

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 2:1.

Studying the Old Testament, there are a couple things that you should probably know that would help you see the books there shrink down in size in terms of understanding. By the time you get to the end of the book of Judges, we come to the time of Saul's reign. It's roughly 1040 or so B.C., and all three of the kings that Israel has nationally, before there is this great split in the country, ruled roughly forty years - Saul did, David did, Solomon did. In 931 B.C., after Solomon died, it is his boy that, with a bunch of his friends, began to run the country and drove them into a civil war that split the north and the south from one another. God had put His name in Jerusalem. But ten of the twelve tribes (Judah and Benjamin were the exceptions that stayed in Jerusalem) went north. And for the next 209 years there is a northern kingdom. It is called, during this time of split, Israel. The southern kingdom is called Judah. And most of the prophetic books that you read were either right before or right after the split or addressed to those who had influence upon the north or the south. In the north, they lowered the expectations of the priests, they changed the Feast Days that the LORD had given them, they set up calves to worship. They never had a good king in 209 years; never had a good king. And, in 722 B.C., the LORD sent the Assyrians in - wiped out the north; and they really were never reconstituted as a people until they would later on return to Jerusalem. In the south, they had some good kings. They lasted until 606 B.C. when - for the same issues: idolatry, rebellion against God - God sent the Babylonians in. But He didn't tell the south that they would be destroyed forever, as the north had been; that they would go into captivity for seventy years and, as a result, would learn not to worship false gods (606 B.C. that began under Nebuchadnezzar). The place was leveled years later. And that seventy-year period was spent by the Jews being taken 700 miles away to Babylon. In 536 B.C., the LORD had the Babylonian kingdom (actually two years earlier) overthrown by the Medo-Persian Empire (it's a world empire). The king, Cyrus, said to the Jews, "Go home." God had promised them that. Daniel was aware that that was coming when he writes his book - began to pray. Isaiah mentioned King Cyrus by name. And, of all of the millions of Jews in captivity, only 50,000 went home. They laid the foundation for the Temple, which was the only place the Jews could worship God (there in Jerusalem). And then, because of political pressure (at least

that's what they'll tell you) and a great desire to build their own houses, they stopped. They said, "Why should we live in tents? Let's build our homes, then we'll get back to the work of the LORD." For sixteen years, the thing just kind of sat there having just a paved foundation but nothing else. 520 B.C., Zechariah is sent by the LORD; Haggai, you have his book as well, sent by the LORD to encourage the people, saying things to them like, "You're putting your money in pockets with holes, and there's a reason you're not prospering, you've put God second in your life" (Haggai 1:6). And the people took heed. They built the Temple, they finished it in 516 B.C. - four years later.

Another company of folks will come to Jerusalem from the captivity - about 2,000 of them in all - seventy-nine years later, in 457 B.C. They will come as a worship community, a bunch of priests that teach biblical reform. The book of Ezra (the one right in front of this book) will take you through that. But the city itself - though the worship is established, though the Temple is built - is just a sitting duck. There's no security; it is nonexistent. It is a frontier town. People maraud through the area. It's hardly a witness for the LORD. This is the place God had put His name.

And that's when we are introduced, twelve years later after that second group, to Nehemiah. Because Nehemiah lives in that city of Babylon (or in that state-controlled area of Babylon that now is ruled by the Medo-Persians). He is 700 miles away from Jerusalem. He works for a king who's not prone to kindness. I mean, history said he was a pretty rugged guy, like most of these absolute rulers were. And God begins to work in Nehemiah's heart to move him to Jerusalem so that the walls and the city streets can be built and that the name of the LORD could again be honored in the city. But it is the process of getting him there that is the subject of the first six chapters of this book. It is the process of God ruling there that is the subject of the last seven chapters. So, we pick up with Nehemiah as a young guy who is in a very important job. He's a food taster for the king, so no one will poison the king. If they try, it'll be Nehemiah that drops dead. It was a trusted position. You have to trust the guy tasting your food and going, "Yeah, everything's fine." And yet Nehemiah's problem is God had begun a work in his heart of concern for a place he had never seen; he was a kid born in captivity. He's heard reports. It matters to him more than, it seems, to anyone else, and he wanted to go take care of this neglected city for the glory of God.

