

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(August 24, 2008)

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Sermon manuscript

### **SERMON SERIES: Forward - Together!**

(studies in Nehemiah)

**GRIEF** leads to **VISION** leads to **PLAN!**

(Nehemiah 1:5--2:8)

Study #3

#### **Introduction: Waiting...**

In Herman Melville's great American novel, Moby Dick, there is a turbulent scene in which a whaleboat scuds across a frothing ocean in pursuit of the great white whale, Moby Dick. 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, he doesn't perspire; he doesn't shout... This man is the harpooner, quiet and poised, waiting.

And then Melville has this sentence: "*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.*"<sup>1</sup>

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.

Waiting is hard. What, exactly, are you doing while you are waiting? Nothing! You may be tempted to think that waiting time is wasted time. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The seconds between "Get Set" and the starter's signal for the sprinters to leave the blocks are critical moments when the racers tense every muscle to prepare for blastoff.

The gardener plants seed - and then follows that up with almost no activity. He waits. He's done his work; it is time for God to do His.

The waiting an engaged couple endures prior to a wedding is invaluable time that matures a relationship destined to last a lifetime.

To those who are waiting, waiting can seem to be a most inefficient waste of time. Waiting may seem useless. But waiting is something God uses powerfully when He wants to prepare His people for a great work.

He forced Israel to wait forty years before He allowed them to enter the Promised Land. He led Jesus into the wilderness to wait through forty days of fasting before He began His public ministry.

And He allowed Nehemiah to experience a five month period of waiting before it was time to act. And it was while he was waiting that a vision was born.

Vision is birthed in the heart of a person who sees *status quo* as unacceptable. And for Nehemiah, the *status quo* of Jerusalem was completely intolerable!

Bad news from his brother Hanani about conditions in Jerusalem left Nehemiah grieving. He wept and mourned for days over the fact that there were no gates or walls protecting God's city. And God's people had become a reproach among the surrounding nations. Nehemiah was undone!

But soon, his "*weeping and mourning*" morphed into "*fasting and praying.*"

And it was during the five months of his waiting and praying that a vision for Jerusalem's restoration began to form.

The vision will soon become action. But we've got to see where the vision came from. It came as a result of grief + prayer + fasting + TIME.

<sup>1</sup> This quote comes from Eugene Peterson's The Contemplative Pastor, p. 24. William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989.

God used the period of Nehemiah's waiting to forge a vision. And the prayer that we find in the first chapter of our book is not only a summary of Nehemiah's prayer over the course of months, it is the exact prayer he prayed on the last day of the season of waiting.

We catch up to Nehemiah today and learn what the prayer of a believer looks like who has waited and whose vision has matured through the crucible of time.

### The Development of a Soul through Prayer (1:5-10)

#### Nehemiah Knows "Who Art in Heaven"! (v. 5)

*[5] I said, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments..."*

Notice that the first focus of the prayer is the greatness of God. Nehemiah reminded himself that the God he serves is great and awesome.

- Jerusalem might be in ruins, but God is great and awesome.
- Opposition may come (and it certainly will!), but God is great and awesome.
- For us, today, war in Iraq and Afghanistan may continue unabated and that Georgia vs. Russia thing sure is troublesome - but God is great and awesome.

And we can become even more personal.

- My health may be deteriorating, but God is great and awesome.
- People I love may have rejected me, but God is great and awesome.
- Our worlds might be coming apart at the seams, but God is great and awesome!

When Nehemiah begins to pray, he begins NOT with his neediness, but with a recognition of God's awesomeness.

You and I can take a page from Nehemiah's playbook here. Mature prayer begins with God, not us. It is God-centered, not need-centered, not me centered.

In order to pray right, we need to start with a recognition of the greatness of the God to whom we are praying.

But prayer that begins with worship inevitably moves to something else. It will for us and it did for Nehemiah.

From the peak of a recognition of the worthiness of God, he is brought to the point of admitting his own unworthiness. The next item of business in dealing with God involves the confession of sin.

#### "If We Confess Our Sins" (vv. 6-7)

*Corporate Culpability (v. 6a)*

*[6] "let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins<sup>2</sup> of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You..."*

As he prayed about the bad condition of Jerusalem, he confessed moral failure.

