

“Responding to the Suffering of Others” Nehemiah 1:1-2:8, Sermon Notes

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Morning Worship Service

Introduction

It's a pleasure to be back with you this week, but I feel like I need to either ask better questions when Pastor Marc invites me to fill the pulpit – or just conclude that he doesn't like me! I mean, how do you follow Todd Murray and precede Pastor Jerry Wragg who will share with us tonight? A tall order. But putting my teasing aside, what a special time it was for us last week with Pastor Todd. Beginning with our first ever family conference on the topic of marriage, then his time with us on Sunday when he used up our entire annual budget for tissues with his heartfelt message on Ps 131 – and then the wonderful recounting of John Newton's life in narrative and song Sunday evening. In addition to all of the insightful teaching, I was struck by Pastor Todd's evaluation of the excellence he observed in the administration of the conference. In his words, "I am impressed with the level of excellence I've experienced in running this conference for such a young church!" And that is a direct testimony to all of the people who served and labored to prepare for and "put-on" the event. And particularly touching for me was to see the role our youth played in serving the children. So, let me again express appreciation to everyone who took time out of their weekend to serve the body. Your efforts did not go unnoticed by man, but more importantly they will be noticed by the King!

We turn our attention this morning to the topic of prayer – and more specifically to prayer offered in response to the suffering of others. We call this intercessory prayer. In its simplest sense, an intercessory prayer is a prayer offered on behalf of another person's need. The Bible is full of intercessory prayers. In fact, our Scripture reading this morning from Dan 9 is one of the great OT intercessory prayers. Having realized the prophesied 70 years of captivity was nearing completion, Daniel intercedes for the nations restoration. Another is Moses's intercession for the nation's protection after their failure in the golden calf incident in Exod 32; as I'm sure you remember, Moses prayed for God to relent from his plan to destroy the people and start over. Jesus Himself is our intercessor. The writer of Hebrews says it this way, *"Therefore He (JESUS) is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them"* (Hebrews 7:25). And of course, the Holy Spirit also, specifically with regard to prayer! In Romans 8:26, Paul says, *"In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."* I don't know about you, but there are surely days when I need to call on this promise!

Today we will look at Nehemiah's great intercessory prayer for the captives who have returned to Jerusalem. Turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah – chapter 1. What we are going to see is how Nehemiah responds to the suffering of the captives who have returned to Jerusalem. Now as you are turning there I must confess that I was burdened to preach on this topic because of my own failings in this area. My shortcoming goes something like this:

1. I'm talking with a brother or sister experiencing some trial in their life ...
2. With a genuine desire to be empathetic, I quickly respond with – I'll pray for you; and

3. With a great deal of embarrassment, I acknowledge that I equally quickly forget to do so ... or at best, I pray sporadically!

Have you ever found yourself doing this? It sounds so good and so spiritual to say you will pray for someone but do you actually remember to do so? Sadly, I was falling short and the Holy Spirit convicted me of this poor pattern in my life, prompting me to do two things. First, I became more serious about my promises to pray for someone, not stingy mind you, but simply more discerning about promises to pray, then fulfilling them. Second, I looked for Biblical examples of intercessory prayer to follow – which led me to our passage for today. If you are taking notes I have three points. Nehemiah is going to show us three things about intercessory prayer:

1. In Neh 1:1-3, we will see the prologue to intercessory prayer – These opening verses will tell us the occasion that leads to Nehemiah’s prayer, along with some helpful contextual background;
2. Then in v. 4 through the first verse of chapter 2, we will see the progression of intercessory prayer – we will see a very deliberate structure to Nehemiah’s prayer. Not a formula, mind you. Rather, an instructive framework for how to intercede for someone who is suffering; and
3. Finally, in the first 8 verses of chapter 2, we will see what I am going to label the pinnacle of intercessory prayer ... or maybe better, the peak of intercessory prayer – and that is God’s response. So – the three “P’s” of intercessory prayer the prologue, the progression, and the pinnacle.

