: "How long will you be gone and when will you return?" What does that tell you about Nehemiah's credibility with the king? The king could have said, "Sure, and take your time coming back!" No, this man was excellent in his work, as we all are called by God to be, and had made himself indispensable to his employer.
- Nehemiah already had a plan. Nehemiah knew this would be a three-month journey through some very dangerous territory. There is no way he will be allowed to pass through certain areas without letters from the king. He was asking for a passport, if you will, that had the king's signature and stamp of approval to do what he was doing. When he got to the governors and they stopped him and said, "You will not be allowed to pass through our province unless you have papers from the king." And Nehemiah would be able to reach into his shoulder bag and say, "You mean these papers?" He also knew that it would accomplish nothing for the team to get all the way to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and not have the necessary materials to do just that. So he asked for papers to give to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest. Lumber was a precious commodity and these forests were the repositories of some of the best trees in the kingdom, and they were closely

guarded. Asaph or his men would have stopped this entourage before they stepped foot into the forest and demanded to see their papers. "You mean these papers, the ones signed by King Artaxerxes? By the way, Asaph, Art told me to say hi to you and your wife."

- Careful planning and faithful prayer won the day! What if he had gotten the king's permission to go and had not thought about how he would get past the Euphrates and into the area beyond? What if he had remembered that but had not considered the lumber that was necessary for the rebuilding of the walls and the gates? Too often we Christians try to spiritualize everything to the point where we say things like, "I believe God told me to do so-n-so." And someone says, "What do you need to do to make that happen?" And our response is something like, "Oh, I don't know. I guess God will make a way where there's no way." It's true that God does do that sometimes, but God most often works through means of grace that He gives us. Like prayer. Planning. And good old fashioned, hard work. Let's remember that dependence on God does not eliminate our need for all of these means of grace.
- Jesus told a parable about this, didn't he? **Luke 14:28-33** He was teaching us to be willing to count the cost in anything we do that matters, especially in our commitment to follow Him.
- The king granted Nehemiah's requests, and he will do even more, because as Nehemiah said, "the good hand of my God was upon me." God's hand was on him as he prayed. And as he planned. And as he made his request. And as we will see, as he accomplished the mission which God created him to do. That was true for Nehemiah. It's true for you and me as well.