

Nehemiah and His Not So Crazy Dream

Nehemiah 1-6

Good morning, men. We want to give a special welcome to all the men who are here with the FUEL conference. Also, in addition to many general visitors, we have newly appointed and hired Area Directors. If you are an Area Director for Man in the Mirror, stand and let us say thanks for doing that. Thank you so much, men.

I must confess as I was preparing the message this week, I had these AD's especially in mind, but of course, this is a message for everybody.

Before we get started, we have a shout out today. For our visitors, the way we do this is we give a group of men who are doing the Bible study online a round of applause, and on the count of three, we will all give them a hoorah.

The shout out today goes to the Oasis Men's Bible study. 20-30 guys who have been meeting for over ten years, on Thursdays at 7PM at the Tacoma Christian Reformed Church in Tacoma, Washington. Thanks to Howard Wouters for bringing this to our attention. We welcome you guys to the Bible study. Would you joining me in giving them a great round of applause? One, two, three, hoorah!

The title of the message is, "Nehemiah and His Not So Crazy Dream." Last week we did the parable of the ten minas. Ten minas is about three months' worth of wages. In the parable the master gave each of the ten servants one mina and said go and put it to work. The big idea last week was "What is my agenda? What is God's agenda? Are we working on the same agenda?" I thought it would be good this week to drill down on this idea of being a servant of the Most High God and look at an example of a man who worked out this idea of synthesizing, if you will, his agenda with God's agenda. That is this guy Nehemiah.

THE MAN AND HIS MISSION

The first thing I want to look at this morning is a man and his mission. In Nehemiah 1 we begin to read about this guy and the situation in which he found himself. One of his brothers had come back to Judah. At this point there had been two returns. They were in post-exilic Israel; after the exile. It had been about a hundred years since the first return. The second return happened over a decade ago. One of his brothers came back to the citadel and gives a report on what is going on.

Nehemiah 1:1-3: "They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.' When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

Then his prayer in Verse 11, “Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.’ I was cupbearer to the king.”

What we have here is a man who actually believed that he could succeed where others had been failing for a hundred years. We have here a man who actually thought he could reverse the trend that what all these other people who had gone before him had faced and failed at doing that he was going to be able to do it. Others have gone before you and had failed at the vision God put in your heart.

There had been many, many others who had gone before you who had become faithful, gospel workers who poured out their lives.

Think about Billy Graham, the greatest evangelist in our era, and perhaps of all time. Basically, all of the moral and spiritual decline in culture happened while he was out there preaching. You are not always called to be successful. There are others who have gone before you and failed. God gave Nehemiah a vision to be a servant and to do the thing. He actually believed that he would with God’s help – give your servant success – succeed where others would fail. I believe that God can give any man that he wants that kind of confidence. That is the mission.

What kind of man is this? First of all, he has a staggering amount of self-confidence. It is amazing. But beyond that he is an extremely humble man. When he heard these things he sat down and he wept and mourned and fasted and prayed. He was a humble man. He was an extremely determined man. We all know he rebuilt the wall with the help of a few others. He was an extremely determined man and a confident leader. But he was also extremely humble. This is the exact kind of man Jim Collins talks about in *Good to Great*, the level five leader. The unique combination of humility and professional will to make things happen. That is the kind of man Nehemiah was. He was a level five leader. He was above reproach and he was courageous.

There is something else; because above all else, Nehemiah was a servant. That is how he viewed himself. That is what it says in Verse 11. Be attentive to the prayer of this your servant. Give your servant success. Above all else, he considered himself a servant.

He knew that he was a son of God. He knew the gospel of Jesus, the Christ of prophecy. We believe in the Christ of history, he was believing in the Christ of prophecy. He was a Christian. He knew that he was a son of Abraham. He knew that he was a son of God and that was his principal identity. But he set aside the rights of a son in order to be a servant. Sound familiar? Anyone else come to mind who set aside the rights of son to become a servant? I am among you as one who serves, says Jesus. That is what Nehemiah has done here. Yes, a son, but above all he viewed himself as a servant.

