

PLANNING TO SUCCEED

Nehemiah 2:1–10

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Our Scripture today is from the second chapter of Nehemiah. “In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I 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.’ 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 fathers 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 fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.’ Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, ‘How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?’ It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. I also said to him, ‘If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?’ Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites” (Nehemiah 2:1–10, NIV).

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I don't often have the chance to repeat a sermon to the church so when I get an outside speaking engagement I can preach one of my favorites. One of my favorite sermons is entitled "How to be a Failure." It's based on the Feeding of the 5000. It's very simple: look at the size of the task (5000), look at the little bit that you have (5 loaves and 2 fishes) and leave the Lord out of the picture. Then you'll fail every time. I guarantee that will work.

Nehemiah faced all these things too. He could have been a failure had he looked at the size of the task, the little bit that he had. He was only one. He was 900 miles away from the problem. If he had left the Lord out of the picture he would have failed. But he planned to succeed. And that's the title of my message this morning, "Planning to Succeed."

I'd like to say that Nehemiah is a successful person. There's nothing wrong in being a success if you have the right definition of success. Success, as I understand it from the Scripture, is doing God's will. It's knowing why God put you on earth and it's accomplishing the purpose for which He sent you. Success for Jesus was dying on a cross. He fulfilled the will of God. And rose again from the dead. Success for the prophet Jeremiah was living out his life as a lonely person crying out against the sin of his day and finally dying in exile in Egypt. Success for Nehemiah was rebuilding the city wall. There are different expressions of success. We do wrong if we try to generalize and say there is a uniform pattern of success that all of God's people should have—they should accomplish this particular thing or have this particular objective. There are many different objectives that the Lord has for His people. Finding God's will for our life and doing it is being a success.

Nehemiah is a connective book. As we look for planning for success in chapter 2 we must be aware of what has preceded in chapter 1. Starting on the road to fulfill God's will for us will be

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being aware of the problem God's called us to, saturating that problem with prayer and from that position of prayer then positioning ourselves to act.

I. As we open to Nehemiah 2:1–10 we see that in order to be successful in the plan that God had for him, the plan he felt upon his own heart, he needed someone else's approval.

Verses 1–3 speak of Nehemiah's needing the king's approval. Often it's the case that if we're to get something done that the Lord is calling us to or that we want to do ourselves we must get somebody's approval in order to do it.

Nehemiah in his particular situation needed the approval of the king of the Medes and the Persians. Nehemiah has a pretty big task on his hands when he comes with this request. He must get the king's approval if he is to do the task.

What is the key of getting someone else's approval for doing what you feel God wants you to do, doing what is best in your own heart?

I think Nehemiah exemplifies the fact that getting someone else's approval sometimes involves a need to wait with patience. Chapter 1:1 begins by dating the chronology of Nehemiah as occurring in the month of Kislev, which is in November-December. But in 2:1 the month of Nisan is in April. So between the beginning of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 there is a time interval of four months in which he has been waiting patiently for an opportunity to come to the king, Artaxerxes, with this request. He's not simply rushing into the king's presence and saying, "I have this great burden in my life and I'd like for you to do something about it." He is trying to wait for an opportune moment.

We are too used to instant change as we approach a problem or need or desire in our heart and we think if we just get serious with God all of a sudden God will line up the dominoes in a row and everything will fall in place. Nehemiah illustrates to us that sometimes there is a length of

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time that is involved in getting an approval. Things don't always in the kingdom of God or the kingdom of men happen all in one moment.

Waiting with patience and prayer is Nehemiah's watchword.

Then when an opportunity presents itself as Nehemiah has sought the opportune moment to get the kings' approval he indeed is ready to risk himself. The king says in 2:2, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I understand from those who study the times that the cupbearer to the king was selected on the basis of his handsome qualities. It was expected that a person close to the king project a healthy and a positive image. Kings were so whimsical in those days that if you smiled the wrong way it just might be your head on the block. So to be sad in the presence of king Artaxerxes was no small offense. And Nehemiah had sought during this time consciously to keep himself glad.

But the king now knows that something is wrong with Nehemiah. This is Nehemiah's chance to say what is wrong. But Nehemiah gives us very honest and transparent perception of himself. He says, "I was very much afraid" (verse 2). Here is an authentic honest person willing to show their weakness.

I would simply suggest that if you have ever wanted to witness to someone about the Lord you know exactly what Nehemiah is going through. For you have waited for that moment to witness. Finally the Lord has opened a door. There is a moment in which you are afraid, thinking, *Should I go through that door at this point or should I back off?* The king has told Nehemiah, "This can be nothing but sadness of heart" (verse 2). And Nehemiah, had he not been willing to risk this moment, could have said, "Let it be known I was just having a bad day today but it's just a momentary thing and it will pass." But that one moment of open opportunity gives him the

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chance to risk, possibly to risk even being mistaken for disloyal to the king. After all, he wanted to rebuild a city that had been subjugated and conquered.

