Prayer in Action

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Preacher: Jeremy Norton

[0:00] Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 2 is where we'll be this morning.

The wall is broken down and the gates are burned with fire.
Chapter 1 proceeds to record Nehemiah's response. He sat down and wept and mourned for days. He fasted and prayed. As we look at verses 5 through 11, they provide a framework of elements for prayer.
We see adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. The common acronym ACTS is used to describe those elements of prayer. We don't know if he prayed this same prayer day after day or if this was more of a refined version that took shape over time as he was praying.
As we get into the discussion this week, I want to read verse 11 of chapter 1 to help set the stage for chapter 2. Because these two chapters work together as we see Nehemiah start to take action based on the prayer he's been praying.
[1:35] So Nehemiah 1 verse 11 there. I want us to notice a few observations from this verse.

First, notice how he describes himself. Your servant. Nehemiah rightly understood who he was and who God is. Second, Nehemiah is asking for success.
He's going to the Lord and requesting that he be successful today. Had he prayed this prayer day after day, waiting for today to happen? It's completely possible that's the case.
Third, how does he describe the king? This man. After reflecting on who he is, who God is, he describes the most powerful person in the known world at this time as this man.
Finally, the verse closes with a footnote that he was the cupbearer to the king. This was an important job in the Persian Empire because the kings were notoriously suspicious and susceptible to assassination by poison.
[2:54] Artaxerxes had good reason to be paranoid. His father was killed by his own bodyguard and his older brother was blamed, so Artaxerxes killed him and assumed the throne.

Now, Nehemiah, as cupbearer, would have tested the king's wine and food to ensure it had not been poisoned. That's a fantastic job, right? He got to taste some of the best food and wine in the world, but it came with the risk of death.
His position meant that the king trusted him. It's also interesting that the Persian king would have a Hebrew as a cupbearer. We see the theme of Jewish people being close to positions of power throughout the exile and really even before that.
Think about Joseph. In the time of exile, we see Daniel and his friends, Esther, Mordecai, as well. God working through these circumstances to ensure his purposes are accomplished for his people.
Now, Nehemiah probably wasn't the only cupbearer, but he likely was in the king's presence on a regular basis. Now, I want to transition to our text for this week. Could I get somebody to read Nehemiah 2, 1 through 10?
[4:04] Thank you, Christina. Our main emphasis this morning at the top of your handout is, Persistent praying produces a plan and God provides provision to his people to proceed with action.

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Nisan is about four to five months after Chislev, which is where we started last week.
So, Nehemiah has been praying for success and compassion before this man, the king, for more than a hundred days. He had been persistent in prayer. And now we're going to see those prayers answered.
For our discussion question, it's there on the back of your handout. I want you to review Nehemiah 2, 1 through 8 and observe a few things. Think about these questions and anything else that comes to mind.

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What causes the line of questioning from the king? How does Nehemiah respond to those questions? What does he ask for? And then anything else you notice in those verses.
[5:12] So we're going to make a few observations and then we'll come back and kind of talk through those verses. Okay, what were it? Just a few quick observations and then we'll kind of flesh them out as we move through the outline.

What are some things you noticed as you looked at those eight verses? What causes the line of questioning from the king? His sad countenance. Yeah, his sad countenance.
Nehemiah's look. The way he looks. The way he's acting. Right? So he spent months and months in prayer. And presumably he was serving the king during this time. But it hadn't shown.
And now it has. Okay? Yeah, absolutely. God would have been working to kind of drive that outcome. How does Nehemiah respond to the questions?
First he prays. He prays. But then what does he do? He's honest. He starts asking for things, right? So he prays, right?
[6:18] We know Nehemiah is a prayer from chapter one. So he makes a quick prayer in this instance. But then he starts asking. And what he asks for is very specific.

He has a plan of action. So through that praying, he had been preparing for what he would need. Okay? And then I said what he asked for.
He asked for some very specific things. Did you make any other observations that we want to call out before we get into the details? The first point in your outline there is Nehemiah makes petitions. Nehemiah makes petitions. So Nehemiah spent the better part of over a hundred days persistently petitioning the throne of God on behalf of his people in the city of Jerusalem.
During this time, through his prayers, plans start to develop so that he is ready in God's timing. Did Nehemiah know that he would be part of the answer to his own prayers?
[7:21] That's not known. But it is clear that as he prayed, he was going to be involved. One pastor mentioned you often become involved in the ministries you're praying for.