What I want you to see today is this big idea I am about to show you. **A servant isn’t thinking, “What do I want?” He’s asking, “What does the Master need?”** When you think about this man Nehemiah, he wasn’t thinking what do I want, what do I want to do with my life? Where do I find meaning and purpose? But he was asking what does the Master need? These are two completely alternative ways of approaching life as a Christian. What do I want? What does the Master need? You know how the jeweler has the raw, rough diamond? The master jeweler studies the diamond and turns it around and around and looks at it maybe for days. He is

looking for that one place to make the one perfect cut that would make the difference between an ordinary diamond and the most remarkable diamond that has ever been created. I believe this is one of those cuts you can make in your life that will determine whether you are a common man or you become a great man of God.

WHAT MADE IT WORK FOR NEHEMIAH

That line of demarcation is am I going to be focused on what I want or am I going to focus on what my Master needs. With that in mind, let's look at what made it work for Nehemiah. I will give you seven things that are pretty obvious that made it work for Nehemiah.

Number one, Nehemiah fully considered the gravity of his times. We saw that already that we wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. He knew that others had tried and failed the calling God placed in his heart. He knew he would face opposition. But he also knew that this was what the Master needed him to do. That is number one.

Number two, he was a man of prayer. If you want to be a man of God, you really want to be a man of prayer. He mourned, wept, fasted and prayed. God did answer Nehemiah's prayer and He did give him all the resources that he need, He gave him all the plans he needed. He made Nehemiah's prayer come into reality because Nehemiah was faithful in being a man of prayer.

As we saw in Verse 11, the third thing is above all else, he was first a servant of this Most High God.

The fourth thing I want you to see in this is that he had committed to spend himself on a worthy cause. I want you to look with me at Chapter 2:1-5. It says he brought wine to Artaxerxes, the king. He said he "had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, 'Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.'"

This guy had a very important position. I wonder what the life expectancy for a wine taster for a king was back then. He had a very important job and he had access to the king. But he had this sad look on his face. Then it says, "I was very much afraid." When God puts a vision in your heart to do something great for Him, this does not mean you won't have all kinds of fears and doubts and questions and wondering if you made the right decision. He was afraid. He looked sad and must have been sad. The king said he was sad, and he was afraid.

God gave you a great vision to do something great for Him and you are sad and afraid. That is part of what it means to be a servant. But he committed himself to spend himself on a worthy cause.

Reading on, it says:

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it."

There is the vision. God gave Nehemiah the vision to rebuild this nation. God had given Nehemiah the vision to start by rebuilding the wall; the vision to rebuild his nation. Nehemiah was willing to forsake this great job that he had and commit himself to be spent in a worthy cause, rebuilding a nation.

This is a story about nation building. In the Old Testament when you read about nation building you need to make a little adjustment in the New Testament because you are talking about the body of Christ. What is the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, in the New Testament is the body of Christ.

If Nehemiah was today it would not be nation building it would be body of Christ building; kingdom building. He would be a kingdom builder today. He would say the walls of the kingdom are broken down. Who is going to be the man who answers the call and would spend himself on a worthy cause to rebuild this kingdom, this broken down wall?

We see first that he had fully considered the gravity of his times. He was a man of prayer and above all a servant. He committed to spend himself on a worthy cause and then, number 5, he inspired and recruited other men to stand shoulder to shoulder with him in this vision. In the whole of chapter three I counted 38 different families who helped in rebuilding the wall.

He didn't just walk off into Jerusalem and say would you like to help rebuild the wall? The first thing he did is keep his mouth shut. The Bible said he didn't tell anybody what was in his heart. Instead he went out and assessed the damaged to the wall. He went out by night. When he had developed his plan, that is when he revealed his vision to the people and because he had a plan he wasn't just shooting from the hip, he had a plan, they launched on board. They came on board and began to do the rebuilding and in Chapter 3 we see verse after verse of these unknown people that you have never heard before and when you read the names you will never remember them again. They are just ordinary people like you and me who he inspired to work shoulder to shoulder together which they did in 52 days.

Here is a note I wrote years ago in my margin. Some had vision for section of the city. Some had vision for their neighborhood. Some were building the wall just in front of their house, some were building whole sections, but together they had enough vision to rebuild the whole city. You don't have enough vision to rebuild the kingdom of God. You don't have that much vision but you can stand shoulder to shoulder with other men who have that much vision, if you are a servant of God. That is number five.

