

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to the book of Nehemiah 2:11.

The book of Nehemiah begins about 446 B.C. where we run into a fellow named Nehemiah who was a Jewish man born in captivity in Babylon. He was serving in a very official role as the king's food taster. And we meet him, very troubled about how the land of his forefathers was doing - especially Jerusalem, which had been wiped out in 586 B.C. (140 years earlier). And, hearing about the people's plight there, though it had been the city of God - where the Jews took great pride in their God meeting with them, it no longer had a wall or gates or even roads, for that matter. Nobody lived in town. And it broke Nehemiah's heart. The nation had been allowed to go back in 536 B.C., after a seventy-year captivity. God had said that He would do that, and He did. But only 50,000 people actually took Him up on it, and they traveled 700 miles from captivity back to the Land of Promise and back to Jerusalem itself. They built the foundation of the Temple pretty quickly. But then, for the next many years (just sixteen, I think) did nothing. They blamed political pressure, but it really was just their desire to build their own houses first. And by the time 520 B.C. rolled around, God sent a couple of prophets - Zechariah and Haggai - to get them to move again on the things of God so the LORD could begin to move again in the midst of the people. Eighty years later, 2,000 more folks came with Ezra. They came to lead in worship, to serve at the Temple; they were mostly priests and worship leaders, if you will, teachers. And eleven years later, 700 miles away, we meet this guy Nehemiah - 446 B.C.

We looked (in chapter 1) at how God calls individuals. We made four points with you: that the LORD's work begins in the heart of an individual, not in a group; that you can usually determine what God might be calling you personally to do by what breaks your heart and really doesn't bother anyone else; that, as a result of his despair though he had never seen the city, he began to pray and to not only confess the sin that had brought them into captivity to begin with, but he said to the LORD, "I'm in an impossible situation. I can't leave. But if You want to send me, I'm willing to go." And so he prayed for four months. Nothing came of it until chapter 2, when the LORD opened a door, and Nehemiah was noticed by the king as being kind of discouraged. He didn't mean to be; he wasn't trying to set the situation up. He was afraid that the king might kill him for being upset. And the

king wasn't. He asked him what was wrong. He shared his heart with the king. The king asked what he wanted; he had an answer for him. And we talked (last week) about how that you, while you wait upon the LORD, should be planning and prayerfully being ready so that when the king asked the questions, Nehemiah had answers for him - was able to tell him how long he'd be gone and what kind of things he would need if he was going to go do the work. And so, as a result, the king gave him a thumb's up, and he was ready to go out. And so, at the end of last week's study, we saw Nehemiah set off for Jerusalem. In tow, he had letters from the king, if you will, for the forest guy who kept the forest - to get wood and all, to get materials. He had safe passage visas through all of the different lands because the king that he served was a king over the world; he was a world empire, if you will. And Nehemiah said, "God's good hand was upon me." As they went, we finished (in verse 10) mentioning a couple of guys who were already upset that someone was coming to help the Jews; never met Nehemiah, had no idea what he was going to do, but anything good wasn't good to them. And so we will see this rising opposition. In fact, we may spend next week looking at it as a big overview out of the book. But, needless to say, maybe three more months pass between verse 10 and verse 11, where we start this morning, and that's because that's about the length of time (with all that he was taking) it would have taken him to travel.

So this morning, verse 11 down through the end of the chapter - verse 20. We've entitled the message, "A Vision In The Making." Here're the three points in case you need to leave early: get a vision, share the vision, opposition. Easy to remember.

