

Nehemiah 6:1-3 [NIV]

*When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it – though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates – <sup>2</sup> Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”*

*But they were scheming to harm me; <sup>3</sup> so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”*

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You're welcome to turn back to the passage that was just read for us in the book of *Nehemiah*. You might actually want to start in chapter 1.

Nehemiah was a Hebrew, a Jew, living in Persia, not by choice, but rather by conquest. About 150 years before, the nation of Israel, and Jerusalem her capital, had been sacked – overrun by the Babylonians, who were themselves, then, overrun by the Persians.

And somehow through that exile and the generations born out of it, remarkably, Nehemiah, the Jew, winds up becoming cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. Which means, Nehemiah did what cupbearers do – he was the keeper of the king's wine. He was the king's' butler, you see, because the term “butler” comes from the Middle-English word “boettler.”

When the king wanted something to drink, Nehemiah's job was to give him what he wanted – which was a position involving much trust, since many murders in those days were committed by poisoning.

So, Nehemiah was as known by the king, and as close to the king, and as trusted by the king as nearly any person could be – so much so that the king actually noticed the sadness in Nehemiah's face one day and asked him about it.

And Nehemiah explained that he was sad because his hometown, the capital city of his people, was suffering greatly.

It's like the Afghani people living here would feel today about their people back home: they are suffering because they are defenseless against their enemies.

The wall around Jerusalem, which was at that time a city's primary means of defense and protection, was broken down and so there was no safe place within. Enemy nations, raiders, thieves could come and go as they pleased. The people there had no protection for property or crops or themselves. Long, sleepless nights were their lot, just to survive.

So, as you'd expect, when he found out about it, it all made Nehemiah very sad.

And, godly man that he was, his sadness drove him to prayer, and through prayer, God hatched in Nehemiah a plan, not just to feel sad, but to do something about it – something very big, in fact, and very unexpected:

Nehemiah was to go to his homeland and lead the people in their capital city in rebuilding the city wall.

How often you and I hear hard news that makes us feel badly about some circumstance, and yet that's where it ends. We feel badly for the suffering, but then daily life intervenes and we simply move on.

Or, how often we feel badly about a situation, and so immediately we take matters into our own hands to try to repair it, and we fail. And things are left even worse and more confused.

When all the while, God wants us to come to Him about the tough things of life. He wants to be our protector and defender – a shield about us.

In tragedy and hardship and tough situations, why don't we go to Him first?

Why don't we go to Him about Haiti?

About Afghanistan?

About tyranny and terrorism?

Why don't we go to Him about the state of our cities?

About the sexual confusion and drug issues in our nation?

About the whole COVID situation, and all the other diseases that plague us?

About the smaller, but serious upheavals in our lives and families?

We used to. As a nation, we used to go to Him.

History is full of the prayers of our national leaders – seeking God's mercy and help about wars and diseases and faltering economies and natural disasters.

Not all that long ago we used to go to Him, and God heard and He answered.

You notice, we don't do that so much anymore.

But Nehemiah did. He did the right thing: he heard the bad news and immediately he sat down and wept, and he mourned and fasted and prayed – for days! So heavy was his heart for his people! (Neh. 1:4)

He himself was in no danger.

He lived in the security and luxury of the palace.

He had the trust of the most powerful king in the region, if not the known world.

Nehemiah had all he wanted and more.

Ah, but maybe it was *that* – that very fact – that caused him to feel even more the pain of his people: knowing *they* were suffering in ways *he* was *not*.

That's how a compassionate heart responds to the suffering of others. It asks the question, “What might I do to help?”

It was that very sentiment that Nehemiah took to heart and to prayer, and somewhere in those days of weeping and mourning and fasting and praying, something happened. A thought from the Lord came to Nehemiah: a thought that grew into an idea, that grew into a conviction, and that then grew into a plan – a plan that would be presented at just the right moment.

And eventually the Lord provided that moment, and Nehemiah took a deep breath because he admits that he was *very much afraid* of the King and how the King might respond (Neh. 2:2). When the King asks why he looks so sad, Nehemiah takes a deep breath and tells the King all that was troubling him – all about the suffering of his people and the state of Jerusalem.