In these verses, Nehemiah wants us to see that we respond to the suffering of others with intercessory prayer. Now get this, that leads us to take action! This is the central idea of our text today, so let me say it again. We respond to the suffering of others with intercessory prayer that leads us to take action. This last little clause is really key – and it’s why I’ve included vv. 1-8 from chapter 2 in today’s text though it really ought to be a second message!

Let’s see how this central idea develops beginning with vv. 1-3.

“The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.” (Neh 1:1-3 NAS)

Body of the Sermon

1. The prologue to intercessory prayer (1:1-3)
 - a. I think we should start with a fundamental question: What is it that leads us to intercede in prayer for another person?
 - b. Not a hard question really. I would suggest it usually arises from 1 of 2 reasons:
 - i. 1st: Might be the case of habitual or persistent sin that can be observed in a brother or sister
 1. In this situation, you take the initiative

2. In addition to loving confrontation, your initiative may take the form of intercessory prayer- asking God to convict them of their sin and, maybe, to allow you to help them overcome it.
- ii. BUT, more typically the opportunity for intercessory prayer will come about in response to some trial or crisis in another person's life ...
 1. In this case the situation is brought to you – so you are a responder vs. an initiator ... though you could be proactive
 2. The issue might be any number of things
 - a. Maybe a life altering medical diagnosis
 - b. Or the loss of a job
 - c. A struggle with a spouse or children
 - d. Or an issue with a Christian brother or sister -There's really no shortage of possible reasons
 - e. I'm sure that every one of us has encountered such a circumstance at one time or another
- c. This second reason is what Nehemiah experienced. In vv. 1-3 a contingent arrives from Jerusalem and reports on the status of the people and the city.
- d. Since we are parachuting into Nehemiah, let me spend a minute on some background information
 - i. In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra & Nehemiah are one book
 - ii. Together they record the return of the Jewish captives and the rebuilding of Jerusalem initiated by king Cyrus just as it was prophesied by Isaiah in 44:28, some 400 years before Cyrus lived! Amazing!
 - iii. The book of Ezra focuses on the first and second returns of the people and the start and subsequent stoppage of the rebuilding
 - iv. The book of Nehemiah continues the story, beginning with the report brought to him regarding the status of the returnees and their building project, which is "not good!"
 - v. Now one further note and a key to understanding the challenge presented to Nehemiah in vv. 1-3 is to remember that the same king who issued a decree to stop building in Ezra 4:21 is the king whom Nehemiah serves – making things both tricky and risky for Nehemiah
- e. Returning to the text: A couple things we should note in these opening verses
 - i. Verse 1 starts with a time-marker – the month of Chislev (mid Nov-mid Dec) ... store that away for a little later. It is the 20th year. 20th year of what? The reign of king Artaxerxes ... cf. 2:1. Artaxerxes reigned for about 40 years, from 465-424 BC.
 - ii. Next, we are given a location – Susa, the capitol. Susa was the location of the winter palace of the Medo-Persian empire, not the actual capital city of Persepolis – both cities are near the western border of modern day Iran in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf. Nehemiah, himself was born in exile after the fall of Jerusalem and, like Daniel, had risen to a position of influence in the court of the foreign king.
 - iii. In v. 2, a contingent arrives from Jerusalem and reports to Nehemiah ...
 - iv. Among the contingent is Nehemiah's "blood brother" – Hanani ... confirmed in Nehemiah 7:2
 - v. Upon their arrival, Nehemiah asks a question ... Note the order
 1. Concerned about people first, then "things" ... the city.

2. While the initial focus is on the rebuilding of the wall, the bulk of the book of Nehemiah is concerned with the spiritual rebuilding of the people recorded in Neh 7-12.
 - vi. Then in v. 3 the report is not good –
 - vii. The people are in great distress and the city is in ruins.

So, this “prologue” provides us with the occasion, or the reason, for Nehemiah’s intercessory prayer. The suffering of the people and the state of the city prompts Nehemiah to offer an intercessory prayer on behalf their suffering.