Number six. Nehemiah was prepared for opposition. Look at Nehemiah 4:10. There was so much opposition to this, no wonder he was afraid. No wonder he was filled with fear. He had good reason to be. In Verse ten it says, "Meanwhile, the people of Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is giving out.'" The first kind of opposition is people are worn out. They are discouraged. Then it says "there is so much rubble we cannot rebuild the wall," so there was just chaos they were dealing with. In Verse 11 it says, "Also our enemies said, 'Before they know it or

see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.” They had enemies and had problems coming from outside.

Look over at Chapter 5:3. “Others were saying, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.’” Not only were these other things going on, apparently there was a famine as well. There were not enough resources to feed the people. People were mortgaging their property. In the next verse it talks about there wasn’t enough to pay the king’s tax. It talks about they were borrowing money from their fellow Jews and they were charging usurious interest rates. There were all kinds of opposition to the success. Not only that there were traitors as well. God’s mission is not free from man’s opposition. Whatever mission God’s given you is not free from man’s opposition.

Jesus told a parable about this. He said that servants went out and he saw there were weeds growing up in the same field as the wheat. He said how did this happen? He said the enemy came and sowed the weeds with the wheat. He said do you want me to pull them out? The master said, no, let them grow. We’ll take care of it at harvest time but for now, let the wheat and the tare grow together. So that is what is going to happen when we go out and do this work of rebuilding God’s kingdom. Our walls are broken down, men.

My wife and I were watching the Super Bowl together during the halftime show. About half way through Beyonce’s performance my wife says, “She has such an attractive smile.” That’s what I did – I laughed. I said, “Honey, I can assure you there is not a man on the planet who is looking at her smile right now.”

I was so disturbed by this. Basically what you are looking at is an exotic dancer, who happens to have a great voice, and yes, a wonderful smile. Something happened to me that night. I became a dinosaur during the Super Bowl this year. I’m a dinosaur. The world has passed me by. I don’t fit in anymore. This is not my world. Our walls are so broken down. We need some men of God. We need some men like Nehemiah or some no names who would stand next to him shoulder to shoulder to rebuild this kingdom. We need to do it now. If not us, who is going to do this? If not now, when is it going to be done, men? Are you going to be a servant, who says what does the Master need, or are we going to be the generation, the next generation that asks, what do I want? What is good for me? What is convenient for me? You have to expect some opposition. We have some opposition.

The seventh thing you see is that Nehemiah put his absolute trust in God but he also took responsibility. Look at Chapter 4:9. There were these people plotting against them. Verse 9 says “But we prayed to our God” – there is the absolute trust in God. “And we posted a guard.” If you want to understand the sovereignty of God and human responsibility put together, there you go. We prayed to our God and we posted a guard. Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition.

Look at Verse 14. “After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

Drop down to Verse 20. “Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!” He put his absolute confidence and trust in God but he also took responsibility.

Verse 16. "From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other."

So they were trusting God but taking responsibility for what happened. Men, it is time for us. I don't know if it is at your place of work, your church, or if it is Pine Hills, your neighborhood. I know that is what you feel a responsibility for. That is your place on the wall. International students – that is your place on the wall. Repairing automobiles – that is your place on the wall and every customer that comes in there.

Find your place on the wall and then be a servant who instead of thinking what do I want, ask what does the Master need from me right here in order to rebuild these broken down walls? What does the Master need from me to rebuild these broken down walls?

I am getting over a little shoulder impingement thing. I just pray to God, that He would heal my shoulder. He did. But I did all the physical therapy. I put my absolute trust in God, and I took responsibility to do the PT. That is the order of things that God has given us. The big idea today is this: **A servant isn't thinking, "What do I want?" He's asking, "What does the Master need?"** What I want; what the Master needs. Those are two ways of doing life.

The question is to you – where is your gravity? Where are you feeling the gravity of your times like Nehemiah felt the gravity of his times? Maybe it is families. Maybe it is teenage crisis pregnancy centers. Maybe it is prisoners. Maybe it is your peers at work. For me, it is men. I see that behind every failure that we have, even the impending doom of the budget sequester crisis, which by the way only amounts to 10 percent of the deficit – not 10 percent of the budget – just the deficit.