Verse 11, Nehemiah writes, "So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days." I can't imagine what might have been going through Nehemiah's mind - getting close to the city he's been praying for and lamenting over. Four months of prayer between him and the LORD, three more months of traveling, seven more months in all. Imagine the anticipation, maybe, that was burning in his heart. He'd never been here. He'd only read about the place in the Scriptures. He'd been told by his brother about how bad things were here, and if he had imagined how bad it was, I can only imagine what he might have thought about when he saw how bad it was with his own eyes. We read, there in verse 11, that he was here for three days. I read the Scripture, and I think to myself, "Gosh, if I was waiting this long to get started, I might have just immediately tried to go to work, maybe frantically so." But that's really not the way God works. Maybe the hardest part of anything in serving the LORD is to go slowly and prayerfully and ask God to speak. The Bible

talks about, "Without a vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). Nehemiah had a heart for the place, and by God's good graces, he's now at the place. But what does he do now? What is the way that he approaches the work now? And so, rather than just rushing in, he spent the next three days just kind of getting his bearings, assessing the situation. What would the LORD want to do next? He's not frantic; he's diligent. He's not making quick decisions, he's not employing others, he's not rallying the troops yet. He just wants to hear from the LORD. "What do I do now? You've got me this far. What happens now?" And certainly any, I think, leader led by the LORD would come to the conclusion that you have to get a vision from the LORD before you could ever enlist any others to help you. And so Nehemiah goes at it pretty slowly, although it's a miraculous story that he's here at all.

Verse 12 tells us that Nehemiah writes, "Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem; nor was there any animal with me, except the one on which I rode." So for three nights, Nehemiah sets off on night scouting missions to see the work, to develop some ideas, to pray about what to do next. He wasn't sharing it with anyone. He kept it very close to the vest. He wasn't sharing what he hadn't really thought through, if you will. He was asking God to show him what to do. It is best that you plan and that, as the LORD is working, you take it one step at a time. Now, notice Nehemiah traveled very light. Like I said, aside from the few men that were with him - who might very well have been that king's guard that he sent with him - he hadn't really told anyone what he was going to do because I don't think he really knew yet. Not fully so. Had he begun to talk, he'd have gotten a lot of opinions and might very well not have any other ideas. Notice down in verse 16 that it says, "And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work." "I hadn't said anything to anyone." So, he just kind of traveled.

It is this quiet, I think, seeking of the LORD that is a hard thing to teach us to do in light of the fact that we live in an instant society. I was on the internet the other day at work here, trying to look something up, and the thing was slow. Slow. It took two seconds to come up. And I went, "What is wrong with this thing? I'm never going to get done!" Everything is that way, isn't it? We put instant coffee into microwaves because we want to hurry up. I mean, there's just really no way for us to stop and count the cost. I think we shared that Scripture last week (out of Luke 14:28) where Jesus said, "You can't sit down and build a tower without

figuring out if you can pay for it. You can't get halfway done, and then you can't pay for it. Everybody laughs at you. Think it through. Count the cost." And without this three days or this time, if you will, of waiting upon the LORD, Nehemiah might have said to the people later, "Well, the LORD'll lead us," but it'll have been an excuse because the LORD hadn't led him. And so people say that sometimes when they don't do anything, "Well, whatever the LORD wants to do." Which is kind of almost like saying, "I didn't think about it, I didn't plan anything, I didn't think it through, I don't have any answers, the LORD hasn't spoken to me, the LORD'll lead us." It's almost like a cop out, you know? But Nehemiah wanted the LORD to lead him. He wanted to know what God was going to do, first. And, without any activity but to pray and to walk around, this is the greatest process, I think, in getting things done that the LORD would do. The LORD has already given him a burden. God has opened doors that were miraculous to get him here. And now he's just kind of left with what to do next; not emotional but truly planning. Right? He's going to anticipate problems, he's going to look forward to what is going to be needed and how is he going to divide the work, and the vision that is in the making is happening in his heart. So he hadn't told anyone, hadn't said a word to anyone, hasn't stirred anybody up, if you will. And that's really the way I think you and I have to go about doing and serving the LORD. Our first priority is to be students of the Word. Be a student of God's Word. Know it well. Right? Be a believer in the Word. Receive it from the LORD. Know what God wants to do. And then you can step out. Wasn't it Paul who said in his last letter to his young protégé, Timothy, who was now in his forties, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15)? So, Nehemiah is a man and a leader that brings himself to the place where he has something to share with everyone. So by the time he gets with people, he's thought it through, and he's heard from the LORD. He's anticipated problems. He's considered the resources he has and things he can't do anything about, and he has a pretty clear picture of what God is going to do, or would like to do, so that he can pass that along to others.