Beginning in v. 4, through the first part of 2:1, we have the intercessory prayer itself. Now, as I studied these verses, I noted three distinct parts to Nehemiah’ prayer. He starts with a prelude to prayer ... kind of a “warm up” period to prepare himself ... in v. 4. This is followed by the prayer itself in vv. 5-11, and the final part is Nehemiah’s persistence in prayer, noted in the first part of 2:1. As I read 1:4-2:1, pay attention to the progression of the prayer.

“Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵ And I said, "I beseech Thee, 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, ⁶ let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ "We have acted very corruptly against Thee and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses. ⁸ "Remember the word which Thou didst command Thy 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 "And they are Thy servants and Thy people whom Thou didst redeem by Thy great power and by Thy strong hand. ¹¹ "O Lord, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant and the prayer of Thy servants who delight to revere Thy name, and make Thy servant successful today, and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

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.” (Neh 1:4-2:1 NAS)

2. The Progression of Intercessory Prayer (1:4-2:1)

- a. *Prelude to prayer ... v. 4:* Nehemiah’s first response to the news is rather interesting:
 - i. As most of the book of Nehemiah will demonstrate – Nehemiah is a man of action. He doesn’t waste time getting things done. In fact, he rebuilds the wall itself in approximately 52 days ... Just to put this in perspective, Biblical archaeologists say the wall was approximately 2.5 miles long, up to 36 feet high and 8 feet thick! Nehemiah is a “get it done, and get it done NOW” kind of guy.
 - ii. So why do I mention this ... Well, given his nature, his first response to the news is out of character for Nehemiah ... so we should take note.
 - iii. Nehemiah takes time to enter into the grief of the captives before he utters a single word in prayer!

- iv. I think this is a very important part of intercessory prayer ... we need to enter into the grief of those we pray for.
- v. This can be messy ... and maybe why we tend to shy away from it
- vi. This reminds me of a class I had in seminary that I'll never forget. The textbook we used was called Spiritual Friends. The author uses a phrase to capture the idea of experiencing someone's grief. He said, you need to crawl into the casket with the person who is suffering. I thought this was really creepy but it was helpful. To fully help someone through our prayers – I think we really need to feel their grief right along with them. Otherwise, you are just an observer!
- vii. And this is just what Nehemiah does in v. 4
- viii. Nehemiah crawls into the casket with the captives with an interesting sequence of reactions to the report:
 1. Physical – He was “knocked off his feet and sat down” ... like receiving a body blow. You know the feeling, you receive bad news about someone close to you and it takes your breath away;
 2. Emotional – He wept and mourned for days! Not a brief and momentary response – he truly felt for their experience and their grief; and then
 3. Spiritual – two spiritual disciplines ... he fasted and finally he prayed

Now, having gone through this sequence of reactions, Nehemiah turns to God and commences to praying in vv. 5-11.

- b. *The Prayer Proper (vv. 5-11)*: So how do we intercede for someone in prayer? Nehemiah models it for us beautifully. We can observe four distinct movements in Nehemiah's prayer. He starts with adoration for God in v. 5; then he moves to confession in vv. 6-7; from there he affirms God's promises in vv. 8-10; and finally his petition for God's action in v. 11.

Now before we take a closer look at each movement, I'm not advocating a formula here. But I do like the priorities that Nehemiah demonstrates when he reaches out to God ... praise him first, acknowledge our shortcomings second, affirm God's promises third, and then petition his action in conclusion. Let's look at each of these in turn:

- i. *Adoration (v. 5)*: I won't dwell on this other than to say that Nehemiah starts where we should always start – praising God for who He is. There is no shortage of things to praise God for ... Nehemiah notes:
 1. Who his God is ... *the LORD God – the one in the heavens*;
 2. Some of God's attributes – He is *great*; He is a *promise keeper* (i.e. preserves His covenants); He exhibits *lovingkindness* – His graciousness – toward all who *love Him and keep His commandments* – God's obedient children
 3. Verse 5 uses exactly same wording that Daniel uses to praise God in his intercessory prayer (you can compare 9:4 to 1:5)

Having exalted God, Nehemiah confesses the sins of the people and his own sin as well in vv. 6-7.