If you start praying for children's ministry and find yourself serving there a few months later, don't be surprised. The stage has been set by Nehemiah's praying, and now the opportunity presents itself in verses 1 and 2.
And it came about in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. So the king said to me, Why is your face sad, though you are not sick?
This is nothing but sadness of heart. Then I was very much afraid. His apparent sadness on this day prompted the king to ask the question, What's up with you?
There are some who postulate that Nehemiah had not been in the king's presence for this period, where he was weeping, fasting, and praying, but that seems unlikely. It's more likely that he had been able to effectively carry out his responsibilities, even though his heart was broken for his people.
[8:30] If you're around anyone for any length of time, you'll notice something's off. Nehemiah is in this state, and the king, prompted by God, notices. He has the insight to realize the sadness is different, and isn't because he's sick.

What's Nehemiah's response? He's afraid. The servants of the king were required to carry themselves a certain way in his presence, and the king could have had them been killed if they didn't.
This was particularly important for the cupbearer, because he may have been part of an assassination plot, so the suspicious king would watch closely the countenance of his cupbearer. Nehemiah's immediate verbal response is, Let the king live forever. This was a typical greeting to the king in the Babylonian and Persian empires. In this instance, it would reassure the king that Nehemiah did not mean him harm.
He then proceeds to tell the king what's up. But he does it via a rhetorical question. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my father's tombs, lies desolate, and its gates have been consumed with fire?
[9:40] I want you to notice he doesn't use the name Jerusalem anywhere. In this passage or in the following verses. In this verse, he describes it as the city, the place of my father's tombs, and later he describes it as Judah, which is the region where Jerusalem was.

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But he doesn't specifically say Jerusalem. Why is Nehemiah avoiding saying Jerusalem? Well, back in Ezra 4, Artaxerxes is the one who decreed the building of the walls of Jerusalem be stopped. Ezra 4, 17-21 says, Then the king sent an answer to Rahim, the commander, Shemshiah, the scribe, and the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and the rest of the provinces beyond the river.
Peace, and now the document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me. A decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made, and it has been discovered the city has risen up against the kings in past days, and the rebellion and the revolt has been perpetrated in it, that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all the provinces beyond the river, and that tribute, custom, and all tolls were paid to them.
So now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that the city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me. So there we have Artaxerxes issuing a decree to stop the rebuilding.
[11:02] Earlier in that chapter, Jerusalem is described as a rebellious and evil city. Nehemiah is being thoughtful and tactful, and some might say diplomatic, in how he approaches the king with his request.

He's asking for the king to reverse his prior directive to stop work. He doesn't just walk in there and say, hey, you shut down this work, and my people are suffering. I want you to reverse that decision and give me the provisions I need to fix it.
God, through months of prayer, has given Nehemiah the courage and the words to speak to the most powerful man in the world. This reminds me of Jesus' encouragement to his disciples in Mark 13, 11.
So I think the Holy Spirit was working in Nehemiah, and that was built on months and months of prayer.
He also describes the city as the place of my father's tombs. This would have resonated with the pagan king because of their respect for their ancestors. Nehemiah is framing his appeal to the king in a way that it will be best received.
[12:13] We don't necessarily know from what is recorded here, but I picture this dramatic pause between verses 3 and 4 as the king considers Nehemiah's question. And Nehemiah is just standing there, holding his breath.

What is he going to do? Because I've now asked him to reverse his decision to stop building the wall and send me back. So verse 4, Then the king said to me, What would you request?
So I prayed to the God of heaven. There's a sigh of relief as the king responds with favor and offers Nehemiah an open-ended question of what would you request. He doesn't immediately launch into his request.
He prays. This prayer is often described as an arrow prayer, a quick shot to heaven. It can't be long because it wasn't out loud and because a lengthy pause would have alarmed the king.
The story of Nehemiah is littered with prayers. Chapter 1 is primarily a prayer. Here we have an example of a short prayer. Chapter 9 is one of the longest prayers recorded in scripture.
[13:18] There are at least nine other times in the book that it talks about Nehemiah praying. What I want us to remember about prayer is that Nehemiah had this short communication with God because he had spent months in prayer.

