

God's Rebuilding Process Repent, Return and Rebuild

PREPARED FOR POSSIBILITIES



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Randolph Dunn

President

IBKI.English@gmail.com

Website: thebiblewayonline.com

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We tend to gravitate to one of two extremes when it comes to the will of God. We rush on ahead or we refuse to move a step. Instead, what we need to do is pray and prepare so when God opens the door, we will be ready to move at His pace. Nehemiah, a godly man, was burdened with the news that the wall of Jerusalem is in shambles. He prays not just once or twice but regularly over a span of four months. This lesson examines his planning and preparation for doing God's work.

Principle

Even when the cause is His, God may wait to open a door.

It's hard to understand and it's even harder to explain, but it is a fact. Many times in the Bible, you see people who thought, for sure, they knew what God wanted them to do, and they just rushed ahead. Remember Moses? He thought "when he went out and slew that Egyptian, surely, all the Israelites will know that God's using me to deliver them and to rescue them." No, they didn't! In fact, the next day they came out and looked at him and said, "Are you going to kill us like you did the Egyptian?" (Acts 7:25) Now, what Moses didn't understand was: yes. God was going to use him to deliver the Israelites but not then. He was going to use him 40 years later. Moses ran on ahead of God. That's what we often do. We get an idea, we feel confident it must be God's will, after all I'm a Christian and I thought of it. So surely it's God's will. We forge ahead assuming that God will clear a path.

But not Nehemiah. He prayed until God opened the door. "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. 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." (Nehemiah 2:1-2) He has been fasting and praying now for four months. Apparently, nobody knew that.

It reminds me of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "When you fast and when you pray, don't disfigure your face, don't go out on the street corners and wail and weep. Enter into your closet and get the job done there." Nehemiah didn't flaunt his piety. But one day after four solid months of prayer and bearing the burden for Jerusalem, he couldn't help but wear his heart on his face. The king looked at him and said, "Nehemiah, I know you. Why are you so sad today?" Nehemiah was afraid. Why was he afraid? It was a capital crime to be sad before the king of Persia. If you frowned in the presence of the king, you could have your head lopped off. Nehemiah was afraid first because his countenance was putting his life at risk. He was saying by the look on his face, "King, there is something that makes me so sad that even your presence can't brighten me up." But there is a second reason for his fear, and that dealt with what he was going to have to ask Artaxerxes. Nehemiah wanted to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall and revive the people.

The Jews were in captivity because the Babylonians had carried them off? But the Babylonian Empire had been overtaken by the Persian Empire. The Persians were not nearly as interested in keeping captives in exile. So under the rule of the Persian kings, Cyrus, Darius Xerxes, and Artaxerxes large groups of Jews and other captive people were allowed to return home. That's how the other groups had already gone back. A new ethnic group was now present, the Samaritans, a race composed of Gentiles who had intermarried with the remaining Jews. The Samaritans now occupied the land and opposed every effort of the Jews to rebuild their Jerusalem.

A long time before Nehemiah, Ezra the priest who led the second wave of Jews back from exile. He records a letter from those opposing to the efforts to rebuild the city to King Artaxerxes. "To King Artaxerxes, from your servants the men of Trans-Euphrates: The king should know that the Jews who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundation." (Ezra 4:11-12) These men are writing to Artaxerxes saying that the Jews are trying to rebuild that wicked and rebellious city.

Artaxerxes writes back, "The letter you sent us has been read and translated in my presence. I issued an order and a search was made and it was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a rebellion and sedition. Jerusalem has had powerful kings ruling over the whole of Trans Euphrates, and taxes, tribute and duty were paid to them.

(v. 18) ... "Now issue an order to these men to stop work so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order." (v. 21) This is one of the main reasons Jerusalem was still in a state of disrepair at the time of Nehemiah." Artaxerxes had ordered it. Have you ever heard the expression "it's as sure as the law of the Meads and Persians" or "it's as fixed as the law of the Meads and Persians"? If you have you know what it means. It meant that the law of the Meads and Persians never changed. Once they set it, it was set!