If you've watched much of the Olympics over the past couple of weeks, you've seen a commercial or two. One of my favorites is the AT&T spot that highlights "*We won!*"

The idea is that Michael Phelps wins, the Americans won beach volleyball, gold in gymnastics - and more! These folks are Americans. We're Americans. And when **THEY** win, **WE** win!

Throughout the Bible there is this great sense of, "*We're in this together*" for the people of God. The idea is corporate solidarity.

The idea of corporate solidarity requires that we rejoice when someone has a victory and we mourn when one suffers a tragedy. It also requires that the people of God confess a corporate guilt when one commits sin.

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<sup>2</sup> Sin here is the Hebrew *chata*. This word signifies missing the mark. Judges 20:16 - anything less than a bull's eye.

When Nehemiah confessed the sins of Israel, what do you suppose he had in mind?

I suspect he was thinking of idolatries from the days of Moses, moral atrocities from the days of Jacob, rebellions in the wilderness, and murders of prophets.

He confesses these things because he knows that it was these things that led to the discipline of God in the first place (the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians). But his confession continues and becomes more personal.

We honestly don't know how well formed Nehemiah's thoughts were, early on, about his being a part of the **solution** to Israel's dilemma. We do discover here that he has identified himself as a part of the **problem**.

He thinks of sins committed by his family.

*Personal culpability (vv. 6b-7)*

**[6] "...I and my father's house have sinned. [7] "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.**

Going back generations, he thinks of things that his parents and grandparents and great-grandparents have done. Specifically, I think he is confessing things that his more recent ancestors (all of whom had been in captivity) might have done to help Jerusalem - and didn't.

What could they have done to see to it that Jerusalem was no longer a reproach? How could they have helped God's people in Palestine? Could they have sent money? Could they have visited? Could they have prevailed upon the Babylonian and Persian kings to help the Jews?

They didn't do all that they could have done - and Nehemiah confesses that as sin.

Then, being almost embarrassingly transparent, he turns the spotlight on himself. He confesses his own sin.

I don't have the sense that Nehemiah was a notorious rebel against God, that he went out of his way to break every one of the Ten Commandments.

No, I suspect he's asking himself, "*Over the course of my life, have I done everything I might have done to further the purposes of God? While serving in King Artaxerxes' court, have I used every opportunity to help my people back in Jerusalem?*"

It takes guts to ask those kinds of questions. It's tempting to hide behind a dismissive, "*Well, nobody's perfect.*" or, "*What could I have done - a slave in Artaxerxes' court?*"

But after five months of waiting and fasting and praying he is able to be brutally honest with himself.

He asks the question and has to accept the answer: "*No, I haven't done all that I could.*"

He's no longer wagging his finger at all those bad people in Israel's history who were responsible for the predicament in which Jerusalem found itself.

No, now he owns up to the idea that if Scripture is true and if God is real then no sacrifice is too great. And, to this point, he hasn't made every sacrifice he might have made to further the purposes of God in his day.

Now he includes himself in the big club of people who have failed to work for God's glory and Kingdom. He can't claim innocence in Jerusalem's sorry condition and he knows it.

And from this point forward, Nehemiah's prayer takes on a whole different tone. Having confessed, he turns a corner and asks God to DO something.

**Standing on the Promises of God (vv. 8-10)**

**[8] "Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples;**

***[9] but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.’ [10] “They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.***

#### *A man of the Book*

We discover something about Nehemiah by reading verses 8-10. We learn that he was a man of the Book.

It was a common practice among devout Jews of the captivity to memorize whole sections of Scripture. One of the books these devout Jews would often commit to memory was the book of Deuteronomy. Perhaps Nehemiah was one of those Jews who had committed the book of Deuteronomy to memory.

I wonder about that because verses 8-10 recall things that Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 30 (and in Leviticus 26).

Even though he had spent his entire life in Persia, Nehemiah was one of those Jews who had given himself to learn God’s Word.

And his knowledge of God’s Word informed him when it came time to pray.<sup>3</sup>

What we read in his prayer (vv. 8-10) remind us of what God had said would happen if the people rebelled AND what would happen if they repented.

#### *Convinced of God’s goodness*

And the fact that he prayed what he knew from Scripture also tells us volumes about what he believed about God. He knew God to be a God of His Word, Someone who could be counted on to do what He said He would do.