But he strikes out. He risks when his moment of opportunity is presented. He uses tremendous tact. In fact, tact, in getting approval of other persons, is so very, very critical. Often what we want may be so right but the way we go about getting it may be so very wrong that we lose some of what God wants from us because we do not use tact.

The first thing that Nehemiah does with the king is to assure the king of his loyalty. “May the king live forever” (verse 3). That’s just a customary phrase in the times. It was expected that you would say that to the king before you gave a word of address. I’m sure with Nehemiah it was a sincere thing. It was his way of conditioning the king that “even though I’m going to ask about rebuilding a fallen city that your kingdom rules over, nevertheless I want you to know beforehand that I am on your side. I want your welfare. I want your happiness. I am not against you.”

When he has assured the king of his loyalty he then opens up the problem with a question. He says, “Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins and its gates are destroyed by fire?” (verse 3). He doesn’t begin with a request saying, “May the king live forever. I’d like to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls that are down so it can be a strong city again.” Often by asking a question, stating a request in the form of a question, we give a person some room to find themselves and say yes to us. There is such a thing as tact and often tact comes in the way of assuring another person of your loyalty. There’s no accusation by Nehemiah, no saying by Nehemiah to the king, “It’s about time your administration started to act on this problem. That city has been a mess for a long time.”

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He exercises even discretion with how he phrases his questions to the king. For example, notice in 1:3 when Nehemiah is first informed of the problem. When he's first informed of the problem it's about the Jewish remnant that remained in exile. There are really two problems that he's made aware of—the Jewish people in exile and the city of Jerusalem itself. When he addresses the king with the problem he makes no reference to the people at all. He makes no reference to the city of Jerusalem by name. After all, the city of Jerusalem was known to the kings as a particularly rebellious and stubborn city. He doesn't wave a red flag where it's not necessary. Instead, he talks about the city where his fathers are buried. Any ancient had concern for showing respect to the dead. To use Jerusalem in that kind of sense kind of allows the king to have some sort of empathy for the position that Nehemiah is in.

Nehemiah at this point doesn't say, "I've been praying to my God for four months that you will do something." He doesn't share anything about the personal throws he's been through. Often I think when we want someone else to do something we ought not to use the leverage of "I've been talking to God about this..." That makes it a little bit difficult for them to make some sort of response.

He's using great tact. He seizes the moment, risks the opportunity and succeeds.

Nehemiah gains that first fundamental thing: "Do I need someone else's approval?" And he got it.

II. The second question that rises as we look at these verses today is, "If given the opportunity, am I prepared to act?"

Often we have opportunities that are given to us and then perhaps we let them slip because we do nothing about the challenge that lie before us.

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The king says to Nehemiah “What is it you want?” (verse 4). That is a tremendous question. If someone were to ask you, “What is it you want?” what would you say? If you know what you want and you have the opportunity to get what you want, do you know how to go about it? Have you let it simply remain in a wish or have you made some intelligent plans to go about seeking it?

I would say that if someone asks you, “What do you want?” and you have been praying for four months about it as Nehemiah did, you’ll be ready to answer that question. You’ll know, I think, at the end of our months prayer and fasting, what God wants.

During these four months of prayer and fasting, Nehemiah had evidently been planning. Because when the king asks him that question he is ready with a response. He has laid out in his mind some of the problems that are associated with the rebuilding of the wall 900 miles away. Even though he’s laid down these plans, when the king asks, Nehemiah says, “Then I prayed to the God of heaven and I answered the king” (verses 4–5). Then he begins responding. He is prepared to act in committing himself first of all. We indicated last week that part of approaching any need we have in prayer is our willingness to become involved in being part of the answer. He says in verses 4 and 5 that he is ready to go back to rebuild the city.

Previously in chapter 1 this has not been part of his praying. He had never before involved himself so directly in being part of the answer. But he has concluded that he is the logical person to go. So he makes himself available.

Nehemiah committed himself to do the work of the Lord. It takes commitment for the work of the Lord. He had committed his will to the Lord. Verse 6 tells us that he had what may be called a measurable goal. “The king with the queen sitting beside him asked, ‘How long will your journey take and when will you get back?’ It pleased the king to send me so I set a time.” In

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other words, Nehemiah set an objective that could be measured. His job was done when he built the wall and he knew approximately how long it would take him before he could get back.

To set a goal that is unmeasurable is not a good thing from Scripture. Just to simply say, “I want to be more spiritual,” and not know what that involves, may not be a healthy thing. We need to look at some indicator to help us know when we’ve accomplished the end.