When King Artaxerxes asked "Nehemiah, what's wrong?" He's afraid because he was about to ask the king to reconsider his own unchangeable law. That's pretty much the reason for anxiety. It is a mistake to assume that great leaders aren't afraid. Every great leader is afraid! Every human being is afraid! But great leaders are able when they know the course and they see the door opening, to move ahead in spite of their fears.

So look with me at verses 3 and 4 (now back in Nehemiah 2, our text). We read then: "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. The king said to me: What is it you want? Then I prayed to the God of Heaven." Have you ever stood in the presence of a prayer being answered? I mean, right then you look and think, "I've been praying for this!"

(Nehemiah 2:2-3)

Nehemiah has been praying for God to do something to save Jerusalem. Now the king asks, "All right, Nehemiah, what do you want?" Nehemiah blurts out the reason for his fallen countenance and he offers what I call a "bullet prayer". He just blurts it out and shoots it straight up to Heaven. Then he said, "So, I prayed to the God of Heaven, and I answered the King if it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in His sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so I can rebuild it." (Nehemiah 2:4)

By the way, you can do two things at the same time. You can walk and chew gum, and you can pray and talk even at the same time. There have been times when I have been in a crucial meeting, haven't you, when I have sent one of those bullet prayers and said, "God, put the right words in my mouth NOW! I shoot one of those bullet prayers right there on that pew every Sunday before I walk up here. I've been on the scene of a tragedy where somebody was absolutely berserk, and they look a-round to you to give them some word of wisdom, and you don't have a clue what to say. I've sent one of those bullet prayers and said, "God, I have no idea. Just don't make it come out like a fool. Put something there that will make some sense and be of some help."

The problem is most people don't spend four months in prayer like Nehemiah. They expect just a bullet prayer to get the job done. Bullet prayers are only effective when they have that bedrock of prayer behind them like Nehemiah. But Nehemiah said, "O God, you have opened this door. He's asking me what I want. Just make me say the right thing." You see, Nehemiah had to wait on God to open a door but now opened, would God have to wait on Nehemiah?

Principle

When God opens a door be ready to walk through it.

When God opens a door be ready to walk through it! Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah, "What do you want?" Nehemiah didn't say, "Um, well, Artaxerxes, let me get back with you on that, all right." That wouldn't have worked! When the door cracked, Nehemiah had his grocery list ready. He had four months to get his speech ready, and I'll tell you what, he knew it well.

1. He asked for permission.

He said let me go back so I can rebuild it. 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. I want to tell you something, folks. Some jaws dropped in the court that day. There were people surrounding that king who had never seen a Persian king change his mind before. Certainly not about a law! He changed his mind because of the hand of God and because of the presence of a man who was willing to be used by the hand of God. That's why! Artaxerxes asked, "What do you need and when do you get back?"

2. He asked for is protection.

Once he asked for permission, he says now he needs protection: "I also said to him, if it pleases the king may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates." (v. 7) Does Trans-Euphrates ring a bell with you? They are the same men who said, "Stop these Jews from building this city!" Nehemiah asked "Can I have a letter so that they will provide me safe conduct until I arrive in Judah?" Nehemiah has received permission to go; now he's asking for protection. It's a thousand-mile journey. He's got to go through a lot of provinces. People didn't travel freely in those days. You had to go through proper precautions. This request tells us that Nehemiah had thought this out, prayed for this opportunity and is confident that God would allow him to go. Managers focus on solving today's problems and leaders focus on solving tomorrow's problems. Now you need both.

3. He asked for is for provision.

Look at verse 8. He said, "And may I have a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest so that 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 that I will occupy, and because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my request." (Nehemiah 2:8)

Nehemiah said, "King, you have issued a decree that the city of Jerusalem couldn't be rebuilt. I want you to change that law, I want to rebuild that wall and I want you to pay for it. While you are at it, throw in enough materials to build me a house and to fix the temple back up, too." Don't you love that? He said, "I want you to give me lumber from the forest, I want you to give me soldiers from the army, I want you to give me money to pay for this thing." Nehemiah was ready to walk through a door God had opened. Nehemiah had been praying for four months but as he was praying he had been preparing. He was sure that God was going to honor his request, that he had his plan of attack ready.