Both types of prayer are necessary. We need longer times of quiet prayer before the Lord, pouring out our hearts and listening to his response and direction. We also need short prayers at different times.
Be out loud. They can be silently. Nehemiah is standing there on a Persian rug in the Persian palace about to make a petition before the Persian king. And he's also in the throne room of heaven, standing before the one true king, making a petition to the one who is truly in control.
Do we sometimes move through our day with God amnesia? Trying to do things all on our own? We need to take Nehemiah's example of turning to the Lord in prayer no matter where we find ourselves and apply it each and every day.
Turning to him for what we need. This is a great example of a short, quick prayer before he spoke. After this short prayer, he asks Artaxerxes to send him and give him things.
[14:38] Verses 5 and 6, he says, send me. Verse 5, I said to the king, if it please the king and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah to the city of my father's tombs that I may rebuild it.

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Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, how long will your journey be and when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me and I gave him a definite time. Notice he continues to be diplomatic with his request.
If it please the king and if your servant has found favor before you. Verse 6 mentions the queen sitting beside him. I know this table mentioned that seems like an odd thing. Why is that fact mentioned?
It's an odd aside kind of here in the middle of everything. The commentaries mention there are multiple options for who the queen could be. It could be the wife, his wife, the queen. It could be the queen mother.
Or a preferred woman from the king's harem. They all mentioned it was likely included for a few potential reasons. It was possibly a less formal occasion. So Nehemiah would have had more comfort approaching the king with this kind of request.
[15:41] Two, the queen could have been there. The queen being there could have meant the king was in a better mood. And the third reason was there was a witness to the promises the king made. So she's sitting right there next to him to hear what he's saying.

Back to Nehemiah. These all seem like very valid and practical reasons why this fact would have been included in the narrative. The king asks how long he's going to be gone.
Having been a leader for 20 years, he wants some definite timelines on what he's approving. Nehemiah provides him a time, but it doesn't state what that time is here in the narrative.
Most likely it wasn't the full 12-year term that Nehemiah served as governor. It's more likely that he asked for a shorter leave of absence and then reported back and requested additional time to go back and continue governing.
It's here that we begin to see Nehemiah's plan. He wouldn't have been able to provide the king a definite time if he didn't have a plan for what needed to be done.
[16:42] Moving to verses 7 and the first part of verse 8, reveal more of Nehemiah's planning. If verses 5 and 6 could be categorized as, send me, verses 7 and 8 would be, give me. And I said to the king, If it please the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of provinces beyond the river that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah.

And a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go.
Not only did Nehemiah have a definite timeline, he had ascertained the supplies and that political backing would be needed to accomplish his task. We're going to see a couple of these governors of the provinces beyond the river at the end of the lesson today.
And over the coming weeks, they're going to provide no end of opposition and complication for Nehemiah. God had given him the foresight to request letters from the king to give to those governors.
He knew they would be needed to resume the building of the wall because the king had told those governors not to build it. While things are going well, he continues to ask for other provisions.
[17:54] He needs timber to make beams for the gates, for the walls, and for the house he is going to live in. He's done the work to determine who is the keeper of the king's forest. Here we have another Jewish name, Asaph.

Nehemiah has made his petitions to the king for him to be sent and for the things that he needs to accomplish the work. It is clear that Nehemiah has a plan. He knew the time, the political environment, the supplies he would need to accomplish what God had put in his heart to do.
Up to this point, we have a picture of how God works through prayer and planning. Sometimes we use prayer as an excuse not to make a plan or to not proceed. I would contend this is not biblical. God is a God with a plan. His plan is for the redemption of those who believe in his son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty for their sins. The pastor of my childhood church summarized the story of the Bible with one sentence phrase.
The perfect God bringing sinful man back to himself through his son, Jesus Christ. That's God's plan in a nutshell. If you want a one word summary, write down redemption.
[19:04] The whole story of the Bible is one of God's plan to redeem what we have broken. Nehemiah's part in this story is to rebuild the walls of the city and restore the people in preparation of the arrival of the Messiah 450 years later.