As it actually happens, Nehemiah must have set a goal of being gone twelve years, because it isn’t until 13:6 that we find another reference to how long he was in Jerusalem and it was a period of twelve years. He set the time and he’s going to come back when the time is done.

I think it pleases God when goals are in our heart. God has given visions to His people. With Nehemiah as he looks at this opportunity and is prepared to act he intelligently plans for this goal of rebuilding the walls and accomplishing it within a certain period of time.

Verses 7–9 indicate that right at the outset there were two problems he needed to cure while he was still in the presence of the king. One, he needed safe passage; and two, he needed lumber in order to make the city walls and his own personal residence and the gate to the city walls.

Nehemiah was not the kind of person who goes out “on faith.” Without planning. He was not the kind of person who would walk out on a foreign territory without planning. Sometimes we can abuse faith.

Faith does not mean that we shouldn’t organize. In fact, by being organized we have in effect built an altar for God to pour some fire upon. We have established a specific goal and we have had faith for God to realize that goal. Nehemiah was not the kind of person who said, “We’re going by faith and we don’t have any plans.” The presence of faith does not necessarily mean the absence of organization. Nehemiah anticipated his needs. He is able to say, “The gracious hand of my God was upon me” (verse 8).

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III. In verse 10 we find that Nehemiah had obstacles to face.

And there is never a time in our life if we seek to do God's will for us individually or God's will in the body of Christ where there will not be obstacles. All the way back in Susa, the capital, Nehemiah is already beginning to hear word of opposition. He is aware of the obstacles before him. Sanballat the Horonite was the governor of Samaria. He was one of the children of Israel who had remained in the land and came from an interfaith, mixed-marriage experience. His name literally means, "*Sin* has given life." *Sin* was the moon god, not moral rebellion. Sanballat was not a God-fearer at all. He was called an "Horonite," for a town northwest of Jerusalem. With him in alliance to be an obstacle for Nehemiah was Tobiah the Ammonite, probably the governor of Transjordan under the Persians. These two political powers of the area saw Nehemiah coming to rebuild Jerusalem and it's taking away from them their tremendous opportunity to plunder and tax the people of Jerusalem. So they were critics.

We need to be aware of obstacles in our path. If we have slipped into something foolishly or mistakenly or without God's will often God Himself stands as an obstacle in our path, as in the case of Balaam and the donkey. Sometimes fellow believers may give us caution and stand in our path. So we shouldn't take Nehemiah as an example and say, "God told me to do this and everyone who stands in my path is of the devil." That's being a little bit pig-headed. There are times when God might want to tell us no. There are times when fellow believers might tell us no. But sometimes obstacles simply indeed are from negative critics and from persons who are not walking with the Lord. We have to ask, and I'm sure we can look at Nehemiah to find the answer to this, "Does our service for the Lord cause Satan any problems at all?" Has hell lost any sleep lately by because of me or you?

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Some people are beginning to lose some sleep over Nehemiah and what he purposes to do. I pray that our service to God is such that hell will lose some sleep over us. Nehemiah, as he approaches this obstacle, is not going to let anything intimidate him from doing God's will. Experiencing criticism and opposition does not necessarily mean you're out of God's will. In some cases it can be an indication that you're in God's will.

Nehemiah is off on his mission. He has planned for success. He has gotten the approval of the person he needed. He has been prepared to act if he is given the opportunity. And he is ready for the obstacles which he is going to face. There's not a great cheering squad that goes with Nehemiah. I think what Nehemiah does, and often our service for the Lord, is like a real good basketball team playing a championship as visitor on someone else's court miles away.

There's a real sense that Nehemiah stands for us and our service for God in the same way. We are winning. Christ is for us. Who can be against us? If the Lord has called us, we can, in effect, be on the home court of someone else, the prince of this war. Jesus didn't get cheers as He was going to the cross. But He got His work done because He was on the winning side and God was with Him and He overcame the obstacles.

Closing Prayer

As we come to You today, our Father, we give thanks that when we wanted eternal life You gave us your approval and we were prepared to act by receiving You into our life. We become prepared to face the obstacles the enemy wants to plant in our way. We confess today that You are greater in us than he that is in the world. As I pray today I know there are many persons here whom You are calling to do various things in Your body. You are summoning to a higher and better level of life. You are calling us to repair relationships, and to rise up in Your name to do great things for You. Let what is shared today from Your Word be a model and inspiration for us

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to set out and really do Your will and not shrink back. As we come to this communion table today we give You renewed thanks for Jesus who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross and who in the moments when He was giving His life for us did not have the support of others but nevertheless accomplished your will. We praise You for Jesus. That He has come and rebuilt our life and made something beautiful out of what was there. You are continuing, Lord Jesus, to work in our life. We praise You for what You are building. In Jesus' name. Amen.