

“Rejecting Passivity”
Nehemiah 2
August 2, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

Nehemiah has been told that Jerusalem is in trouble and the object of derision among their enemies because of the condition of its walls and gates, which had been reduced to a pile of rubble. So he does what any believer would do when confronted with a wrong that needs correcting—he prays. Chapter 1 records his prayer, and, together with the first verse of today’s chapter, tells us Nehemiah prayed and fasted about this for four months. It would have been quite convenient for Nehemiah if the matter had ended with his prayer and fasting. He could tell himself that he had done what he could, while still being able to enjoy his position as cupbearer to the king, a position of honor, prestige and wealth. There would be no need to risk his position and possibly even his life in pursuit of a project that would involve significant time and trouble.

Such a passive response has often been the case with the church. Passivity is one of the realities of our sinful nature. In 1995, Larry Crabb wrote a book titled *The Silence of Adam*. It was about Adam’s silence while Eve was having her conversation with the serpent and eating of the fruit. Adam was passive, and Crabb notes how men in particular often have a problem with such passivity. Sadly, the church often has the same problem. Historian Bobby Griffith describes a teaching of the southern Presbyterian Church in the 19th century called “the spirituality of the church.” This doctrine said that since “Christ never addressed the issue of humans seeking to improve their social condition through political means,” that “the institutional church must reject political means” as well. He then goes on to describe the devastating conclusion of this belief. “With this view tied to the deeply held belief that non-Whites were inferior to Whites, they argued to preserve the institution of race-based slavery” (*Heal Us, Emmanuel*, p. 166). In other words, they were saying that the church had no business in the political arena and should concern itself only with matters such as prayer and the preaching of the gospel.

I can identify with those who struggle with this sin of passivity, because I see it in my own heart. Nehemiah rejected such passivity and took action. His story encourages us all to take the actions God calls us to take and to reject the passivity to which we are so prone.

I. The Launch

Nehemiah has been praying for four months about the situation of Jerusalem’s ruined walls and gates, and then one day he reaches a decision.

His decision is indicated by one word in the last verse of the previous chapter. He prayed, **“Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”** The man is obviously King Artaxerxes. Though chapter one gives us an outline of the general prayer that Nehemiah prayed during these four months, this last verse indicates the prayer he offered on the very day he decided to act. He determined that this day he would present his case to the king.

Doing so was taking a big risk. Nehemiah knew that he might not live to see another sunrise. When in the presence of a king, one is to wait on the king to speak. For Nehemiah to initiate a conversation would be a serious breach of royal etiquette, and Persian kings were noted for their readiness to deal harshly with such things. Further, it was also expected that the king’s servants would appear before the king with their happy face on. Nehemiah had had a sad heart since hearing of Jerusalem’s condition four months prior to this. He had made himself put on a happy face every time he appeared before the king. But on this day, as he tells us, he abandoned that artifice and let his true emotions show, emotions of sadness.

There is almost always some risk involved when we decide to take action. Even if it’s something simple like setting up an appointment to talk to someone about something, there are multiple risks. That person might refuse to meet with you. If the meeting happens, you might be misunderstood. Or you might say something that will damage the relationship. Action almost always involves some level of risk. I think that’s one of the reasons we retreat into passivity. It feels like a way to avoid risk, though it often has the opposite effect.

I notice several resources we have as we accept the risks involved in taking the actions God calls us to take. The first resource is the sovereignty of God over all things. He is sovereign over kings, and on this day that Nehemiah had determined to act, God engineered the conversation such that King Artaxerxes addressed Nehemiah first. Further, he asked him the very questions that allowed Nehemiah to put his bold request to the king. He asked him why he was sad and then what his request was. We’re also told that the queen was sitting beside the king at this time. This was mentioned because it was likely to Nehemiah’s advantage that this was so. It meant at the very least that this setting was not the royal court, but something more private and intimate, a setting where the king could be a little more free. It is also possible that the queen was favorable toward Nehemiah, again making it more likely that his request would be honored. When we decide to step forward and take an action God has called us to take, we can know that God’s sovereign control of all things goes with us. Nehemiah acknowledges this reality and says at the end of verse 8, **“And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.”**