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If you're interested, there's some commentators that believe the decree here in Nehemiah 2 is the one that Daniel refers to in Daniel 9, 24 through 26 that predicts 69 weeks from this decree to when the Messiah is cut off which amounts to about 483 years between the decree and the death of the Messiah.
Daniel 9, 24 through 26. And there gets to be a lot of math and stuff so I didn't include that this morning and I'm an accountant and you guys would have been like why is Jeremy doing math in Sunday school?
And so I elected not to include that but there are some good commentaries out there that kind of lay out those 69 weeks and pointing to this decree as the point where that started and then the end point is when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey.
So it's a pretty cool thing to see in Scripture and drives home the point that God is a God with a plan. Because God has a plan, and He created us in His image, we should have a plan in line with His will.
[20:19] Prayer and planning work together. As we saw in Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah didn't immediately jump to action when he got the news. He sat down and wept. He prayed for months, day after day, for over a hundred days.

But it's clear based on his actions in Nehemiah 2 that he was planning while he was praying. This is a model for us to follow. As we live life, we should be praying, regularly turning to God for wisdom and guidance.
Then we need to turn those prayers into a plan to follow what He has called us in to do. We don't know if Nehemiah knew he was going to Jerusalem when he started praying. But it's clear by the time that Artaxerxes asked him the question at the beginning of the chapter that God had put in his heart to go.
Is there something in your life that you've been praying about but have failed to act on? Like Nehemiah, be watching for the opportunity to present itself and have courage to act when it does.
Now, these last two points are going to be brief. The second point in your outline is God gives the provisions. God gives the provisions.
[21:37] The second half of verse 8 reads, And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me. Nehemiah never loses sight of God. As we move through this study, you will notice that he uses I to describe some of the things that get done.

But remember this, he consistently turns to give God the glory for anything that happens. So while he uses the first person pronoun to describe some of the things that get done, he's always pointing back to God just like we see here.
He acknowledges that the king provides what he asked for, but says that it's only because the good hand of my God was on me. The short sentence of the end of the verse resonates with Proverbs 21.1.
The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever he wishes.
God had turned the king's heart from one that had decreed a discontinuation of the work to rebuild Jerusalem to one that is sending his personal cupbearer and supplying the materials to accomplish the task.
No work of man could have ever done this. In our day, fraught with political turmoil, we would do well to remember Proverbs 21.1. God gives the provisions.
[22:57] The last point there is Nehemiah proceeds in the face of opposition. Nehemiah proceeds in the face of opposition. Verses 9 and 10.

We will see more of this next week, but the opening salvo of opposition Nehemiah will face is in our text today. Verse 9. Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the river and gave them the king's letters.
Now the king had sent me with officers of the army and horsemen. When Sambalat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.
Other translations read a very great evil where the New American Standard reads very displeasing. So these local leaders view this as a very great evil that Nehemiah has come to do good or is concerned about the welfare of the Israelites.
Nehemiah has the letters from the king in hand. The king has provided royal entourage for protection. We shouldn't take this as Nehemiah being fearful or that he asked for that entourage.

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[24:02] It seems that the king provided it to reinforce Nehemiah's official capacity from the king's court. So he rolls into town. No doubt this created quite a stir. He doesn't avoid the leadership.

Instead, he takes the letters from the king directly to them to head off any opposition. Verse 10 introduces these men, Sambalat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. Sambalat was the governor of Samaria to the north and Tobiah had local influence and likely an official position in the satrap to the east.
We will meet Geshem, the Arab, who was to the south. Nehemiah is entering a difficult situation with enemies and opposition all around. But he has prayed, planned, and prepared to do what God has called him to.
And we will see him keep praying throughout. The fact of the matter is, we will encounter opposition any time we live as God calls us to. We're in a world that's fallen and against God.
So it only makes sense that when we're living like we're instructed to in Scripture, Satan and the world system over which he rules is going to be against us. To overcome the opposition, we must continually return to the word and prayer, relying on God, and not being afraid to act when called like Nehemiah's example provides.
[25:18] If we are to stand for Christ in a fallen world, back to our main emphasis, persistent praying produces a plan and God provides provision to his people to proceed with action.

A few applications to consider there. Do you pray regularly? If not, why? If so, could you say you employ the two types of prayer that we've seen from Nehemiah so far?
Long periods of extended prayer and short arrow prayers. Second, God prepares his people for action through prayer. Pray for wisdom about where God would have you take action.
And third, don't be surprised by opposition you encounter when living out your faith. Trust in the Lord to provide. To learn more, visit us in person or see the website at highlandparkbaptist.net.
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