

Opportunities

Nehemiah 2:1-8

Last week, we saw that at the beginning of chapter 1, Nehemiah's friends brought the condition of Jerusalem's city walls to his attention. They were in a terrible state of disrepair, and this made the city unsafe. The broken walls were also a constant reminder of the punishment God had brought on His people – how He had allowed them to be conquered and carried off into captivity because of their unfaithfulness. In short, the people of God faraway in Jerusalem were in distress and they were ashamed.

Now, this was a serious problem for God's people. But instead of jumping right in and trying to use his influence with the king to fix things, Nehemiah devoted himself to prayer – for between three to five months. As a result, at the beginning of today's passage, when he finally speaks to the king, he describes the problem the same way his friends had when they had just come from Jerusalem: the city lay in waste and the gates had been burned with fire.

But that doesn't mean Nehemiah's months of prayer had had no result. No, in the first place, his steadfast, constant prayers had focused and tightened his own priorities. Day after day, month after month as he continued to pray about the problems of God's people in Jerusalem, they had become more and more his own. Regardless of the safety, wealth, and influence he personally enjoyed in Susa, by the time he spoke to the king, he had become so overwhelmed by the suffering of the people of Jerusalem he could no longer hide his sorrow and distress. In other words, while his prayers had sought to move the heart of God, his prayers had also changed him.

So, before we go on to examine what else Nehemiah did, perhaps we need to take a quick peek inside our own hearts. Perhaps we need to eavesdrop on our own prayers. What do our prayer lists reveal about our own priorities?

For example, I know we spend a lot of time praying for the health of our friends and our loved ones. We pray for jobs for those who are out of work. We pray for safety for our friends who are travelling, and for those who do dangerous jobs. And it's certainly not wrong to pray about the material, physical needs of others. It's not wrong to pray that a merciful, loving God would comfort those who are in distress, as the people of ancient Jerusalem certainly were.

But remember, Nehemiah was praying with this kind of fervor not just for people he knew and loved, but for God's people who were faraway, many of whom he had never met. Well, what about us? How often and how steadfastly do we pray for the safety and security of our Christian brothers and sisters in foreign lands who are even now in great danger because they claim the name of Christ?

And while we pray for the physical and material needs of our brothers and sisters, what about the reproach of God's people? Do we also pray about that? Are we burdened in prayer by the way that Christians are oppressed and abused in countries that are dominated by communism or Islam? Do we cry out for folks in other parts of America who have to endure a popular culture that increasingly scorns not just Christian standards of morality, but the very notion that there can be any absolute truth at all? Closer to home, as we pray for the physical and material needs of our friends and loved ones, do we also pray for their spiritual needs? Do we ask God to reveal Himself to those who don't yet know Him?

In short, What do our prayers tell us about our priorities? And if we were to pray more often and more fervently not just for material, physical blessings but for the advancement of God's kingdom and the expansion of God's glory, how might that change our priorities?

But as the months passed by, Nehemiah wasn't just absorbed in prayer. No, he was also making careful plans. The detailed request he made to the king in verses 7 and 8 indicates that he had spent a lot of time thinking about exactly what he would need to accomplish the tremendous task of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem, if the opportunity ever presented itself. The letters to the local officials, the necessary building materials, the permission to be absent from his job, an estimate of how long it would be before he could return to the king's court – Nehemiah left nothing out. He had formed a realistic plan of exactly what he needed to ask the king to do, and then prayerfully waited for the chance to make his appeal.

Well, what about us? What sorts of plans should we make to further the work of God's kingdom? The answer to that question will in large measure depend on the particular needs that present themselves, the urgent problems that the Lord will lay on our hearts as we pray with an eye to His glory. For example, Hector Reynoso and the folks at Genesis Church in Mercedes, Texas, have made careful plans for their new sanctuary building, selecting a prominent spot and designing facilities that will enable them to reach out to the community. Only after making all these plans have they asked the rest of the Presbytery for help to make their dreams a reality.

So, perhaps in your own prayers God has drawn your attention to someone with a particular need – have you thought about how you might be able to meet that need? Is it something you can do yourself? Or like Nehemiah, might you need help from others?

And isn't it true that the needs we discern and the plans we make often flow out of our relationships? In Nehemiah's case, it was his friends who brought the problem in Jerusalem to his attention. And since it was King Artaxerxes who had put a stop to a previous effort to rebuild the city walls, Nehemiah was in a position to help remove that roadblock. That's because of his job as cupbearer to the King, a job that meant the king trusted him to taste his food and thus prevent him from being poisoned. No, Nehemiah wasn't powerful enough to barge in and ask the King to reverse his previous decision. But he knew he just might have a chance to put in a word for His people when the opportunity presented itself.