He tells him.

And I'm sure there was silence for a moment as the King processed all that.

And I'm sure, to Nehemiah, that silence seemed to last forever.

But then, finally, the King asks Nehemiah, "What is it you want?"

Nehemiah has his plan in mind, and he's ready to answer. But, notice there in chapter 2, verse 4, that just before he answers the king, Nehemiah stops to pray.

It wasn't a vocal prayer – nothing formal or thought out, much less written out. Not in that moment, unexpected as it was.

Nehemiah wouldn't have asked the king, "Hey, do you mind giving me a couple minutes so I can go down the hall to the chapel and pray?"

No, Nehemiah's was a prayer much like you and I pray when we're caught off guard and nervous or uncertain or afraid. This was the sort of prayer that was little more than a breath.

Nehemiah says in chapter 2 verse 4 there, "***I prayed to the God of Heaven and then I answered the king.***"

You see, it was good for him to mentally remind himself of the cosmic pecking order there. Nehemiah understood that even a moment with the God of Heaven would help his conversation with any king of earth, no matter how great.

And that's a good thing for us to remember too. If we're *in* Jesus, we have direct access to the God who rules over all. And if our cause is right and just – if we are working *with* God and *not against* Him and His purposes, He'll hear us. God is always ready to join hands and forces with those who are in communication with Him and working toward His goals – as Nehemiah was.

So, Nehemiah presents the main idea of his plan to the King. There in verse 5, he says, "***I answered the King, '...send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.'***"

And right here, you see, this is what tells me that this whole thing was God's idea and not Nehemiah's: whoever heard of a cupbearer building a city wall, or knowing how to build a wall, or knowing how to inspire and lead people? It was not just building a wall, but Nehemiah winds up fighting, encouraging, upholding, inspiring, defending, governing!

Cupbearers don't do that. They don't do any of that.

That's why I'd imagine Nehemiah was more than a little taken aback when, in his initial prayer for relief for his people, God told him, "***You go and bring them relief. You go and restore dignity and security to Jerusalem. You go and lead the people. You go and build the wall.***"

I wonder how long it took Nehemiah to accept the fact that God was calling him to be, in a matter of speaking, the answer to his own prayers?

I'm sure he took a while to convince. I'm sure God's response was surprising to him because it was so far out of his wheelhouse, you know? He was a palace-dweller. He knew – wine. His hands were soft.

Nehemiah wasn't a stone-mason or a carpenter or a soldier or any sort of wilderness survivalist which you had to be to live in Jerusalem in those days.

He was no Teddy Roosevelt sort of charismatic leader.

And yet God said to Nehemiah, "You think this should happen? You know, so do I! So, let's you and I go and do it!"

"Let's answer this prayer of yours together."

How often that happens today!

It happens to me.

I pray that God would do something and somehow, He winds up having me do what I've asked Him to do.

Does that happen to you?

And I've noticed this: it doesn't seem to matter whether or not I have the *gift*.

I think lots of Christians try to hide behind the whole thing of "giftedness."

They say, "Well, doing that is just not my gift. Not my temperament. That's not the way I'm wired."

You know, that all sounds nice and good and even spiritual at times. But the truth is, as good as gifts are, I don't think God really gives a rip about your giftedness or mine, when He's trying to move us to action.

God didn't care about Moses' inability to speak eloquently.

He didn't care about David's youth and inexperience.

That little boy on the lakeshore with the bread and fish and all those people to feed: Jesus didn't care that he hadn't yet learned multiplication in school. All Jesus cared about was a willing heart, and He somehow managed to take care of the rest.

God doesn't need a builder in order to build.

God just needs someone who will believe that *God* can build.

And Nehemiah did. Nehemiah believed that God could do it, which is actually the greatest work of Nehemiah's life, you see?

Trusting God to actually do what He says He'll do: once a person arrives there – once that trust factor is in place – the project itself, whatever it is, is all but done! All that remains are details and time.