I think in the book of Ezra, when Ezra showed up with those 2,000 people twelve years earlier, he wrote in chapter 7:10 of Ezra that he had prepared his heart to seek the Law of God so that he could do it and then he could teach it to Israel. Hear God's Word, do God's Word, pass it along. But it has to go through your life first. I think when the apostles stood before the Sanhedrin (there in Acts 4), and they were told that they couldn't speak anymore in Jesus' name, "Don't preach anymore in His name," their simple response to very ominous leadership over them

at the time was, "We can't but speak the things which we have seen and the things we have heard." In other words, we've been there with the Lord. We know what He wants. It's in us now. We have to pass it along." I mean, Nehemiah - if you put yourself in his shoes - had seen the LORD move mountains already to get him this far. There was really no sense changing managers now. "Thank You, LORD, for getting me here. I'll take it from here." Kind of foolish.

So, notice that while others slept, Nehemiah was wide awake seeking the will of God - virtually by himself. And planning takes much more time than doing. If you really want the LORD to use you in a leadership position, know that it's not a 9 to 5 job where you can walk away. It's a lifestyle that God calls you to. And you certainly see that in Nehemiah.

So, he slowly approaches with faith, waiting upon the LORD. He spends time in secret, letting God form in his heart. And then he honestly evaluates the work that he's facing. Notice, in verse 13, that he says, "And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal under me to pass. So I went up in the night by the valley, and viewed the wall; then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned." Despite all of the destruction, what you don't hear from Nehemiah is that he was overwhelmed or that he was somehow discouraged. He believed God could do the work. It wasn't a matter of trying to underestimate what he was facing, but he wanted to be familiar with the details. He wasn't lost in them. And so, notice verse 14. He travels around the perimeter, he sees the great rubble; there're places he can't even lead his horse through. If the reports back in the palace (from his brother, months earlier) had been discouraging, I suspect that this mess would have been worse. The word "viewed" (in verse 13 and again in verse 15) is a Hebrew word that means to inspect. It wasn't just like taking pictures. He really looked at what he was facing with a determination to fix it.

Alan Redpath, who passed away in the 80's, wrote a book called *Victorious Christian Living*. He used to come to our pastors' conferences when I was a young pastor. And he was from England, and he loved singing, but he was horrible at singing. And he would be on the pulpit, singing louder than us all, and you would just your teeth would hurt, and your eyes would but he would worship, man, he was gone, you know? But he was one of the best teachers, I think I've ever listened to.

If you ever get a chance to read his book, it's well worth doing; although it's British, and he writes kind of in that English style, which can be a little bit hard to read. But he wrote on this verse, and I wrote it in my Bible, "When a true work of God is to be done, some faithful, burdened servant has to take a long journey and weep in the night over the ruins." And I think that's really what happened here with Nehemiah. It stirred his heart. He had a compelling concern which the people who had been living there for generations had not had. And so he gets the vision.

Well, then, having spent some time, he now has the opportunity to tell the people that live nearby what God was doing. So he shares the vision here, beginning in verse 16. "And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told anyone" Verse 17, "Then I said to them, 'You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.' And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. So they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' Then they set their hands to this good work." Four months of prayer, three months of travel, three days of nightly review, and now it's time to get some people on board. It wasn't a work he could have done for himself or by himself. No good work of God is ever done alone. That's why there's this picture of a body ministry. You don't see a hand just flapping around by itself. And it is time to have others catch the vision and join the work. But God's method of work is always sharing the vision or sharing the labor, if you will. There has to be unity, I think, in any ministry. And if you ever hope to be fruitful, work with people. Let the LORD put you in a place where you're working with others. You can't stand on your own. It just doesn't work that way. But, look. God has led one person first. He's been directed, he's followed the vision, he's now coming to share the vision. And leaders without a clear vision usually find people under them that are very frustrated. I don't know if you're involved with any groups or things where the leadership doesn't plan much, and you show up and you go, "Oh, we've got a meeting, but we're not going to get anything done," or, "We're going to gather together. We don't know what we're doing." And so it's hard to get on board because you really don't share in anything. And Nehemiah understood that.