And so we spent last week in chapter 1 looking at how that calling of God began in his heart, and we gave you a couple of things to think about. Number one - that God's work always begins in the heart of an individual, not in the heart of a group. God calls people individually. Second of all - that you can oftentimes determine what God is calling you to by what breaks your heart and doesn't seem to break anybody else's. Here's a guy, 700 miles away, in tears - fasting and praying. No one else seems to care. They're all kind of settled in to life in the Babylonian way of life, if you will. Thirdly - that that concern and that weeping led him to fasting and prayer, confessing that they were in this predicament because they had, for years, ignored the LORD, and He finally sent them into captivity. They can go back now, but the residual still was with them. And finally that Nehemiah makes himself available to be the answer to his prayer. "Send me. Bless my prayers." And so we ended, at the end of chapter 1, last week with just that.

And we want to pick up the story this morning in the first ten verses of chapter 2, when the next move of God's Spirit takes place. Verse 1, "And it came to pass in the month of Nisan," (not the car) "in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before." All of us, I think, are subject to authorities in our lives that we have little control over. It is usually hard to submit to people over us because we have sin and pride. And yet there is much to be learned from learning to submit to those over you as you do to the LORD. It's one of those lessons of growth. But it is frustrating when you are serving under someone, or responsible to someone, that is (a) an unbeliever, (b) stands in the way, you think, between you and what you believe God wants you to do, and there is some authority figure that has separated you from the will of God for your life. And that's certainly the case for Nehemiah. We know what he would like to do, but we also know there is a world ruler with absolute power standing between him and his goal. When that's the case, certainly it is imperative that you are convinced that prayer can move the hand of God; in other words, that you're not left hopeless, that God has a way, but that the only way that you can use is to pray - almost to go over their heads to the "big Boss," you know? To the LORD who can move mountains.

Hudson Taylor was the founder of Inland China Missions years ago, and he wrote a book about his experiences in China and how difficult it was to get anything done, how challenging it was. But one of the lines that he wrote in his book was this. He wrote, "I've learned that it is possible to move men through prayer alone, without the worldly tactics of anger or of intimidation." Well, Nehemiah needed God to

move if Nehemiah ever hoped to pursue what God had put on his heart. In fact, there was really nothing else that Nehemiah could do. To rattle the king might mean your life. It wasn't unusual for this guy to kill people in record numbers because he could. And nothing seemed to be checking his heart. So he's in a difficult place. He loves the people of God, he loves a city that he's never seen. It has captured his heart and driven him to tears and caused him, more than once, to just lay down his food and his daily bread and, with great intensity, to begin to pray.

We are given another time stamp, here in verse 1, between here and the last chapter. And this really had been a time of waiting - between chapters 1 and 2. We are told in chapter 1 that he had begun to pray in November or in December, in the month of Chislev. It is now Nisan; that's the month of April. It has been over four months since chapter 1:1 (to get to chapter 2:1). And all during that time, all we know is that verse 4 of chapter 1, Nehemiah fasted and prayed, and his heart was broken, and he was left to, really, himself and without any kind of indicator over those four months that heaven was listening, that God cared. There was no outward sign of progress. There were no hopeful signs. There was no assurance that it would just take a little while, "Just hang in there, and things are going to be fine." There was a four-month gap between chapters 1 and 2 because there's just nothing new to report. He cries, he prays night and day, he weeps with fasting. His heart is burning, his eyes are teary, but heaven seems closed. And yet Nehemiah continues to press on.