Behind every one of these failures, you will find the failure of a man. If you look deep enough you will find that somewhere there is a man who has not been disciplined to understand what it means to be in Christ; to be a godly man, husband and father.

When I look at where the walls are broken down, Nehemiah's not so crazy dream was to rebuild the nation of Israel. My not so crazy dream is I believe that we can present a credible offer of Christ to every man in the United States. We have talked about it here. It can be done. It is being done. It is only going to be done if God does it. You can't manufacture a spiritual revival and awakening, but you can take responsibility to do everything to make it possible if that is what God wants to do. That is what my dream is. That is what my mission is. Our mission is for every church to disciple every man. The area directors and the people here at FUEL and you men here at the Bible study and you guys online, no matter what else God is calling to you, I am enlisting you this morning. I am recruiting you this morning to be involved in repairing these broken down walls among men.

WHAT IS YOUR GRAVITY?

What is your mission? What are you going to do? What does God want you to do? Where is your gravity? Where do you feel the gravity of our broken down culture? Whatever that is, what will make it work for you? What is going to make it work for you are the same things that made

them work for Nehemiah. To enter into and feel the gravity of the situation, to be a man of prayer, to ask God, to weep, mourn, fast and pray, to ask God what it is He wants you to do. It is to above all else be a servant. To be asking not what do I want, but what does the Master need? It is to commit. To be spending yourself in a worthy cause.

I saw an interview with Daniel Day Lewis talking about his part playing Abraham Lincoln. He read about a hundred books getting ready for the role. He made six films and won Oscars for three so he must know what he is doing. He said if Lincoln had not been shot he probably would have died in office because he had so expended himself on a worthy cause because of his love for his country. I don't know about you but that is the way I want to go, not being shot, but I want to die in office. I have a sentence at the top of my to-do list that I see: "I would rather die for a worthy cause than live for no reason." Wouldn't you? I know you would.

Another thing you can do to make it work for you like Nehemiah is you can recruit some other people to do this deal with you. Whatever your deal is get others to stand shoulder to shoulder with you. Then expect opposition. Be prepared for it. Don't be surprised. By the way, whether you do it or not, you will have opposition anyway.

As I like to say, since half the people in the world are not going to like you anyway you might as well have them not like you for the right reasons. It doesn't make any difference what you are doing. If you do this half the people will not like you but if you do the other thing the other half won't like you. Since half the people in the world will not like you anyway, let them not like you but for the right reasons, for the reason God put in you. You are going to have opposition, but instead of having opposition for what I want, why not experience opposition for what the Master needs?

The final thing that will make it work for you like it worked for Nehemiah, is to have this absolute trust in God. While at the same time taking personal responsibility for the outcome; to pray and post a guard.

This is the big idea today. **A servant isn't thinking, "What do I want?" He's asking, "What does the Master need?"**

Andre Agassi gave the speech at his wife Stefanie Graf's induction into the Tennis Hall of Fame and he told a story. We were traveling and we were in a high rise hotel. We were looking down on a beautiful cathedral, carved of stone – a work of perfection. He said, as I was looking at that I was stunned by the immaculate work that the craftsman and artists had done.

Then he said, Something struck me. When that cathedral was being built, that was long before anybody had anticipated skyscrapers, tall buildings, and airplanes. And that those craftsmen at the top of the building, which would have been the tallest building in the city, they were doing their work with the knowledge that probably no one would ever see what they had done. No human eye probably would ever see the work they did on the top of the cathedral. What motivated them to do this work without cutting corners to be so excellent? We know the answer. They were servants of God. The question for all of us is very simple. Will I focus on what I want or will I ask what does the Master need? You decide. It is your life. You decide. Let's pray.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, Jesus, thank you for this awesome example of a man who was able to sync up Your agenda and His agenda. Lord, we also see that by asking what does the Master need, instead of what do I want, that eventually, they become the same thing – what I want is what the Master needs. I pray that you would help each of us to get to that place. We ask in your Name Jesus. Amen.