So, here're a couple things that we learn from Nehemiah about this meeting that he had with the rulers and the priests and the officials and the others who would do the work. Basically (from verse 16), he got as many people together as would

listen. He says, in verse 17, "You see the distress that we are in." And my first point would be that Nehemiah identifies himself with the problem. It would have been easy, as an emissary of the king - with the king's guards with you and the way that you've gotten there, to say, "You've got a problem. You guys have certainly been sitting on your hands. Look at this place. It's a disaster! You'd better get to work. I'll be in the office." But he doesn't do that. He identifies. He uses the words "we" and "us" a lot - because it's hard to ask people to do what you're not willing to do yourself. I think it was Paul who said to Timothy in his first letter to him (1 Timothy 4:12), "Don't let anyone despise you, Timothy, for the fact that you're young. Here's how you not have that happen. Be an example to them of a man who, in his word and conduct and love and faith and spirit and purity. Set an example for them." Practicing, if you will, what you preach. And then he devotes the entire chapter (1 Timothy 4) to Timothy's example.

Well, Nehemiah shows up, has the town meeting. Everybody is curious to want to know why this guy's here with the king's army. And he said, "Man, we've got trouble. We've got a problem. Look at this place. Look at this place! We are in great distress. Jerusalem is destroyed, the gates are not there. We've got to bring some dignity back." And he doesn't put it off on them. You know, I'm always interested in leaders. Because I get a chance to go speak at a lot of other places, it's easy to watch leaders of people you don't really even know. But if they get in the pulpit and they tell you that it's so important that you worship, and yet during worship they hang out in the foyer and want to talk, I'm not convinced they believe that worship is so important. Right? You don't want people that tell you one thing and do another. Everyone kind of, I think, hates hypocrisy. If it isn't in your heart, it's not going to be in those that you would want to lead. And, in the church, that's just the way it works. If you're in church, and your family never is, and somehow that isn't important to you, then it says a lot about you. So, Nehemiah doesn't separate himself from the need that's in front of them. He embraces the fact that they're in this together. This is a common deal.

Second of all, he doesn't beg or plead or bargain with them to get involved. And I find that pretty interesting because there is always this difficulty in ministry - motivating people to get involved. I've been pastoring almost forty years, and I can say, without doubt, that 100% of the work in a church is done by 15% of the people. In fact, I'll go this far - 100% of the debts that churches incur are paid off by 15% of the people. It's just the way it is. So if you're a numbers guy, you might be encouraged to quit because that doesn't seem like you're making much of

an impact. And yet God never said, "I'm going to need 100 or 1,000 to get My work done." He's just looking for the hearts of a faithful few. But that to say Nehemiah gathers this people together who literally have lived there all of their lives and have done absolutely nothing. And you would think that he might employ the typical kind of, "Let me just encourage you by guilting you out or trying to force your hand." He doesn't do that. He just shares the vision, "Look at our place. We need to rebuild this." It is our church policy, and has been since we started, that we will never say to you we need anything. Because if this is God's church, we don't need anything; we just need Him to work. We will announce if Sunday school needs a teacher, we'll just say, "Hey, there's an opportunity to teach," or, "Hey, there're some opportunities over here to serve." If you don't show up, God's not hampered. And so for me to pressure you, or somehow the church to put a thumb on your back, "Come on, man, if you really love Jesus" What a way to see God work! I would rather shut a classroom down than keep it open with pressure from the pulpit. Why do that? It's the LORD's church! "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Psalm 127:1). We read that this morning. And I don't see Nehemiah doing that, either. There's nothing you can do or you can keep things together artificially through guilt and pressure and all. But he doesn't do that. He just says, "Look at this place. There's certainly a need. There's certainly a cause." He appeals, rather, to their spiritual senses. He tells them, "This is God's city. This is our place. This is the place God has brought us. It's our place of worship. We need to put it back together." Now, if you've read ahead, Nehemiah will eventually put forty-two different work groups together in various places to get this work done as quickly as possible.