Most prayers in the Bible are not answered immediately. If the Bible is your guide, you'd have a hard time making a case for, "Well, I prayed now, and the LORD answered now." There are a few exceptions. There's a great verse in Isaiah 65:24 that says, "It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear." And now I'd love that to be the case. Wouldn't you? You could just go, "LORD," He goes, "I got it." Perfect. But that is not usually the way things go. There is usually a time between, and, like I said, very few notable exceptions. Why do you wait upon the LORD? Especially, why does God wait when my heart is churning and I'm impatient to get moving and I'm willing to go? Why would the LORD make me wait at all? There're a lot of reasons, certainly, that the Bible gives us. It seems that sometimes people, when God makes them wait, begin to make vows to the LORD, "If You'll do this for me, then I'm going to do this for You." Or they hope and make a deal. Or they fall for the lies of the devil, "God will never listen to you. The reason He hasn't answered you is He doesn't like you."

And you'd be surprised how many people come in and go, "I don't think the LORD cares for me." Really? Because He hasn't answered your prayer.

Sometimes, and we mentioned it last week as we closed, God wants to weed out the uncalled. Because we can respond emotionally to lots of things around us, and when we see something we don't like or something we think should be rectified, it isn't a big stretch for us to get involved immediately and, "Let me just fix that." And yet maybe not at all the place that God wants us to be. Time tends to winnow the field and focus the calling clearly. It'll help you learn to pray. Delays in prayer, I think, make you come back again. "I'm coming back again, LORD. I'm here again for those issues." And I think about Hannah there (1 Samuel 1), Samuel's mom, who for years prayed to have a child, and she just couldn't have one. Now, the other wife in this picture was like a rabbit. You'd look at her, and she'd be pregnant again! But not Hannah. And every year, she'd go to the Temple for the Feast Days, and her heart would break. Over those years, though, Hannah learned something. She came to the LORD and said, "LORD, if You give me a child, I'll give him back to You." It wouldn't have been something out of her mouth in year one, but it came out of her mouth years later. "LORD, he can be Yours. He can serve You." And when God got Hannah's heart to a place where she could accomplish what He wanted in bringing Samuel forth and then making him that last judge and that prophet to the country, then He blessed her prayers. It wasn't that He wasn't willing to answer. But He had to form her heart as well.

God loves to answer. Go read Luke 18, the first eight verses, about that unjust judge that Jesus told the parable about. And it starts out with the words, "The Lord taught them a parable that men ought always to pray and not to faint," and he tells the story of a widow who couldn't get justice in court. And there was an unjust judge who didn't like to be bothered, and he was a mean guy and known for being mean. And she had no one to defend her. So all that she had left was just to come knocking on his door every day. And she became a nag - that squeaky wheel. Finally the judge said (wicked guy), "I'd better just meet with her and get rid of her. She'll drive me nuts!" And then the Lord says this, "How much more do you think your Father in heaven will answer your prayers?" And He compares Himself to a guy who won't answer, but he'll answer because he's being put out; and He compares Himself to this unjust judge as the right Judge, the good Judge. He said, "Look, when you come to Me, I want to answer prayer. I want to help. You're not coming to force My hand."

If the answer doesn't come right away, there's a good reason for it. But know that the heart of God is to answer prayer, not to not answer prayer. Waiting refines us. It prepares us. In our lesson this morning, at least from Nehemiah, one of the most important things that can happen while you wait upon the LORD is that you begin to plan what to do next. What if the LORD answers your prayer? What if the LORD opens the door? What if God answers that cry from your heart? What are you going to do next? And we find that, at least for Nehemiah, a time of delay was also a time of planning. While I wait, I'll plan, I'll count the cost, I'll think through the work, I'll focus on what lies ahead. Look, God never stirs hearts without also providing a way to accomplish His will. But the timing is His. It's kind of like you've got to do your part. He'll certainly do His.