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, he quotes Scripture all the way through the book, as he reminded God of His Word at various critical points.

Nehemiah believed that God was approachable, that His heart was for His people, that He was good.

A verse from the New Testament that is becomingly increasingly important to me affirms this truth. Think about what we learn about the nature of God from Hebrews 11:6.

***[Hebrews 11:6] And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a REWARDER OF THOSE WHO SEEK HIM.***

Nehemiah became convinced, not only of God’s greatness (v. 5), but of his own sinfulness (vv. 6-7); not only of the truth of God’s Word, but also of the truth of God’s goodness (vv. 8-10).

And, having affirmed and embraced these truths, he wraps up his prayer. There is no smooth transition. Nehemiah concludes with a very bold **ASK**.

#### **The Development of a Plan through Prayer (1:11--2:8)**

**“Father, Please!” (v. 11)**

***[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.”***

That final verse of chapter one records the final stage in a five month long season of prayer. It is a very specific request that God would grant him compassion before King Artaxerxes and give him success in the fulfillment of a growing personal vision.

See, over the months of his praying, there has been this steady development of his 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 a desperate, *“Somebody needs to do something about this problem!”*  
 Then, it became *“WHY doesn’t somebody do something about this problem?!”*

FINALLY, after months of weeping, mourning, fasting and praying, Nehemiah came to, *“I will be that somebody!”*

His grief has become a vision. And his vision now involves a plan. But his plan is dependent on lots of things - not the least of which is the cooperation of the king in whose court he serves!

If you’ll stop and think for a moment about the things you are most passionate about, you’ll see that these things are ultimately dependent on others’ cooperation.

No one unilaterally decides to have an A+ marriage. Kathy can decide, unilaterally, to be a God-honoring, loving wife - but her enjoyment of a mutually satisfying marriage is dependent on me determining to be a God-honoring, loving husband.

You may work as hard as you can at your job, but others (fellow employees, supervisors, subordinates) play a role in determining the success of your career.

Parents do not unilaterally determine their children’s godliness. Of course you want your kids to walk with Jesus. But from a very early age, they make personal choices which contribute to the course they follow.

As in all of these cases, so it was with Nehemiah’s vision. In order to see his vision come to pass (the walls rebuilt around Jerusalem), he would have to have help from the citizens of Jerusalem, from the governors of other provinces, and even from King Artaxerxes himself!

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. That’s why he prayed, because, on the face of it, the chances for his vision becoming reality looked real iffy...

## **Nehemiah’s position: Cupbearer<sup>4</sup> to King Artaxerxes**

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

If his job title doesn’t sound, I understand. None of us would likely aspire to the post of *“cupbearer to the King.”*

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!”*

Nehemiah’s job was risky, to say the least. But, because the life of the king depended on the cupbearer (and because the cupbearer had daily access to the throne) a relationship of deep trust often developed between a king and his cupbearer.

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

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

*Nehemiah - sadly serving as cupbearer (vv. 1-2)*

#### **Nehemiah’s faultless service (v. 1)**

*[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 words about Nehemiah not having been sad in the King’s presence seem kind of strange to you, here’s the deal.

It was a legal requirement that all who entered the court of the king should be joyful. The thought was that simply being in his presence should be enough to gladden anyone’s heart. To be sad in the King’s presence was an insult to the throne and was punishable by death!

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<sup>4</sup> The job also brought financial security, social status and daily interface with royalty.

Up until this point, Nehemiah had been able to mask his grief over the conditions in Jerusalem. For some reason, this day is different.

Ever since Chisleb, when Hanani delivered the awful news about conditions back home, Nehemiah had done a good job of hiding his grief and pasting on a smiley face while he was with the king. Not today. And the king noticed. No doubt the king's words sent shivers up Nehemiah's spine.

The King's observed Nehemiah's sadness - Oh no! (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."***

The King is a keen observer, but he wasn't being polite and he wasn't being sensitive. He was accusing Nehemiah of committing a trespass that made him liable for capitol punishment!<sup>5</sup>

Nehemiah records his feelings - ***[2:2b]...Then I was very much afraid.***

What happens next is high drama.<sup>6</sup> Nehemiah could have safely opted to mask his true feelings one more time, laugh, assure the King that everything was fine, and tell him a good "Knock-Knock" joke.