So the body of Christ - that's kind of the way we are, you know? Aren't you glad that the kids can sing? These girls and boys sang good, huh? But some of you couldn't do that. Trust me. You can't! (Laughing) I don't think I could either. Isn't it good that God gives them that gift so they can lead us in worship? Isn't it good someone showed up on Friday to put toilet paper in the bathrooms? And that's their ministry, man. They take care of you. You'll never see them up here taking bows. "Thank you very much." You'll probably see them in heaven sitting a little closer to the throne than you - because they don't have their reward yet. I get mine now. People come up all the time, "Oh, Pastor Jack, it was such a good study." I'm thinking, "Man, you're rippin' me off!" (Laughing) And then I get the guy who writes me a letter telling me I'm an idiot, and then I think, "All right. I get reward for that one." (Laughing) So keep those letters comin'. It's a good thing we have a lot of parts that work together to get the work done, don't we?

Nehemiah doesn't offer any rewards for help. He doesn't say, "We're going to give away weekends at the Dead Sea for those who sign up and bring the most workers." There're a lot of churches that operate that way because that's how we respond. And yet it isn't the way the Bible would teach us to go forward. It's not the best motivation for service because the minute you start giving and offering things to people for them to serve, you've got to just continue in that path because that motivation hasn't changed. The best motivation is just because you love the LORD. I feel my job, as a pastor, is to teach you as much as I can, as clearly as I am able, so that you can walk out of here saying, "I love the LORD." And then whatever you decide to do because you love Him will be His work. Here's the problem - if I start going around saying, "Man, we really appreciate you. I'm so glad you showed up xxxx. We couldn't have done it without you. You're the guy that we depend upon." And I go down that road of constantly buttering you up (for lack of a better term), what happens the minute I forget to thank you or forget to mention you or forget to point out your work? And you go, "Man, he doesn't appreciate me." Well that's because you're doing it for me. You're not doing it for me. You're doing it for Him. So, we try to stay away from all that stuff. It doesn't mean we don't encourage people and tell them how God has used them and how blessed we are to see what God is doing. But, look, your reward comes from Him. Right? Your blessing comes from His hand. And I don't find Nehemiah offering rewards. We read that verse this morning, "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Psalm 127:1). Thank You, LORD. You build the house. You do the work. Love has to be the motivator. I think about David standing in front of Goliath, who could have easily - he must have been just scary big. Right? And while the whole army of Israel agonized, David wants to fight the guy. But his motivation is not the offer of stuff that Saul is dangling before anyone else - a life of tax-free living, a house on the hill, the beautiful daughter. He'd offered everything to get anyone to go out there and fight this spiritual battle. And David goes, "I just am going to fight him because he offended my God, and I love my God." That was his motivation. And I'll tell you what - if you serve loving the LORD, nothing will ever discourage you from serving. If you serve for rewards or applause or recognition or status, eventually someone's going to disappoint you, and you're going to pack it up and go because that's just the way life is in the world. But not in the church.

Nehemiah finally I'll tell you what - the clincher is in verse 18. He was able to say to them, "Hey, by the way, guys. Look outside. See the wood on the truck? God gave us that. Not only are we going to build, God provided all the materials. Look, I got a Home Depot card. Look, my picture's on it. Unlimited. We can buy

whatever we want. The king said so." So, he didn't say, "Join me." He said this, "Join Him. Look what God's good hand has done. Join in His work. Join what God is doing." And if you can, in ministry or in any place where you are seeking to influence others in calling them to serve along with you, invite them to serve the LORD. That's really what God is interested in. And then He gets the credit. Organizing is much easier because Nehemiah had agonized over the plans. I wrote this in my notes years ago, "Planning without agonizing is not good. Agonizing without planning is no good, either." You need both. And so I love the fact that he could take people outside and say, "See all the stuff we got? We've got all the materials, man. And we can just go to work. We've got a clear path." In fact, they got a clear path a lot quicker than we get one from the City these days.