So, as we get to chapter 2, Nehemiah has spent four months on his knees - without an indicator at all that things were going to get any better. He'd been to work again that day to, I guess, taste food, and yet he had left all of his concern before the LORD. He'd offered it up before Him. He even writes here, notice in verse 1, "I've never been sad before the king before." Whatever was breaking his heart, he didn't let on. He didn't wear his emotions on his sleeve, he didn't try to manipulate the situation. When it came to this king, you could be in big trouble. There's a Scripture in Proverbs 16:14 that says, "As messengers of death is the king's wrath, but a wise man will appease it." So, that was the relationship that Nehemiah had. He couldn't make this guy angry. So he didn't just slip in to serve with a long face. But one day, apparently, unintentionally (not at all driven by plan), Nehemiah looked a little bit worse for wear. It had been working upon his heart, and it slipped out, if you will, and the king immediately took notice of it, and it scared Nehemiah to the point where he was "dreadfully afraid."

Notice verse 2, "Therefore the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but' " (depression) " 'sorrow of heart.' So I became dreadfully afraid, and said to the king, 'May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?' " His face betrays a heavy heart. The king correctly reads it, if you will. "What's wrong with you?" And it produces, in Nehemiah, tremendous fear. "Uh oh. This could be death for me! I can't rain on the king's parade. What's he going to say? What's he going to do? What am I going to say?" And I love that (in verse 3) Nehemiah, when called upon, answers the questions truthfully and quickly and clearly. He talks about Jerusalem. He knows full well (if you read historically) that the past administrations saw Jerusalem as a place of

tremendous rebellion that should never be rebuilt. And he says to the king, "Here's why I'm looking so sad. I'm concerned about Jerusalem. It's my heritage. It is the place that my fathers are buried. I'm attached to it, though I've never been there." And he honestly speaks from his heart and his concerns, "This is what's breaking my heart. O king, live forever! Sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. But here's what I'm going through."

"Then the king said to me," verse 4, " 'What do you request?' " And we read, "So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it.' " I mean, here's an unexpected answer to prayer - after four months. His face betrays his heavy heart. The king sees it clearly. And now he says to Nehemiah, "What do you want me to do about it?!" And Nehemiah realizes that the LORD might actually be opening a door, and you've got to love, "I prayed to the LORD and said to the king....." This was no time to get on your knees and raise your hands. This wasn't a couple of worship songs before the prayer meeting. Right? This was kind of like a "quickie." Right? People sometimes ask, "What kind of prayers does the LORD like?" I think the LORD loves any kind of prayer, even the one that you just go, "Come on, LORD. I gotta say the right words right now." He didn't have much time to bring that to the LORD. He just, "God, help me now. Help me now." "What do you want me to do?" "I'd like you to send me 700 miles away so that I can rebuild a city that has been known for rebellion. Oh, God, guide every word."

Now I want you to notice something. Nehemiah does not seek to help God out. If this was me, I think I might very well have couched my request in five hundred good reasons why this would be advantageous to the king and to his kingdom. "This'll be great! If I build this, man, just think. You'll have a city devoted to you - 700 miles away. Your frontiers and your control will have expanded." Nehemiah offers no reasoning. He offers no logic. He offers no argument. He just says, "Here's what I want. I want to go do this work." And along with answers that he'll give to the king for every question along the way, Nehemiah just lays it out and waits to see what God might do with it. I've written in my Bible (for years), "Nehemiah was fully 'pray-pared.'" Not prepared, just "pray-pared." Right? His approach was a long way off from kicking the doors in the name of the LORD. God doesn't need your help in opening doors if He's going to use you. And Nehemiah offered no help. He just laid out his heart.