- ii. *Confession (vv. 6-7)*: Nehemiah's confession focuses on 2 things:
 1. First, he offers a blanket confession of sin in v. 6:
 - a. He begins by entreating God to hear his confession

- b. And he continues by telling us that he is praying continually – “day and night,” in other words, all the time on behalf of God’s chosen people.
 - c. And then he offers a blanket acknowledgement that Israel and his house have sinned, and that sin is against GOD alone!
 - 2. Second, Nehemiah gets specific about the nature of their sin in v. 7 – it is disobedience ...
 - a. They have not kept the *commandments, statutes, or ordinances (i.e. judgments)* that God gave to them through Moses!
 - b. BTW – note that he uses the exact same three words as David in Ps 19:8-9.
 - c. I just LOVE how consistent the Bible is!
 - 3. Nehemiah doesn’t dodge the issue – he wants a full and complete confession on the table before he asks for a thing

But before he moves on to asking anything of God he does one more thing in vv. 8-10. He affirms God’s promises.

- iii. *Affirmation (vv. 8-10)*: This is my favorite part of the prayer and, for me at least, the most instructive part:
 - 1. Nehemiah is expressing confidence in His God’s ability to answer his prayers – He calls on God to remember, that is “to bring to mind” (GOD HAS NOT FORGOTTEN), and act on His promises.
 - 2. He expresses confidence by affirming the promises that God has made to Israel by praying them back to God.
 - 3. Why? Well because of one of the attributes that Nehemiah noted in v. 5 ... because His God preserves – actually the stress of the Hebrew participle in v. 5 is better translated as the God who KEEPS – Nehemiah knows that God keeps His covenant promises!
 - 4. In vv. 8-10 Nehemiah basically summarizes all of Deuteronomy 28-30 ... with particular emphasis on vv. 2-4 of chapter 30 (look it up on your own)! These 3 chapters can be summarized as “keep my commandments and live – or disobey and die. If you stray, then return to the Lord and be restored.” Pretty simple really!
 - 5. If you want to know how to pray in God’s will – follow Nehemiah’s lead. Pray back God’s promises. Why? Because God can’t lie, because He keeps His promises; because He will answer these prayers. The Apostle John says it best in his first letter – *“This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him”* (1 John 5:14-15).
 - a. NOW – LET ME HASTEN TO ADD: God is not bound to answer when and how you want Him to answer. Rather He will do it in His time and in His ways!
 - b. Nevertheless, we should be confident that God will answer prayers that are consistent with HIS WILL!

- c. Our job is to simply be persistent in praying these promises and patient awaiting their fulfillment! We will discuss this more in just a minute ...

NOW, Nehemiah finally gets around to asking God for something ...

- iv. *Petition (v. 11)*: In v. 11, Nehemiah makes his request – which is absolutely not what I expected!
 1. First, he asks for God to be attentive to his intercessory prayer ... OK, that makes sense.
 2. But, look at what he asks for in the last part of v. 11.
 3. He asks God to make HIM – that is, Nehemiah – successful as Nehemiah takes action!
 4. Here’s the thing – I would have expected for Nehemiah to ask for GOD to do something just as Daniel did in his prayer – Dan 9:19.
 5. Instead, he asks for God to give him success in taking action before a certain man. This is important!
 6. In the course of his prayers, Nehemiah has come to realize that he, himself, needs to do something because it is in his human power to do so!
 7. Nehemiah’s “human” power arises from his position in the king’s court – He is the cupbearer to the king – Nehemiah has access and influence!
 8. A cupbearer tests the king’s wine and food to make sure it had not been poisoned. A high-risk job, but one where the person developed a close relationship with the king and became a powerful confidant.
 9. Somewhere along the journey of his intercessory prayer, Nehemiah has realized that he needs to take action.
 10. Text doesn’t tell us how he came to this realization, but his request seems to imply that he knows the burden has fallen to him to act on behalf of the people – AND the time to act has arrived!
 11. Thus, his request is two-fold:
 - a. 1st to be successful when he approaches the king; and
 - b. 2nd to prepare the king’s heart to be compassionate towards Nehemiah ... that is, not to get mad and lop his head off!
 - c. We need to remember that this is the same king that stopped the work in Ezra 4:21 and Nehemiah is going to ask him to reverse the decision – this is a high risk move! This could easily gotten him executed!
 12. It is the same way with us – When you intercede for the needs of someone who is suffering be prepared for God to use you as His “first responder!”
 13. Did you catch that? Be prepared to be an instrument in the Redeemer’s hands!
 14. Just like Nehemiah, we need to be prepared to be God’s answer. As you pray for others to the full extent of your gifting, resources, time, or ability, you must be prepared to act on behalf of the needs of others! Yes, there is a need for prayer warriors but there is also a need for those who will pray and go to war!