Receive a vision. Get the vision. Then share the vision. Finally, notice verses 19 and 20 - here comes the opposition. We read, "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, 'What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?' So I answered them, and said to them, 'The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.' " Every step of victory is followed by a mention of the opposition in this book. Every time there's a movement forward, there is the enemy. And, again, I read this, and I try to put myself in Nehemiah's shoes, and I'm thinking the first thing I'd say to them is, "I got the king's permission. Look at my letters. You shut your face." (Pastor Jack says this in a sing-song, whiny tone). That's what I'd have done. He just simply trusted the LORD. "We're just doing what God has called us to do." "Are you rebelling? Are you fighting against the king? You guys are going to be in trouble." "No, no, no. We're just going to serve the LORD." "Oh, how great is Your goodness," the psalmist writes (Psalm 31:19), "which You have laid up for those who fear You, which You have prepared for those who trust in You in the presence of the sons of men!" God will bless. And Nehemiah's heart was simply to turn there.

I don't know if you remember from last week (verse 10) - there were two critics mentioned by name. Now there are three. Satan's little army has grown by 50% already. It won't be long before there's an army of people here with swords and viciousness and threats. Nehemiah might have whipped out the king's letters, but he didn't. And I think the way you handle criticism is vital to any part of ministry because it's going to come your way. It's a spiritual work. You're out witnessing to people. You're going to get a name, and you're going to be talked about, and you're

going to say "no" to the world, and you're going to be singled out. There's no way to not be that one that sticks out in the world when you're walking with God. It's just the way things are. Jesus said it would be this way. If they hated Him, they're going to hate you (John 15:18).

Nehemiah just said, "We're going to serve the LORD," and then he said to these guys, "You have no part in this work at all." And notice the three words that he uses. "You have no heritage." Heritage speaks about the past. "You have no right." It's a present-tense term. And, "You have no memorial," or no future in this. "We're serving the LORD. So, we're not going to argue with you or try to defend ourselves. We're just going to move on. We're going to go out and serve the LORD and not be preoccupied with this discussion with people that don't belong." He's not sidetracked, he's not discouraged. He just gets to work. It won't be long before they will be shouting at him (them and a whole bunch of other people), "Yeah, I think if a fox jumps on that wall, it's going to fall over" (Nehemiah 4:3). And I suspect that that might have been true. I'm sure if you get a bunch of priests to now do concrete work, I'm sure they're going to be horrible at it. I'm sure there's more concrete on them than on the ground. But they're yelling that on the other side of the wall. God has a way to use us.

So, our lesson this morning is pretty easy. Get a vision from the LORD, and then count the cost, and think it through. Hear God speak, and then you can share it with others and trust that God will work in them. You won't have to connive them or push them or somehow cajole them into joining you. If you build a ministry based on pressure, it's going to have to sustain itself on pressure. You'll never run out of pressure. You'll always be needing to pressure. I would just rather let God build the church. Wouldn't you? And you won't get beat over the head, here, having to serve. We'll encourage you to serve because I don't think anybody's called to just sit. I don't find a "sit" ministry in the Bible. "You shall be called to sit." Okay. It's not in there. But, I'm not going to pressure you. I'm just going to tell you. It's the same thing with money. You ever hear us ask you for money? We'll never do that because God pays His bills. And if He doesn't, I want to quit. If God can't pay His bills, it's the wrong God to serve. Don't you think? Yeah, He runs the universe, can't pay His bills. I don't know. It doesn't fit. On the other hand, we need to let God work. And when God works, you can expect God to not only be glorified but that there are enemies that will arise to oppose the work that you're doing.

So, what's your vision this morning? What has God showed you? And how are you pursuing that which God has put upon your heart? Because this life is short, and eventually you just run out of gas, you run out of time. And then you're going to have to present what you did with what you've been given. Learn from Nehemiah that if you'll get a vision, God will use you to share with others and bring them along. And then we'll get something done.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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