"Then the king said to me," verse 6, "(the queen also sitting beside him), 'How long will your journey be? And when will you return?' So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. Furthermore I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy.' And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me." "What do you need?" "I want to go." "How long will you be gone?" The king asks two questions that only need one answer. "How long will you be gone? When will you be back?" Apparently he liked Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a good worker. He wanted him back. He loved him enough to be willing to entertain the idea of having him go. And so we read, "So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time." Now I don't know what the answer from Nehemiah was to the king as far as "how long will I be gone?" If you read ahead in chapter 5:14, you will read that he was there for twelve years. I don't know if that was the plan initially. I think, at some point, the king said, "Well, you might as well stay there and rule." But we don't know what his answer was. But we do know he had an answer. Right? And I think these words are important. He set a time. It is so different from those who would say, "Well, I'm not making any plan. I'm just trusting the LORD to lead."

And let me just say this to you - faith is not being irresponsible. Walking by faith doesn't mean the absence of organization or planning or forethought. In fact, just the opposite is true. For four months, Nehemiah had been praying without an answer. But for four months, he'd been making lists. "If I get to go, I'm going to need this. I'm going to need one of these, and I've got to have a couple of those. I can just imagine we're going to run into that." And he came with answers as a result of waiting upon the LORD in prayer. Had Nehemiah not planned, he would have had no answers to the king at all. And I think he probably would have just.....well that doesn't sound like much of a plan. I don't think the king might have gotten behind it, if you will. There's that Scripture in Zechariah (4:10) that talks about not despising the days of small things and if you're faithful in the little that God'll give you much, that God is looking throughout the world - His eyes to scan the earth for those that are willing. And here's a man that, quietly, has been planning. "A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). So, Nehemiah had been counting the cost, planning what to do if he would ever see the LORD open the doors. Look, the cost of not planning is a bill you can

ill afford. And I would say this to you - planning is the hardest part of any ministry; actually sitting down and thinking through what you're planning to do. Because the doing of ministry is always a lot of fun. I'll use myself as an example. I spend hours studying every week. Sometimes it's not so fun. But teaching's always fun - well, unless you guys fall asleep, then it's no fun at all. (Laughing) But provided you pay attention, usually it's pretty fun. Planning is not the funnest part of things, but it's the thing that really makes things go, doesn't it? It drives us forward. Jesus said, there in Luke 14:28, " 'Which of you building a tower doesn't first sit down to count the cost, whether you can finish it or not - so that when you've laid the foundation, and you're not able to finish it, everybody mocks you and says, "Man, this guy didn't have much of a plan"? Or how many of you are going to go to war without first counting up to see if with your ten thousand you can beat those with twenty thousand? Or else you're going to make peace.' " The Lord said, "You've got to plan!" And Nehemiah planned. And I would say to you - there's great blessing in planning by faith.

And you can tell. Look at verse 7, how Nehemiah had been hard at work. He asks for safe travel. "I'm going to need a visa. I've got to go through Ammon and Moab and other hostile countries, 700 miles to Jerusalem." He asked the king for materials (in verse 8). "I'm going to need your Home Depot card. I'm going to build walls and gates and a Temple and a house I'm going to live in. I'm going to need tools, and I'm going to need equipment." Good thing he was thinking ahead, don't you think? And you say, "Look at what the LORD did!" Yeah, but look at the responsibility Nehemiah took by faith. My greatest frustration - and maybe yours as well when you're involved with things - is when people make no plans. They only react when troubles arise. They don't anticipate them. They don't seek to alleviate them before they take place. They excuse themselves for not planning by saying, "Well, I've never done this before." Well neither had Nehemiah! He tastes food for a living. Now he's making a shopping list to build up a city. However it came across, and I love the parentheses because I suspect that the queen - like many women in men's lives - had the power. I think she gave him a nod and a wink, "All right. Give him whatever he wants." Because there's a mention of the queen sitting next to him. There's really no other reason to suggest that we would be told that.

So, " 'If it pleases the king, I want letters for the governors beyond the region of the River, that they would permit me to pass through until I get to Judah. I need a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest. I'm going to need timber and

all.' " "The king granted me" (at the end of verse 8) "all according to the good hand of God upon me." Nehemiah recognized the fact that, though the king was the one that was letting him go, it was God behind the scenes. God has it in His hands. Even a king of the world is not as powerful as the God that he serves.