But, instead, while legitimately fearing for his life, he took the risk of actually telling the king that, yes, he was sad - and here's why!

*Nehemiah - pleading his case to the king (vv. 3-4)*

Nehemiah's words to the king (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. He has admitted being sad in the presence of the king.

What will King Artaxerxes do? To be sad in his presence was insulting. To not apologize for being sad was more insulting still. To justify his sadness was a real slap in the face!

***HE KING DID NOT KILL NEHEMIAH! (v. 4a)***

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

Huh? That response is amazing! We expect to hear, "*Off with his head!*" Instead, we get, "*Tell me what I can do to help, Nehemiah?*"<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, King Artaxerxes liked and respected Nehemiah. But, what we don't want to miss in hearing the king's response is that God is in this thing!<sup>8</sup>

Excitement is building. Nehemiah couldn't have scripted the king's response any better. This is the best he could have hoped for, exactly what he had prayed for.

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<sup>5</sup>From historical records, we discover that King Artaxerxes was usually described by the adjectives fickle, arrogant, unreliable, and spendthrift!

<sup>6</sup>There is a similar scene in the book of Esther. There came a point at which Queen Esther chose to visit the King (Ahasuerus), **uninvited**. If, at that time, the King had not extended the royal scepter to her, she would have been put to death. But, because of her conviction that she needed to speak up for her people, she took the risk, faced down her fears, and marched into the King's court. The same kind of risk is in place here.

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<sup>7</sup>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. On the strength of the enemies' complaint, Artaxerxes ordered the work of wall rebuilding stopped. (cf. Ezra 4:6-23)

<sup>8</sup>***[Proverbs 21:1] The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.***

So, he's about to articulate his vision, a vision that has been prayed over and rehearsed inaudibly for months. Before this vision sees the light of day for the first time - before he casts this vision before the one man on planet earth who stood between him and his vision's fulfillment! - he prayed.

***[4b] Then I prayed to the God of heaven!<sup>9</sup>***

Now, it is almost certain that he didn't drop to his knees or call a prayer meeting. He probably didn't leave the room to spend a protracted time with the Lord. He just shot up a brief bullet prayer - and proceeded to press his advantage.

Listen to what follows, because the cupbearer took charge of the conversation and made bold (albeit diplomatic<sup>10</sup>) requests of the king of the Persian Empire.

He immediately asked permission to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city.

*Nehemiah - leveraging opportunity (vv. 5-8a)*

***[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."***

Amazingly, the king was open to his request. But Nehemiah was a trusted and valuable servant. Artaxerxes didn't want to lose him forever. So he asked Nehemiah how much time this little project is going to take. Nehemiah gave him a specific time.

***[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.***

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> While what he did say was important, what he didn't say may have been equally important. He didn't mention the city by name, because Jerusalem had a reputation as a rebellious city. Nehemiah didn't see any reason to bring up that bone of contention.

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

***[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 800 miles of hostile territory. He would have to travel through Media and Syria, the land of the Horonites and of the Ammonites - none of whom were friendly to Jews!

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 was going to be a completely different story. The king's letters would give him diplomatic immunity.

And finally, he wants a letter from the king guaranteeing a supply of lumber for the building projects once he blows into town.

***[8] and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest,<sup>11</sup> 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."***

Wow! Nehemiah thought of everything while he was with the king. But don't think for a moment that Nehemiah was just 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.

He wasn't quick on his feet. He was prepared! And the Lord had enabled him to be prepared with a plan by giving him five months of weeping and mourning, fasting and praying.

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<sup>11</sup> This lumber might well have come from the same forests which supplied the wood used for the construction of Solomon's Temple.

## Conclusion:

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.
- The King might have denied him the supplies or the military support he needed.

From an earthly perspective, the fulfillment of Nehemiah's vision could have been totally squashed by a pagan, idolatrous, self-centered king!

But, verse 8 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.*

The time of waiting was crucial if a vision for Jerusalem's restoration was going to come to Nehemiah.

While he waited, the vision was maturing within him. While he waited, he himself was maturing. And while he waited, God was at work behind the scenes preparing the way.

Waiting is not at all wasted time. We, God's people, wait patiently while while fasting and praying fervently. We use the time of waiting to plan.

And then, when opportunity knocks, we throw open the door, like Nehemiah did and work our plan, trusting God every step of the way.