15. If you have the means, if you feel the burden to act, don't be like the man in James 2 whose help is empty words, "Go in peace, be warm, be filled." Rather, do something about it!

Now, we're going to see how Nehemiah acts or maybe better, how God moves through Nehemiah to act, in just a minute. But we need to see the last part of Nehemiah's progression first – and that is his persistence in prayer.

- c. *Persistence in Prayer (2:1a)*: This verse is not actually a part of the prayer itself but I'm adding it here because it tells us something about Nehemiah's attitude toward prayer. Nehemiah is:
- i. Persistent in prayer: Note that v. 1 begins with another time marker.
 - ii. We are now in the month of Nisan (spanning mid March-mid April).
 - iii. Nehemiah has been interceding continuously for the people in Jerusalem for 4-5 months!
 - iv. He didn't just throw up a "quickie" one and done prayer. His prayer was way more than some passing fancy
 - v. He has been steadfastly enduring in his entreaty to God on behalf of the people!
 - vi. I think this is an important lesson for us in our prayers, particularly with regard to evangelism. We know that God wants all to come to salvation – but we don't know when or how He might do that or if He will do it at all. Nevertheless, our job, like Nehemiah is simply to remain faithful and steadfast – persisting in our prayers for people to come to faith or to be healed or to be freed from habitual sinful patterns or whatever you are praying for!
 - vii. Which leads me to a second attitude that Nehemiah exhibits
 - viii. Nehemiah is Patient in waiting for God's response. This is always the hardest part – the waiting!! Nehemiah waited on God's perfect timing – and when God presented the opportunity, Nehemiah acted
And this is what we will see in the balance of v. 1 through v. 8

"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. ² So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid. ³ And 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?" ⁴ Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵ And 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." 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. 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, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, ⁸ and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, 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." And the king granted *them* to me because the good hand of my God *was* on me." (Neh 2:1-8 NAS)

As I said, the prayer proper ends with v. 11 of chapter 1, but I wanted to quickly look at the first part of chapter 2 because it shows how God works through people in response to intercessory prayer. I view vv. 1-8 as the pinnacle – that is, the culmination – of intercessory prayer. Just as vv.

12-14 were the climax of Ps 19, vv. 1-8 of chapter two are the culmination of Nehemiah's prayer because we see God's response!

Maybe the idea is this "Nehemiah has been praying for the people – and is asking himself now what?" Well, vv. 1-8 are the now what. The greatest privilege in prayer is to see God work ... and it is even more of a wonderment when He chooses to work through you! So here is the payoff – the pinnacle of intercessory prayer is this taking action in faith. Nehemiah did not have any assurances that God would grant his request – He simply knew that the time had come for him to act in faith. Faithful and persistent prayer emboldens you to act, and it pleases God to respond. Prayer, like faith is not passive – it's active, it works, it takes action! There is a symbiosis of sorts between our prayers and God's actions – notwithstanding the indisputable fact that God doesn't need us to accomplish anything. But for some reason only know to Him, He chooses to use us to work out His plans in the present time. There is no higher calling in this life than to be an instrument in the Redeemer's hands. And this is a role that God has for all of us. Let's see how God orchestrates His response through Nehemiah.

