

**What's next?**  
**Nehemiah 2:1-20**  
(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Four months have gone by, and he has not disclosed an ounce of what has been stirring in his heart. Four months of quiet contemplation, meditation, and prayer. Four months for his initial shock to form into a determined resolve. Yet when the moment came, and he had an audience with the one who possessed the resources to meet the needs that were on his heart, he was still nervous and uncertain... this was a big step of faith. But faith is not about blind action or brash steps. It is about doing the next right thing, and at that moment, he knew that the next right thing was to ask. And if the answer was yes, if he was to have favor, it was because God would move on his behalf. So he waited for the right moment and took a remarkable step of faith. Yet, every step of faith is remarkable because we cannot see how it will work out. We step forward, trusting that it will work out because God has worked it out in the past.

Yet, he knows the stakes. He knows what is at hand and what happens to those who impose upon the wealth and generosity of the king. He knows that the king will not be taken for or be made to look like a fool. He's also waited, pursued the Lord, heard from the Lord, and now he has a front-row seat to watch the Lord work in and through him in a way that he never thought was possible. The king hears his request and grants him all the resources he needs. The ask is over, God has given him favor, worked through this Persian king, and now he sets out to begin the work. But, before he can begin, he needs to survey the situation. And through Nehemiah's example, we are going to learn a powerful lesson about working for the future. That is, **we need to understand where we are before we can move forward.**

# 1. Assessment: Purposes of the past. (vv. 9-16)

## a. Nehemiah's leadership strategy → This was no haphazard mission.

### i. Four months of prayer – Remember his praying from chapter 1?

1. The mention of the month *Nisan*, roughly the equivalent of April and the beginning of the Persian and Jewish year, reveals how long Nehemiah had persisted in fasting and prayer (cf. 1:4). It was four months since the news had reached him. Now his praying had reached the point recorded in 1:11, the time for action.<sup>1</sup>
2. This confidence is seen first, paradoxically, in his willingness to wait for God's time to answer his prayer. Those months of private intercession must have been a peculiarly testing time for so active a man as Nehemiah, but for him to have forced the issue with the king could have proved disastrous to his whole enterprise. **Instead, he shows that his confidence is supremely in God.**<sup>2</sup>
  - a. **Again, let us ask, what are our thoughts and convictions on prayer?**
    - i. Effective or Naive?
    - ii. Powerful or Feeble?

### ii. Thoughtful approach to the king – He picks his moment with precision.

1. **We seem to be in the Persian version of Mardi Gras.** The Persian kings were famous for their drinking parties (see Esther 1:3-8), which were an ancient custom in the Near East. This is a festive time. There is drinking and dancing and feasting. People are enjoying themselves. And Nehemiah, a Jew, is the cupbearer to the king. He is basically the king's personal bartender. So he's standing there in the middle of the party, pouring drinks for Artaxerxes.<sup>3</sup>
2. He elicits the genuine sympathy of the king and, **at the same time he avoids a direct reference to Jerusalem or to its walls, either of which might have been immediately counterproductive in recalling the correspondence of Ezra 4.**<sup>4</sup>
  - a. Note: The mention of the queen might indicate that this interaction was a private one.
  - b. This is a bold ask: **Can you imagine saying this kind of thing to your boss? "Number one, I want a year off. Number two, I need a reference letter because I'm going to be taking another job while I'm away. And number three, I'd like you to finance the whole project." It's crazy talk.**<sup>5</sup>

## b. Every church has a past to protect and a future to nurture.

### i. What we will come to see in this passage and in the book as it unfolds is that our futures are never disconnected from our pasts.

1. There were, are, and will be important purposes for the buildings and structures in Jerusalem.
  - a. **Fast forward** → We will come to see them celebrating the feasts again!
  - b. Ultimately the purposes for the structures that are being restored is the glory of God!

<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 86–87.

<sup>2</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 184.

<sup>3</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 28). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 179.

<sup>5</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 34). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

2. The disgrace of the city was a disgrace of the people and of God.
  - a. This is personal in every way, shape, and form for Nehemiah.
    - i. **Question: When it comes to identity (how I see myself), what is the first characteristic that comes to mind?**
      1. For Nehemiah, it was that he is bound to God... he is in God's family.
    - ii. How I see myself is going to inform my purpose.
      1. Child of God → Glorify God
      2. Provider → provide by being successful
      3. A delighter in pleasure → pursue my pleasures
  - b. **Caution:** Form does not equal purpose.
    - i. Ezra 3:11-13 - **And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. <sup>12</sup> But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, <sup>13</sup> so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.**
    - ii. They wept because the second Temple was physically smaller than the first.
  - c. The restoration of the purpose is what was important, the form was of secondary importance. → **When they made the form of primary importance, they robbed themselves of the joy of God's work.**
  - d. **We must be cautioned of doing the same personally and corporately.**
    - i. Our church's physical footprint is different.
      1. Yes, the old building was beautiful.
      2. Yes, the new one is a blessing.
        - a. In fact, a considerable thrust for our moving (other than parking lot space and more room), was the vision to be a community oriented church.
    - ii. **Personally** – How has God worked? Does h have to work the same way?
      1. I remember there was a time when Danielle and I were newly married and we needed a second car, but it just wasn't in our budget. → God came through via a friend who gave us their very old car. I was such a blessing.
      2. God's purpose in that was to care and provide for us. But, if I only think that God is only providing for me when he gives me a car, I am going to miss so much joy in following him!
  - ii. **My past gives me confidence to trust God for what is ahead in the future.**
    1. **Rewind: We need to take time to remember what God has done.**
      - a. This is a powerful and important spiritual practice.
      - b. **Why? → It helps us connect the dots of God's faithfulness with his purposes in the past so that we can move forward with faithful confidence in the future.**