God was the one who opened the door. Nehemiah said so acknowledging "Only by the hand of a gracious God could this have happened." But revival still waited on Nehemiah to walk through that door. Just like revival waits for you and me to walk through.

Essential lessons about faith and preparation.

Faith is instigated by prayer. Prayer is our only effective response to a closed door especially when that door is in the form of another person. Those, by the way, are usually the hardest closed doors to deal with. I propose to you that really the greatest problems in your life, right now, yesterday, or tomorrow, are problems that deal with a relationship strain. You cannot physically, intellectually, or emotionally change another person. But our God can for He masters in changing hearts.

Nehemiah didn't do what we sometimes think we'd do. He didn't try to manipulate the king present some phony story, deceive him, trick him, or play games with him. He first talked to God about him. For four months, he prayed, God, you've got to do something with this king. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases." (Proverbs 21:1)

That's true not only for kings; it's true for bosses, spouses, parents, children, and co-workers. God can change hearts. Sometimes He changes circumstances to change hearts. I don't really know how He goes about doing that but He can through prayer, patience, and planning.

1. Prayer

The greatest need of the church today is a recovery of a belief in the power of prayer. Too many of us have given up in the church and in our personal lives. We think some doors are permanently closed and we've given up. We've not put those doors before God. God, you've got the power to open them.

Sometimes I think we are like elephants at a circus. Have you ever gone to the circus and seen the elephants that are tethered to those little bitty stakes? I've never seen an elephant rip that stake up and run amuck and tear the tent down, have you? Do you know why? Because when they were little they tethered them to those stakes. When they were babies, they tried to break away but couldn't move. After they tried for a few days or a few weeks, they assumed that for the rest of their lives, they could never uproot that stake. Those multi-ton behemoth don't even try. I wonder how many times as Christians we forget the immense power of Heaven at our disposal, but we have just given up asking. Faith is instigated by prayer. What doors need to be opened here? What doors need to be opened in your life? You start by bowing your head and your heart.

2. Patience

People are an impatient lot. Some may pray about problems and challenges. But we see a closed door and pray about it a day or two. Then we set our plan in motion. There is not a single model of faith in the Bible that didn't have to wait a long time. How about Moses in Midian for 40 years? How about Elijah down by the Cherith Brook where for the better part of three years, he was fed by birds? How about David in a cave as he fled from Saul for a decade? How about John the Baptist in the desert?

For four months, Nehemiah had the same entry in his journal. He could have written down "prayed again today- nothing happened." I've come to begin to learn that God uses waiting for us to abandon our self-willed solutions. Nehemiah learned what God wants to teach us, that He will keep the door closed until there is no doubt who opened it so that he will receive the glory. Faith is improved by patience.

3. Planning

It is inclusive planning. Some people assume that faith requires a think-nothing and do-nothing mindset that just sits back and says, "Okay, God, I know it's unspiritual to have goals. You do it!" Well, quite candidly I don't see faith as being synonymous with disorganization. To the contrary, Nehemiah's faith was strengthened by his planning and by his preparation that he had done when there was no reason to make any preparation. When God opened the door, he was going to be ready to walk through it.

That does not mean God honors man's wisdom. It means God is honored by a thoughtful eagerness to fulfill His wisdom. I think that's critical. In management circles, the adage is "failure to plan is planning to fail". But that's also very Biblical as long as God is the ultimate architect in the plan. "Faith is praying for rain and then carrying an umbrella." That's exactly right. It is planning and preparing for God's possibilities.

Reasons we don't pray for God to open doors in our lives, in our churches or in our nation are:

1. We're afraid He won't open them. So, we don't pray.
2. We're afraid He will.

As a body of people, we need to be preparing for God's possibilities. He has wonderful opportunities for you but you must be prepared to take advantage of them when they come. Lesson #1326 August 10, 1997

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