Another resource brought to bear in Nehemiah's action was his emotional honesty. For four months he had put on his happy face, pretending to be happy when his heart was sad. Now, his honest show of sadness brings forth more fruit than four months of emotional dishonesty. He is also honest about his fear, confessing at the end of verse 2, **"Then I was very much afraid."** There are often significant spiritual breakthroughs that come through such honesty. I think many times we pretend to feel the way we think we're supposed to feel instead of being honest about the way we actually feel. Such honesty may be hard, but it will also be fruitful. It is fruitful because it opens a door for God to come in. God comes to our real selves, not our pretend selves. Emotional dishonesty is simply a way we try to stay in control of our lives instead of coming to God for his control.

It was Nehemiah's honesty, coupled with his faith, that led him to pray. After the king asked him, **"What are you requesting?"** Nehemiah paused before answering. The reason for his pause was to send up one of those quick prayers. **"So I prayed to the God of heaven"** (v. 4). This was undoubtedly a silent prayer, and one the king would have been unaware of. Prayers don't have to be long. A short prayer, something like "Help me, Lord," spoken silently in the midst of a need, is often the very thing needed. I can report that such prayers are often on my heart when I am in a counseling session with someone.

Nehemiah then put his request before the king. It was a request that revealed that he had given this some thought. He had been aware all along that some action would be necessary at some point, so he had thought through the specifics of what might be done. This is a key part of rejecting passivity, because passivity never gets to this part. It simply focuses on the problem, perhaps complaining about it, but never asks in a serious way, "What is God calling me to do about this?" Nehemiah had asked that question and was ready with an answer.

II. The Opposition

As soon as Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, opposition surfaces. **"But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel"** (v. 10). These were both powerful men. An historical document from this era identifies Sanballat as governor of Samaria and Tobiah as governor of the territory of the Ammonites. Another powerful opponent is introduced in verse 19 as "Geshem the Arab." He too was a ruler, controlling a league of Arabian tribes that ruled over Moab and Edom. Geographically, these three bordered Israel on the north, east and south. To the west was the Mediterranean Sea. So Israel was surrounded by opponents.

Opposition is a prominent theme in the first half of this book. Every single step forward by Israel was opposed by her enemies. And the opposition increases in intensity throughout the book. We can see this increase here in this chapter. The first notice of opposition simply reports that Sanballat and Tobiah were displeased **“that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel”** (v. 10). Then at the end of the chapter, the voice of Geshem is added and their opposition intensifies. **“They jeered at us and despised us and said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?’”** (v. 19). Later, it will intensify to include threats of physical violence.

This teaches us that we too should expect opposition when we take steps to advance God’s kingdom. Nehemiah’s example also teaches us how we should respond to opposition. How did he respond? One thing he didn’t do was to whine and complain about how unfair it all was, even though it was unfair. He didn’t write essays to be distributed around Jerusalem to raise awareness of these opponents. He didn’t use fear of these enemies to motivate his countrymen to respond in some way. He didn’t really engage with them much at all. At the end of the chapter, he does reply to them. But his reply is not what you would expect. I would have expected him to answer his opponents by showing the letters from King Artaxerxes authorizing him to do the very thing he was doing. But that’s not what he does. He replies, **“The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem”** (v. 20). He has great confidence in God, and that leads him to respond to opposition in the way he does. So what does he do? He simply goes about the work, almost as if the opponents don’t even exist.

I think this has significant application to the church today. There is no doubt that Christianity has lost significant influence over the past fifty years in our nation. The church has been pushed more to the margins of our society, to the point that in the minds of many the church is part of the problem and not part of the solution. How should we respond? I would suggest that whining and complaining on social media is not the best response. Nor is stoking the fears of God’s people, though I must say that I see many Christian leaders doing just that. Instead, with an abundant confidence in God, let’s just get about the work God has called us to. Let’s just go about the business of building up Jerusalem. What does that look like? I’ve just ordered a book with an intriguing title: *The Beautiful Community*. It’s a take on a phrase Martin Luther King liked to use, “the beloved community.” The book I ordered is subtitled “Unity, Diversity, and the Church at its Best.” Let me encourage us all to spend less time complaining and more time building the church to be God’s Beautiful Community. Let’s work to build a church characterized by unity and by love. Let’s welcome any who want to join us to do so through faith in Jesus. Let’s point the way for our troubled nation.