Now, I'll just tell you in passing - and we're not going to look at it today - there's another reason why Nehemiah had to wait this long, and it is found in Daniel 9. And you might remember those verses at the end of the chapter where the LORD gives to Daniel a prophecy about God's dealing with national Israel from the time of the command to go forth and rebuild Jerusalem until, really, the Lord's second coming. The commission by Artaxerxes II to Nehemiah would be one anchor of a date in this awesome prophecy that God would establish there in Daniel 9. And we've gone over it before, but suffice it to say that the prophecy began by saying it'll take forty-nine years to rebuild the city in troublesome times. Now the wall would be built in fifty-two days. And then there is this prophecy about the coming of the Messiah - to the date that He would come. Daniel will write about Him being cut off and not for Himself. He'll talk about the seventieth week of Daniel, the time of the Great Tribulation. Jesus would weep over the city when He came, "If you'd have known in this your day." There's this wonderful prophecy in Daniel 9 that specifically mentions the day that the Lord would come to save. Had Nehemiah gotten an answer two months earlier, it would have all been thrown off. Now he didn't know this was going on. Behind the scenes, God moves a lot of pieces. Right? He rules the world. So He's got this prophecy to fulfill. Nehemiah doesn't know about it, but he's waiting and planning; doesn't really see the purposes of God. But we'll see that later when we get to the book of Daniel.

So, verse 9 tells us, "Then I went to the governors in the region beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me." He never even asked for this. Here's an official entourage in an official capacity sent to protect him. He's got the finest army in the world watching his back. It reminds me of that Ephesians 3:20 passage that says, "God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think." And so, as usual, when God is at work, He does more than we can ask or think.

Well here, verse 10, we'll end with that this morning. "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite" (we're going to learn to dislike these guys tremendously) "official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel." For now, the opposition

amounts to two people. We will watch them grow into an army. But needless to say, let me show you how the devil works. He's not happy when all you're interested in is serving others. They'd never met Nehemiah. They don't know what he's coming to do. But word has gotten out, "Someone is coming from the king to do something good for the children of Israel, to do something good for the land," and they are already agitated. Their numbers are small. The intensity is not really there, of hatred, much. But it will grow. And by the time we get through chapter 3 or so, maybe we'll stop on a Sunday and just go through all of the verses that talk about how the opposition against God's work grows as you serve the LORD. But understand this - the minute you step out to serve the LORD, you're going to have an enemy. The way to have peace is to do nothing. But then you don't really have peace, either, because God hasn't called you to sit.

We're all under circumstances and under submission to people that seem to sometimes hinder what we think God would want to do in our lives. And, rather than praying, we blame others for our situation. And, "I would if I could, but I can't, so I won't." But here's the lesson - if you pray and wait upon the LORD, God will do the impossible. And things that seem impossible to budge, He can move them. So pray well. Stay with it. God loves to answer prayer. If there's a delay, there's a good reason. And maybe if He explained that to you, you wouldn't get it. So just trust Him. And while you're waiting, plan. Think it through. "God, show me what would I do if I had that opportunity?" You don't need to prime the pump. You don't need to have fancy speeches to get your way. You don't have to try to hustle.

Notice that the answer for Nehemiah came in his normal daily life, and it came quickly, and he was "pray-pared." Seek God and pray. Don't be discouraged. Plan wisely. Watch God open the doors. In that format, living a Christian life is pretty exciting because you just never know when the LORD's going to, "Here you go. It's time." If you'll stick with it, and God moves in your heart, you can't lose.

Next week, we will look at the next ten verses, down through verse 20. So read ahead. And we're going to entitle next week "A Vision In The Making" because Nehemiah had a vision to get here, but now how's he going to do the work? And how's he going to get people onboard with him? Because you can't be a Lone Ranger in this work.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson  
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