- c. Our past:
  - i. **Mission** – Connecting people in life-defining relationships in Christ.
    - 1. How do we know if we are doing that – corporately & personally?
      - a. Are you enjoying God daily?
      - b. Is the Spirit flowing through you?
      - c. Who are you fishing with?
      - d. Do you have someone(s) to share tough stuff with?
      - e. Are you practicing hospitality with a worn welcome mat?
      - f. How are your investments doing?
        - i. These are questions that get at living purposeful and relationship-oriented lives in Christ.
    - 2. **Can you remember times where and how you saw God at work in those areas?**
  - ii. **Strategy** – Gather, Connect, & Serve
    - 1. We **gather** in corporate worship to be stirred up for Jesus and carry him with us as we are then scattered into our weeks.
      - a. Can you describe what it has been like to connect with God in these spaces?
    - 2. We **connect** with other believers throughout the week to care for each other through prayer, community, and study.
      - a. Do you have a story of how God has used you or someone else in your life to spur you on in growth or healing?
    - 3. We **serve** others because we have been served by Jesus first and foremost.
      - a. How have you seen God at work in and through your serving?
  - iii. **Significant growth points** –
    - 1. As a church we have seen God be faithful over and over again. We have watched him lead us through challenges with grace and patience for each other.
    - 2. **Caution – If our growth for the future is merely about form, we will be a people and a place without purpose. That is a tragedy that we should never be swindled into.**
    - 3. Nehemiah does not say, let's rebuild to get back to what was. → **He leads the charge to rebuild to bring God glory!**

## 2. Plans: A vision for the future. (v. 17)

- a. **Wise and strategic survey of Jerusalem** –
  - i. He accepts and uses the king's resources. → he knows he needs them and see God as the one who is granting him success and favor.
    - 1. **The whole paragraph is thus a model of the balance that needs to be maintained between the total sovereignty of God, with prayer as its proper response, and human responsibility with its counterpart in wise and thoughtful activity.**<sup>6</sup>
  - ii. He needed the military support → Jerusalem had been destroyed by royal decree. Only royal support would make this work possible.
    - 1. There was more than protection to be gained from the military escort. It meant an arrival in style, impressively reinforcing the presentation of credentials to the

<sup>6</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 184.

neighboring governors, and making very plain the change of royal policy (see on 1:3; 2:2). It may help to explain why Nehemiah's enemies resorted to bluff instead of force in their campaign against him.<sup>7</sup>

- iii. **Surveys at night** – There is too much at hand to risk exposure.
  - 1. Not only does he keep quiet about his intentions and mission, he knows that surveying in daylight would provoke the opposition.
  - 2. **He does not want to risk God's glory or fame by foolish actions.**
    - a. **Above and beyond his sound tactics, however, was the conviction that basically the project was not his. It was from God and 'for Jerusalem' (12)—not from Nehemiah nor for his prestige.**<sup>8</sup>
- iv. The powerful reality in all of this is that we can see in Nehemiah that he knows the purposes of the future are not disconnected from the past.
  - 1. This is a book that wants us to ask God, "What's next?"
    - a. We should ask that – Personally & Corporately

**b. The walls need rebuilt!**

- i. They are suffering shame and taunting because of the state of the city.
  - 1. Again, this is not merely a personal shame or image problem. This is a reflection on God as well.
    - a. Why? → Because they were God's covenant people and Jerusalem their holy city where they met with God.
  - 2. Sometimes it takes a stranger to see sharply what has been softened by familiarity. Nehemiah's perspective is significant. On the debit side it is the *disgrace*, not the insecurity of their position, which strikes him—for Jerusalem should be seen as 'the city of the great King' and 'the joy of all the earth'<sup>9</sup>
- ii. **There is the reality that we all could stand to ask God what needs some rebuilding in our own lives?**
  - 1. Sometimes we are unable to see what needs to be rebuilt, but there are people in our lives that can see it with clarity. → Sometimes, we need a Nehemiah.
- iii. **Five areas to put before the Lord for rebuilding:**
  - 1. **Identity** – How I see myself.
    - a. Am I putting my stock in Jesus or in a secondary thing?
  - 2. **Walk** – How I am living.
    - a. Am I increasing in the fruit of the Spirit? (Gal. 5)
  - 3. **Talk** – How I speak to others and to God.
    - a. What does my prayer life look like?
    - b. Do I believe that my words have the power to give life or take life? (James 3:5-12)
  - 4. **Feed** – What am I putting in my heart and mind?
    - a. If I want to grow in the likeness of Jesus, I need to put Jesus in.
  - 5. **Clean** – This is the area of repentance.
    - a. Are you / we routinely practicing repentance? That is stepping off of the path of self and onto the path of Jesus?