III. The Mobilization

Nehemiah's first act was to inspect the walls. Before a work is begun, the first step is to assess the situation and inquire as to the exact nature of the problem. If you don't understand the problem, you will never be able to arrive at an effective solution. But why does he do it at night? I'm not entirely sure. What does seem clear to me, both in the text and in my own experience, is that the first work of the leader is to build unity among God's people. God calls us to work together to accomplish the mission he has given us, and unity is needed if that is to happen. Nehemiah decided that unity would be better built by starting small rather than with a big marketing plan.

So he takes a few people with him on his inspection tour. He then calls their attention to the sad state of affairs. **"You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned"** (v. 17). Then he speaks up. Sometimes all it takes for a great work to begin is for someone simply to be bold enough to suggest it. **"Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision."** Notice that he doesn't issue an order, even though he possessed the authority of the king. Instead, he issues an invitation. He wants the workers to work not because they have to, but because they want to.

Nehemiah then reports to them all that God has been doing. He reported on his meeting with King Artaxerxes that is described at the beginning of this chapter. "This is what God is doing," Nehemiah says to them. "And we get the privilege of working with him." This is always one of the principal ways God's people find unity and motivation for the work. We simply ask, "What is God doing right now, and what part do I have to play in this?"

CONCLUSION:

This text invites us to ask, "What is God doing right now in our city and nation?" Our nation is suffering through some very difficult times right now. There is sharp political division, economic trouble, a pandemic and racial unrest. I believe one of the unique opportunities we have right now is to show to the world a better way simply through being the church he calls us to be. We have the opportunity of shining the light on Jesus simply by following Jesus. We can follow him into love instead of anger, forgiveness instead of bitterness, justice instead of injustice, generosity instead of greed, and a servant's heart instead of a power-grabbing heart. Jesus is all of those things, and as his church, we work to look more like him. We want people to come to him, the only One who can give the life and peace we all long for. So let's strengthen our hands to this work, move past complaining and fear, and be the church he calls us to be.

Small Group Discussion Questions Nehemiah 2

1. Consider the difference between being a spectator at a college football game and a player on the field. Spectators might be loud, but they are still passive when it comes to the action on the field. An attitude that often accompanies passivity is the spectator attitude. Do you believe yourself to be a player on the field or a spectator? Help one another decide what some of those differences might be.
2. One of the differences between the passivity of the spectator and the activity of the player is that the player knows his or her specific role. How would you summarize the role God has assigned to you? What does God want you to do to bring glory to him? How would you summarize your life purpose?
3. Nehemiah took a big risk when he decided to bring up the matter of Jerusalem's walls to King Artaxerxes. Risk-taking is an unavoidable part of all ministry. Can you think of examples of that in your life? In what ways has God called you to take risks in following him?
4. When Nehemiah's honest emotion of sadness was evident, more was accomplished in one day than in four months of putting on his happy face before the king. How might honesty with our emotions further the work of God in us and through us? Why do we find it so difficult to be honest with our emotions?
5. Opposition is a major theme in the first half of Nehemiah, reminding us that we should not be surprised when we as God's people face opposition. Nehemiah spends much more effort in getting on with the work God called him to do than he does in responding to this opposition. Is there a lesson in that for us today? What might that lesson be?
6. Nehemiah labors to build unity among God's people for this project. He doesn't order them to do the building, but seeks to motivate them to want to do it themselves. What might such unity in the church look like today?
7. One of the things Nehemiah does to seek to motivate God's people is to tell them what God has been doing (v. 18). What do you think God is doing today in our world? What opportunities might that provide for the church to lift up Jesus?