There are four points – we are going to go fast. This should really be a second message, but I only have one week and I really want you to see how God orchestrates His response in and through the hearts of His people. So, I'm going to outline the four points, give you a couple of thoughts to get you started, and ask you to study these 8 verses on your own in the coming week. Here we go ... POINT 1. In vv. 2:1b ... the final clause of v. 1 through v. 3 we see

1. Point 1: A Call to Action (2:1b-3) – The chain of events starts with this simple statement – *"Now I had not been sad in his (i.e. the king's) presence."*
 - a. This was a dangerous thing – the last thing a king wanted was a sour puss face in his court! No Eeyore's in the king's court saying "woe is me." It literally could have gotten Nehemiah executed!
 - b. But the king knew Nehemiah well – he knew that it was out of character and interpreted Nehemiah's "long face" as a reflection of deep sorrow ... so he inquired as to its source.
 - c. Note the détente, the "political correctness" in Nehemiah's reply. He makes his sadness a personal issue and NOT a political issue! Nehemiah is sad because he is grieving over the plight of his people.
 - d. Brilliant – and clear evidence that Nehemiah had been "planning" while he was "praying." Had he approached the king in any other way, at a minimum he would have been shut down and more likely executed for challenging the king's edicts.

And now we come to Nehemiah's moment of truth in v. 4!

2. Point 2: A Moment of Truth (2:4) – It seems that the king accepted Nehemiah's response at "face value," and he invites Nehemiah to make a request.
 - a. Obviously, God had been working to soften the king's heart – as the king's response is VERY uncharacteristic ...
 - b. But what I want you to really pay attention to is Nehemiah's first reaction to the invitation ... What does he do?
 - c. He prays spontaneously. Prayer is a way of life with Nehemiah, not something he does, but who he is! This is the moment of truth. Nehemiah has to decide if he is going to be bold – or back away. And he resorts to prayer before he opens his mouth. What a great lesson for US!

- d. Nehemiah displays a range of prayer. His first prayer followed a period of preparation – we saw this in v. 4. now, having prepared and been “prayed up” Nehemiah sends up a spontaneous “prayer-let.”
- e. Nehemiah has decided to be bold and I think he might be saying something like – OK, now Lord – please be with me!
 - i. You know, prayer doesn’t need to be complicated ... just talk to God. He already knows what you need and he surely knows what you are thinking. So why not just say it to Him?

In v. 11 Nehemiah petitioned God for favor before the king. Well, now the time had come and Nehemiah makes one final plea for God’s favor before he plunges ahead ... with a response of faith in vv. 5-8a.

- 3. Point 3: A Response of Faith (2:5-8a) – What I want you to see in these verses is two-fold. First, every call to action requires a response of faith. In your moment of truth, you will need to take a step of faith
 - a. Maybe the most vivid example of this in the Bible was Israel’s crossing of the Jordan River
 - i. The Levites had to step into the raging, flood swelled river before God would part the waters.
 - ii. As we receive God’s response to our prayers we will often face a Crossing the Jordan like moment – when we will have to take a step of faith to receive God’s blessing
 - iii. No promise, no guarantee ... just faith; but a rational faith nevertheless.
 - b. The second thing I want you to notice is the extent of Nehemiah’s preparation.
 - i. Yes, Nehemiah’s first and most important recourse has been intercessory prayer.
 - ii. But he has also clearly been thinking about what he would say if God gives him the opportunity to approach the king.
 - iii. He didn’t just come up with these ideas off the top of his head or on the spur of the moment – he has clearly thought them through ... we see:
 - 1. Boldness: Send me to Judah to rebuild it – v. 5 ... no confusion about what he wants;
 - 2. Anticipation: He’d thought about the king’s possible question about the length of his absence and was prepared with an answer that satisfied the king – v. 6;
 - 3. Planning: He asked for the king’s protection during his journey with letters to ensure his safe passage – v. 7; and
 - 4. He asked the king to fund the project in the first part of v. 8 – which could equally well go under the category of boldness!
 - iv. Here’s my point: Divine entreaty (that is prayer) and human planning are not antithetical ... they are not mutually exclusive things! – There is a symbiosis of sorts between our prayers and God’s response. Recognizing that we NEVER manipulate God through our prayers, we can say that prayer offered in His will pleases God to respond!