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 88.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 89.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 90.

- b. Or, are your eyes so firmly fixed on yourself that you don't even know that you're off of the Jesus way?
      - i. Again, we can get so distracted by the form that we miss purpose.
  - c. **Our future: How will we know if we are walking in the purpose(s) of God for our church?**
    - i. Connect Groups – We desire to be a church of connect groups.
      - 1. Care for each other.
      - 2. Connect and grow with each other.
      - 3. There are opportunities to lead groups.
    - ii. Missions – We desire to be a church that faithfully carries the gospel to the ends of the earth.
      - 1. Why? → Rev. 7 – We believe that all people will present to praise Jesus in the coming, age and we desire to see heaven on earth now in part as it will be one day in full.
    - iii. The next generation
      - 1. Families
      - 2. Internationals
        - a. The simple truth is that we believe that life with Jesus is far better than anything we can work up on our own.
        - b. That means that following Jesus in a life-defining way is better for our families.
        - c. Uniquely, we have a special opportunity to love those that come from other places and countries to study at ISU.

### 3. Commitment: Resolve to be about the mission ahead. (v. 18)

- a. Rebuilding requires our willing cooperation with the Spirit of God.
  - i. Again - **The whole paragraph is thus a model of the balance that needs to be maintained between the total sovereignty of God, with prayer as its proper response, and human responsibility with its counterpart in wise and thoughtful activity.**<sup>10</sup>
  - ii.
- b. **Courage and conviction to move forward** – Nehemiah trusts God.
  - i. Disgrace and shame doesn't dissuade him.
    - 1. As Kidner points out, his perspective on their situation is significant: **"it is the disgrace, not the insecurity of their position, which strikes him."** The word "reproach" (חַרְפָּה), in particular, is heavy with overtones of the punishment of the exile, behind which lies the disrepute brought upon God's name among the nations by those who should have been his servants.<sup>11</sup>
      - a. **Remember – Nehemiah sees himself and Israel in covenant with God. Their disgrace is God's disgrace and vice-versa.**
  - ii. He is surrounded by opposition.
    - 1. **So, with already a hostile Samaria and Ammon to the north and east, Judah was now virtually encircled, and the war of nerves had begun. There was an**

<sup>10</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 184.

<sup>11</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 191.

edge to the taunts in the word *rebell*ing, for a case could always be trumped up which might change the king's mind and excuse an attack or an assassination.<sup>12</sup>

- iii. Courage is not a brash lashing out or witty comebacks in the face of mockery.
  - 1. Courage is a quiet confidence to replay without sharp tone or insult.
    - a. **Finally, even in his dealings with his opponents, Nehemiah responds to their jibes not with rash retaliation but with a firm expression of God's ability to prosper his cause.** Rather than being deflected from his primary task, he asserts positively that "We, his servants, will start to rebuild" (v 20). At this early stage, he is content to leave God with responsibility for the negative handling of opposition. **This, too, is one of the hardest lessons for any church or individual to learn;** cf. Rom 12:19; 1 Pet 2:21–23; 4:19.<sup>13</sup>

**c. Lord, find me faithful!**

- i. Let this be our prayer this coming year.
- ii. **The future is not in Nehemiah's control, it is in God's.**
  - 1. Nehemiah was no doubt aware that if he was to have any success, Artaxerxes would need to overturn his previous decree (Ezra 4:21); to make such a request could be highly dangerous, even for a royal favorite (cf. Esth 4:11–16). He, therefore wisely refrains from determining his approach in advance, but leaves God to open the way in an appropriate manner.<sup>14</sup>
  - 2. **Personally** – You are facing challenges that you cannot see a way through yet.
    - a. The future is not in your hands, but in God's.
  - 3. **Corporately** – As a church, we are facing challenges that hurt and that we see and say, "too big, too much, too strong... let's turn around."
    - a. Nehemiah's example to us says, keep showing up with the Lord. The future is in hands, and our responsibility is to be faithful.
    - b. **Remember - Faithful people are marked by three things:**
      - i. **Remember what God has done.**
      - ii. **Have a right perspective on the past.**
      - iii. **Do the next right Godly thing.**

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<sup>12</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 91.

<sup>13</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 193.

<sup>14</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 173.