

Nehemiah 1-2 • Biblical Project Management

Introduction

There are definitely times in the Bible where God moves someone to do something immediately with almost no advanced warning or preparation such as transporting Philip into the path of the Ethiopian. However, this is by far more the exception than the rule. The most common pattern is preparation and, yes, even planning: God's instructions to Moses and Aaron in all their dealings with Pharaoh, the creation of the Tabernacle and priesthood, the building of the Temple, Paul's own repeated examples in his missionary journeys. But also a common thread is that even though God prepares and communicates in advance, we still have to submit to His timing: Samuel knew of Eli's demise 20 years before it happened, David was anointed king in Saul's place many years before it would happen, etc., etc.

God has promised that he would restore the Jews to their native land along with rebuilding the Temple and Jerusalem. In the case of Nehemiah, it's not God's intentions that are in question, it's His timing in how to carry them out.

¹The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, ²that 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. ³They 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."

⁴When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵I said, "I beseech You, 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, ⁶let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. ⁸Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹but 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

[Read 1:1-11]

Q: What is the news that is given to Nehemiah concerning his people and concerning Jerusalem?

A: The news is that his people are in "great distress" and "reproach."

Q: What does this mean?

A: It probably means that they are poverty stricken and at the mercy of the people who have inhabited the land, including the Samaritans. They have no protection from outside intruders, as all the identifying marks of Jerusalem, except for the Temple, have been destroyed. They are depressed, oppressed, and possibly so forlorn that they are in danger of being exterminated as a result of trying to make it in the land through intermarrying.

Q: What was Nehemiah's reaction to the news his brother Hanani brought back, and what does this tell us about the person of Nehemiah?

A: It's similar to the reaction of Ezra in chapter 9 of Ezra concerning the intermarriage of the Jews with the people of the land. He immediately begins spending time alone with the Lord, praying and fasting on behalf of the condition of his people.

Application: *What are some of the conditions around us that we ought to have similar reactions to? What do you do when you recognize sin within the life of a fellow Believer, or the church itself?*

Q: What was the nature of Nehemiah's prayer?

- (1) He makes his petition on the basis of God's lovingkindness (*hesed*);
- (2) he confesses sin (noting that he, like Ezra had done, identifies himself with the people);
- (3) he acknowledges the rightness of God's judgment (that is, the Jews got what they deserved);
- (4) he asks for success in the next step, which would require the king to reverse the decision he had made as recorded in Ezra 4:21, "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me."

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have chosen to cause My name to dwell.⁹
¹⁰They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.¹¹ O LORD, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.”
Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

²¹And 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 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?”

⁴Then the king said to me, “What would you request?”

So I prayed to the God of heaven.

⁵I 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.”

⁶Then 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.

⁷And 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.

Q: What was Nehemiah’s royal position, and what does this tell us about his integrity and character?

A: He was cupbearer to the king. That is, it was his responsibility to test all beverages given to the king so as to ensure that none was poisoned. Therefore, he had gained respect and trust by King Artaxerxes.

Application: *Is there a lesson for us in that Nehemiah was **NOT** in an ideal position **personally** (as a Jew he was still a slave or servant to a foreign conqueror), but because he recognized God’s sovereignty he was in an ideal position **spiritually**?*

[Read 2:1-8]

Note: The subject here is “Project Management.”

Q: How much time has passed between his receiving the news about Jerusalem and his audience with the king?

A: Four months. That means that he didn’t immediately rush into the king with his request, but waited for the proper time and moment that God provided. He also waited long enough to formulate a plan.

Q: What was the risk of being sad before the king?

A: A sad countenance was not tolerated in the royal presence, so Nehemiah had good reason to be afraid. It could have been that at any other moment in time Nehemiah might have lost his job or his head!

Q: What was Nehemiah’s strategy in presenting his request to the king?

A: He let the king broach the subject. Obviously, he could not hide his distress any longer and the king noticed it. Once the door was opened by the king’s question, Nehemiah took advantage of it.

Application: *How might this speak to us personally in terms of how we’re currently dealing with what we desire to do in and through our life?*

Q: What was Nehemiah’s initial response when the king noticed his sadness?

A: He immediately affirmed his loyalty to the king.

Q: How did he present to the king his dilemma?

A: He presented it in the form of a question that the king would ask and easily identify with. His question was presented in such a way as to be consistent with the royal policy of repatriation begun by Cyrus. He is not stating that the king, or any of his predecessors, were the source of the problem as Nehemiah recognized they were the tool of God’s discipline. Even in his desire for restoration, Nehemiah was obedient to God’s discipline.

Q: What was Nehemiah’s first reaction when the king asked him what his request was?

A: He prayed, even while in the middle of a conversation with the king! He addressed the King!

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Q: Verse 5 begins with Nehemiah's request. What does this tell us about the man?

A: He had a plan! He'd already thought out what he wanted to request of the king. He also begins his request by giving the king an out... *"If it please the king..."* During this conversation, he never speaks arrogantly or discourteously to the king. He maintains a respectful attitude. It's an application of what Paul would later state in Ephesians 6:5, *"Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ;"*

Q: What is Nehemiah's request when the king asks him how long he wants to take leave?

A: Nehemiah gave him *"a definite time."* Once again, he has a well thought-out plan.

Q: What is the significance of the observation in verse 6, "the queen sitting beside him"?

A: Since Esther was the queen of the previous king Ahasuerus (Xerxes) ca. 486-464 and the stepmother of Artaxerxes, it could be that she had previously influenced the present king and queen to be favorably disposed to the Jews.

Q: What was Nehemiah's final request?

A: Get it in writing! This included a list of materials needed to rebuild the wall.

Application

List the steps Nehemiah used in presenting his request to his boss.

1. He first prayed about it.
2. He waited for the right opportunity.
3. He let the king initiate the situation.
4. He was honest, sharing his feelings and in doing so, not making the king look bad, as if it was his fault.
5. He was respectful the entire time.
6. He affirmed his loyalty to the king.
7. He gave the king many "outs," or opportunities to say no. In other words, Nehemiah didn't back the king into a corner or no-win situation. He allowed the king to maintain control of the decision.
8. He had a well thought-out plan that included a timetable.
9. He had anticipated that there might be problems once he got there, therefore he got it in writing.
10. He had the materials list all ready and prepared.

Q: To whom did Nehemiah give the credit when it was all said and done?

A: To God (v.8)