Now Nehemiah concludes by acknowledging the source of fulfillment of his prayers in the final clause of v. 8

4. Point 4: The Source of Fulfillment (2:8b) – Nehemiah never forgets who is ultimately behind his success. He knows that no one but God could accomplish what needed to be done for the walls to be rebuilt and the people secured. No one but God could move the king’s heart to grant Nehemiah’s requests. So, Nehemiah ends his prayer by acknowledging that the king’s favorable response is “because the good hand of my God was upon me.” When God responds to our prayers, we must always be quick to attribute credit where credit is due.

I know that was a whirlwind – so let me recap. Nehemiah was prayed up and ready to be God’s instrument. God, in his grace chose to respond to Nehemiah’s prayer on behalf of the Jews in Jerusalem. God orchestrated his response through Nehemiah in four sequential steps: first, He called Nehemiah to action in vv. 2-3; this led to a moment of truth in v. 4 – was Nehemiah going to respond to the call or would he shrink from the ministry God had prepared him for all these years?; in vv. 5-8a, we saw that Nehemiah did indeed respond in faith; and the narrative closes with Nehemiah acknowledging that his God is the source of fulfillment, giving all of the glory to God.

Conclusion

Well, again, we have consumed a lot of information today. I trust that the Holy Spirit has used this passage to speak to each of you in some meaningful way. As we leave our time in the Word today, I’d like to close with two “take-aways.” Two things to hang onto as you respond to Nehemiah’s words in the coming week. The first is this:

1. Extended times of prayer coupled with a delayed response from God may be a manifestation of His grace to make you ready for when the moment of truth comes! Had Nehemiah rushed in – he would have lacked spiritual coverage; and surely, he would have been ill prepared to answer thoughtfully, and boldly, when the king invited him to make a request. If you find yourself in an extended season of prayer and God is not answering, don’t assume He’s not listening. Instead, trust that He is preparing you for His perfect time to respond. Use the time wisely – Keep praying, and keep thinking through how God might want you to be the solution. Praying and planning are not antithetical. It’s not an “either/or” proposition. Rather it is a classic example of “both/and.” Nehemiah both prayed fervently and planned diligently. The second thought is this
2. Years of apparently unrelated service are never wasted. I often find myself falling into the trap of wishing that God had brought me to salvation much earlier in my life. Along with this I think of all the years I wasted in the service of the world – but that’s just wrong-headed thinking because it denies God’s providence in the affairs of my life. Instead, like Nehemiah, we should view our life’s journey as God’s grooming for a time such as this. Esther experienced this before her moment of truth to save the nation of Israel from Haman’s plot; Joseph did as well – first being sold into slavery by his brothers, then thrown in jail before he became the 2nd most powerful man in Egypt! Moses spent 40 years in pharaoh’s court and 40 years in wilderness before God called on him to lead the nation of Israel; and Paul was the Pharisee of Pharisee’s before his conversion! The Bible is full of examples of God preparing his servants for service. The same is true of everyone here – You are where you are at this moment in life because God intends for you to be there! Have you ever stopped and thought about that? If you believe that God is sovereign, then you have to conclude that *you are where you are right now, because God intends for you to be there!* So, next time you are bemoaning your present circumstances – or wishing something else were true, stop it! Whatever label you presently carry, or however you would like to serve, is far less important than being ready when the opportunity to serve is presented. Nehemiah’s years serving the king gave him access to the king and prepared him for the challenges he would soon encounter. This is as equally true of you and I today as it was of

Nehemiah some 2,500 years ago, so embrace your current circumstances and get ready for the distinct ministry opportunity God is preparing you for.

Let me close by tying these two thoughts together as a question for you to ponder. God is always preparing you for something you get that? Now here's the question:

Like Nehemiah, will you respond when the time comes?

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