Now, that doesn't mean there is nothing left for us to do.

Nehemiah had to gain the king's blessing and then the provisions and escort and supplies and everything else. And then he actually had to go to Jerusalem, and the work gets started.

And the truth is, it was far from smooth sailing. Nehemiah begins to run into all this opposition – from within and from without, but especially from without.

There were other local kings and governors who did not want Jerusalem rebuilt. They knew the stories of old

about how powerful Israel used to be as a nation, and they did not want to contend with that. They wanted to keep the Hebrews subdued.

And besides, as it was at the moment, Jerusalem was easy pickings for them: they could take whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, from her people.

So, they come at Nehemiah in all sorts of ways: to distract him, to plant doubt in him and those around him, even to abduct him or assassinate him.

We see in today's passage that they invite him to come to a "meeting," you know, just to chat, to talk all this over, and even at a supposed neutral location.

But Nehemiah realizes, we don't know for sure but probably again through prayer, that it was all a set-up. Verse 2 there in Chapter 6 ends with his realization, "*But they were scheming to harm me.*"

So, what's he do?

The city is not secure quite yet; the doors and bars aren't yet in place.

So, Nehemiah buys a little time here by sending messengers back with the reply, "*I am carrying on a great work here and can't come.*"

Very carefully chosen words there, so as not to be outrightly defiant, but yet not agreeable either.

So, those other kings try a different approach—one intended to slander Nehemiah, but you see, in their world, all that takes time. They couldn't just post it to Facebook. All that took time—enough time, in fact, for the wall to be completed and for Jerusalem to be secure.

That is the great work for which Nehemiah is known and remembered: the securing of Jerusalem and the restoration of her dignity.

That's what people observe and say, "Wow, look at this great thing that Nehemiah did!"

But Nehemiah himself knew better.

The completion of the wall was not, really, his greatest work. Nehemiah's greatest work was to settle in his mind and heart that he was going to trust God to accomplish something that he knew he could not accomplish on his own.

That was the great work of Nehemiah's life—and that is also the greatest work any of *us* can do: to come to really believe that God *can* bring to completion whatever He might call you or me to do.

Once we determine that our trust is really in Him about a thing, then its accomplishment is just a matter of details and time.

And that's true no matter the task.

For Nehemiah, of course, it was building a wall.

For us it's probably something different.

What have you prayed for lately? What have you asked God to do?

Restore a relationship?

Grow your faith?

Increase your patience?

Give you knowledge or wisdom?

Develop some ability?

Provide you a friend?

Bring someone you know to Jesus?

What have you asked God to do?

Not in every case, certainly, but in so many cases, the chances are good that He wants to use *you*, somehow, to do it.

But before He can use us, He has to have our confidence. We have to decide to trust Him.

That is the turning point in God's engagement with people, which is why that's, really, the great work—the *greatest* work—to which He calls us all: to *trust* Him. To *believe* Him, and then to *work with Him* in any way He chooses.

That's the work that Nehemiah could not leave in order to meet with those kings, you see? He realized that he was working side by side, hand in hand, with *God* Himself there on that wall.

And you don't just walk away from the God of Heaven to meet with some lowly, earthly king.

What is it that God is asking you to do?

If He's asking you to do it, He's not going to set you up for failure. God doesn't leave people by the side of the road.

Will you trust in His character?

That's the greatest work any of us can do. That's really what Abraham and Moses and David and all the saints of old are remembered for.

Maybe He's been asking you to do something like He asked of Nehemiah, something so far outside your gifts and abilities you don't even know where to start.

Here's where to start: decide today to trust Him to work with you and through you and to be there with you until the work is done.

If you've not trusted God like this in the past, but you're ready to today—will you tell Him that?

The answer to your prayers may well depend on it.

Pray with me here...

Prayer

Closing Song: *Be Strong in the Lord*

Benediction:

Let's all go from this place ready and willing to do the greatest work that we can ever do: to live in utter trust in the ability and character and faithfulness of God.

He calls us to work with Him.

He makes up for what we lack.

And He always finishes what He starts.