And Nehemiah had spent years building this relationship, even before he knew about the problems in Jerusalem. He had taken on an admittedly dangerous job in a remarkably selfless way – regularly risking his life on behalf of a pagan king. Yes, it was because of his faithfulness and loyalty that he had earned the king's respect and trust. So, when the subject of the city walls finally came up, Artaxerxes was willing to listen to what Nehemiah said. Moreover, because Nehemiah had earned the king's trust and respect, the king cared enough about him to notice that he was sad and to ask him why, thus opening the door for Nehemiah to make his request.

Okay, so what about us? No, I doubt any of us stand in such close relationship to such powerful people. But because of our First Amendment, powerful people aren't in such a position to either promote or hinder the kingdom of God. No, in America God's work depends primarily on the personal example and witness of individual Christians.

So that raises the question: how are we doing in our relationships with people like Artaxerxes who don't personally know Jesus as Savior and who haven't bowed the knee to Him as Lord? Do we love these folks enough to spend significant time with them, really to put ourselves out for them? I'm not talking about being manipulative – I'm talking about real love, the kind of love we read about in our responsive reading, the kind of love that pours out of our understanding of who we are as the redeemed children of God. And as we live out our love for others, and as we allow our prayers to transform our priorities, and as we display those priorities in our daily lives, shouldn't we expect doors of conversation to be opened? Shouldn't we expect God to create opportunities for us to share our faith in Christ? And wouldn't that bring glory to God, and expand His kingdom?

But there's one more thing we can learn from Nehemiah's interview with the king. For just as he had saturated his efforts in prayer, just as he had laid careful plans for how he could further the work of God's kingdom, and just as he had lived out his faith in loving relationships, he was also willing to risk everything for the glory of God.

For did you notice Nehemiah's fear in verse 3? There are a couple of reasons for this. In the first place, it was dangerous for any servant of the king to appear to be sad in his presence – that might indicate disloyalty or even treachery. That's why Nehemiah's immediate response was "Let the king live forever" – that's an ancient version of the Pledge of Allegiance.

But let's face it – there was another, deeper reason for Nehemiah's fear. He knew this was the moment he had been waiting and praying for. He knew that this was a chance – probably his only chance – to bring up the need to rebuild the city walls around Jerusalem. And he also knew that meant asking the King to re-examine and reverse an edict he had already made on that subject. Then as now, powerful people don't like to be told they have made a mistake.

So in a very real way, when Nehemiah took the plunge and poured out his request to the king, he was risking everything he was and everything he had. It would have been so easy for the king to have been offended by the suggestion that he should have done something different, that he should change his mind. And that offense would almost certainly have cost Nehemiah his job, a job that depended on the trust of the king. It could even have cost him his life.

So, what about us? As we allow our prayers to transform our priorities, as we grow more and more concerned with the glory of God and the welfare of His people, as we make plans to advance the cause of the kingdom, and as we live out lives of service and love even for those who don't yet know Christ as Savior and Lord, are we also willing to take risks? Will we risk our savings to help Hector build a sanctuary or to help our Engage 2025 team reach out to refugees or to help Brett or Christian plant a church? Will we risk our time, forming and maintaining relationships with those who, in one way or another, will probably make demands on our friendship? And will we risk our relationships by being honest about our priorities, about our loyalty to Christ and His truth? After all, in our responsive reading, Jesus Himself said we should love others the same way He loved us – and He was willing to die for us. Are we willing to take risks that others might be saved?

Of course, in this particular case, Nehemiah's risk paid off – and that's probably why he gave all the glory to God for the way Artaxerxes changed his position. After all, he had been praying for that very thing for months – according to the last verse of chapter 1, he had been asking God to give him success and grant him mercy in the sight of the King. In verse 4, just before presenting his request to

the king, Nehemiah said one more quick prayer, probably along the same lines. And then in verse 8, Nehemiah clearly says that the only reason the king granted his request was because Nehemiah had the good hand of God upon him.

So, yes, Nehemiah was both patient and persistent in prayer. Yes, he had allowed his prayers to transform his priorities. Yes, he had made plans to address the needs of God's people. And yes, he had been faithful and loyal to a pagan king, which had earned him the right to be heard. He had taken a big risk, putting his career and even his life on the line in order to further the work of God's kingdom. But he insisted on giving all the glory to God, for he knew that God alone was responsible for the success of his prayers.

And the same thing is true for us today. For no matter how hard we pray, no matter how diligently we plan, no matter how hard we work and no matter how much we risk, God is the One Who still makes everything possible. God is still the One Who softens even the hardest of hearts. God is the One Who opens the eyes of the blind and reveals Himself to others – even if He is gracious to use our own prayers and planning and love and loyalty to accomplish His will in their lives.

So, even as we rely on God for the outcome, let us ask Him to use us for His glory.