

“Be Prepared”

Nehemiah 2:1-8 • Luke 14:25-33

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Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • September 24, 2017

Last week we said that a good leader is a person of action, a problem-solver, someone who can analyze the situation and make a decision quickly, but a great leader is someone who recognizes that God is the one in control. A great leader spends time in prayer, seeking God's will. For example, it's well documented that George Washington, our first president, spent at least an hour every day in private prayer. He led others in prayer, also. As we saw last week, when Nehemiah heard of the situation in Jerusalem, how the walls were broken down and the gates burned and the people in distress, his first response was to spend time in prayer. Lots of time.

You know it seems to me that there are two kinds of people. There are some of us who are planners. We want to plan every detail. When we take a trip I like to know ahead of time where we're going and especially where we'll spend the night each night. So I usually will make reservations and even pay for them so that I know we're guaranteed to have a place to sleep.

But not every one is like that. Some people prefer to just hit the road and figure it out along the way. The same thing applies to our relationship with God. Some of us like to plan things out, others are willing to trust that God has a plan and not worry about the details, being guided instead by the Holy Spirit. What we're going to learn from Nehemiah today is that to faithfully live in God's will we need to do both! We need to earnestly seek God's will in prayer, being led by the Holy Spirit, and we need to use the abilities God has given us to plan how we will actually do the things God is calling and leading us to do for Him.

The first things we want to look at this morning is Nehemiah's *purpose*. In today's passage, Nehemiah begins to take some action. In chapter 1 he received the news about the situation in Jerusalem and it broke his heart. He wants to do something to fix the problem and

so he talks to God about it. A lot. Now he's decided that he can actually do something about it. He has a mission to accomplish for God. His purpose is to find a way to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

But the next thing we see is Nehemiah's *problem*. Nehemiah can't just take off for Jerusalem. First of all it's nearly 900 miles away. And in those days everyone walked. Or they rode camels or donkeys. Imagine what it would be like to *walk* from here to Kansas City, carrying everything you will need for your trip. But that's only part of the problem. The bigger problem Nehemiah has is that he works for King Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. He's one of the king's most trusted advisors and those were hard to come by. The king always had people trying to do bad things to him. That's why he needed a cupbearer. This tended to make the king suspicious of people.

Nehemiah mentions in verse 1 that up until this point he had not been sad in the king's presence. The king could have easily misinterpreted it as a plot against him. Especially if he found out Nehemiah wanted to rebuild Jerusalem. You see, back in Ezra 4, when the Jews who had returned to rebuild the Temple began rebuilding the wall around the city, their enemies sent a letter to Artaxerxes requesting that he make them stop, which is what the king ended up doing. Their claim was that if the wall were rebuilt that Jerusalem would rebel against Persia. So for Nehemiah to get permission to work on the walls would mean the king would have to overturn his previous ruling. That's why Nehemiah says, "I was very much afraid."

The third thing we see in this passage is Nehemiah's great *patience*. He waited four or five months from the time he heard the report about Jerusalem until he approached the king to ask permission. He waited for God's timing. I think many times we get ourselves in trouble by doing the right thing but at the wrong time. We

try to do great things for God but we want to do them on our own time. One of the recurring messages from God in the Bible is “wait.” Nehemiah waited patiently. He continued to do his job serving the king. He continued to bring his best to work every day until it was the right time.

That brings us to the fourth point, Nehemiah’s *plan*. Nehemiah waited patiently, and he prayed fervently. But he also planned carefully. He used those four months of waiting to plan every detail. He planned out how he would present his case to the king. When Artaxerxes asked him why he was sad, Nehemiah answered, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” Notice he doesn’t mention Jerusalem by name. He presents his case in a way that the Persian king would appreciate. The graves of ancestors were highly revered in that culture.

He also planned how much time he would need so that when the king asked how long he would be gone, Nehemiah was ready with an answer. He planned what materials he would need and where he could get them, asking for a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, requesting lumber for the gates and to repair his family home. And he planned the protection he would need from Israel’s enemies in the region. Nehemiah asked the king to sign letters to the various governors guaranteeing safe passage.

Finally we see Nehemiah’s *praise*. The end of verse 8 says, “And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.” Nehemiah could have said, “I planned this so well that the king was impressed with my

leadership skills.” Instead, Nehemiah recognized that it was God that had made it happen and he praised God for the blessing.

What about your life? Every one of us has challenges in life. Jesus said, “in this world you *will* have trouble.” When you make that commitment to follow Christ it doesn’t mean the end of your problems. In fact, it often means more problems because God’s ways are usually in conflict with the world’s ways. What matters is how you respond. When faced with a challenge is your first response prayer? Is your purpose rooted in God’s will? And do you have the patience to wait on God’s timing?

The bottom line is that God often wants us to pause and wait for His time. He wants us to have patience like Nehemiah had. But, and this is important, we’re not to just sit idle while we wait. God has given you a brain. Humans are the only creatures able to make a plan. It’s part of what it means to be created in the image of God. He wants you to use your time and your experience and your abilities to creatively work *with* Him to plan. God wants you to plan how you will carry out His will. He wants all of us together to plan how we will accomplish the work of the church which is to make disciples of Jesus who then make disciples of Jesus.

This is what the Apostle Paul meant in Philippians 1 when he thanked them for their “partnership in the gospel.” God wants to work through us to bring the good news of Jesus to others. But he doesn’t want to control us like puppets. He wants to work with us as His children. I can’t think of anything better than to have that kind of relationship with the living God.

Amen.