

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Nehemiah 2 on July 12, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Nehemiah
Today's Focus: God's Hand, My Heart

“What Has God Put On Your Heart To Do With His Help?”

“Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Pe. 1:2)

Dear Friends in Jesus,

Last week as we started our journey through Nehemiah, I asked the question, “What breaks your heart?” In other words, what is causing your heart to break right now when you think about our world, our country, the church, or our community? Someone told me this week, “Pastor Ben, that is the most intense, challenging question I’ve ever been asked before. I don’t think I’ll ever forget that question.” Would you agree that’s a challenging question to think about—What breaks your heart?

Well for Nehemiah what broke his heart was the broken down walls of Jerusalem. Last week we learned that Nehemiah was a Jewish man who worked for the king of Persia as his cupbearer some 1,000 miles away from Jerusalem. You see Nehemiah was a descendent of Jewish prisoners of war who were taken captive by the Babylonians about 150 years before when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. So when Nehemiah in Persia heard how bad it still was back in Jerusalem with its broken down walls, this broke his heart. Even more, what broke his heart was the broken down spiritual condition of the people. But he didn’t panic. Instead he opened up his heart to the LORD and prayed about what broke his heart. He prayed and essentially asked God not just that God would rebuild Jerusalem independently of him, but for an opportunity to go rebuild it himself with God’s help.

So today I’m going to tweak the question a little bit as we continue our journey into Nehemiah chapter two. So not just, “What breaks your heart?” but, **“What has God put on your heart to do with His help?”** Now Nehemiah was convinced that he should actually go and rebuild Jerusalem. And he felt very strongly about doing this. So... as soon as Nehemiah was gripped by this vision of rebuilding, what did he do? Did he pack up his bags, charge right out the doors, find a camel or hop on a horse just hoping God would work all the details? Not exactly. He first had to wait.

Friends, one thing we’re going to learn today is that waiting time isn’t necessarily wasted time. Now I know how odd that sounds at first. But when we’re asking the question, **What has God put on your heart to do with his help...**it’s important to pray, formulate your thoughts, search God’s Word to figure out whether it’s the right thing to do, and then often to just wait for God’s timing and the opportunity that He provides. And that’s all ok. Often it’s in waiting where God does His best work in our hearts.

Think of Joseph in the Bible whom God prepared for leadership in the Egyptian government by letting him sit in prison for a couple years. That’s not your typical advanced degree program, is it? Think of Moses whom God called to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt but who first had to spend 40 years taking care of his father-in-law’s sheep before God summoned him from within the burning bush. That’s not your typical internship, is it? Think of David whom God had already anointed to be king

over Israel but then who was forced to run away and hide from cave to cave as the current king Saul hunted him down to have him killed. That's your normal succession plan in corporate America. But waiting time was not wasted time for them. It was preparation time—to pray and to plan and to learn while waiting to trust in the LORD.

I was thinking about Nehemiah's life this week. Think of all the things that had to happen for a Jewish kid like him to become the cupbearer to the king of Persia – and I don't think Nehemiah necessarily grew up thinking, "When I grow up, I want to be the king's cupbearer." Yet whether Nehemiah was aware of it or not, God was preparing him all along. And this is how God often works. God who is sovereign (that means He's unlimited in His resources to work out all the details)...He works behind the scenes of our lives to put us right where He wants us. He prepares us for the various opportunities or challenges that He Himself will give us whether big or small. There's a verse in the Bible that says, "*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*" (Ephesians 2:10). So we read today from Nehemiah 2...

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. So listen, when Nehemiah heard the bad news about the broken down walls of Jerusalem it was November. But now it was March (the Jewish month of Nisan). That means for three months Nehemiah was stuck in his role as cupbearer to the king. And seemingly he hadn't done a thing yet to carry out the vision for Jerusalem that God had put on his heart. He was like a runner stuck in the starting blocks of a race but not able to get out and run.

Some of you probably feel like this too I'm guessing, right? Maybe you're in a spot in life where you're struggling to see what your purpose even is. Or maybe you've already tried to do some things that you thought God had put on your heart to do but those things didn't work out the way you had hoped and now you're feeling discouraged. Perhaps you feel like you've got ideas or skills that just aren't being put to good use or haven't even been tapped yet but you're not quite sure what to do about it. Or there's just something that breaks your heart but you're not quite sure what to do about it yet. And if that's the case, that's ok, friends.

There are things that break my heart right now and I'm not sure yet what exactly to do. It's a burden on my heart to help strengthen the marriages of our church. And I want to help people build healthier marriages according to God's blueprint that we might even become a church that is known for helping marriages and families thrive. I want to help establish a teen ministry (there aren't many that are thriving) that actually helps young people grow together in Christ so that they can successfully navigate the challenges of our world. I want to lead a church that reaches more people who are far from God and perhaps forgotten by others. I want to help more of you get connected in small groups so that you can encourage and support each other so that no one feels like they're walking through life alone. I don't just want to build a church. I want to use it build the Church...the people of God, with God's help of course.

Nehemiah felt similar about rebuilding Jerusalem. He knew *what* he wanted to do although I'm not sure he immediately knew *how* to do it and he didn't immediately get the opportunity to do it. For quite a

while all he could do was be faithful in the place in life where God had put him. And that's a great lesson for all of us to learn.

Some of you just need to know that you are serving God right now simply by working faithfully in the place where God has put you doing the things you're doing. Think about it. Nehemiah was right where God wanted him even at the time when all he was doing was serving the king of Persia. Yet in faithfully serving him, Nehemiah was really serving the King of the Universe. What a thought! And while serving in this role, God was giving Nehemiah time to pray and to plan and trust in Him for whatever opportunities God would give him in the future. God was all the while preparing Nehemiah for a new opportunity that He Himself would give at just the right time.

Friends, **What has God been preparing you to do with His help?** *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,² 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,³ but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

⁴ *The king said to me, "What is it you want?"*

Can you put yourself in Nehemiah's shoes? Do you feel the lump in your throat as the king asks you this question? Because this is it—the opportunity you've been waiting for. And yet how does Nehemiah feel? He says, *I was very much afraid.*

I'm so glad Nehemiah admits that, aren't you? Because I've been there too. And because I've read the rest of his story—he's one amazing leader. But when he started out Nehemiah had no idea how it was going to turn it! He had been sketching out some big, bold plans but on his own he was afraid because he knew that if anything was going to be accomplished... it wasn't going to be his good leadership that got it done. It would have to be by God's hand of blessing *alone*.

Now Nehemiah did have some legitimate reasons to be afraid. For one thing the king had noticed he'd been acting gloomy. He could see that something was weighing on Nehemiah's heart. But in the Persian court you were supposed to always wear your happy face. And honestly I think Nehemiah was worried that the king would interpret his sadness as evidence that he was plotting to kill him. For one thing history reveals that Artaxerxes' dad, Xerxes, was assassinated by the captain of his personal bodyguard—a guy named Artabanus. In other words one of the former king's most trusted cabinet members killed him. So unless Artaxerxes was naïve he was likely keeping an eye on his inner circle including Nehemiah.

And in Persia when in the king's presence, not only weren't you allowed to be sad. You also weren't allowed to speak to the king unless he spoke to you first. So it's likely Nehemiah never had a chance to voice his concern until this moment. This was his one shot. He was risking his status, his position, and

possibly even his life. And by the way, King Artaxerxes had already explicitly forbidden that anyone try and rebuild Jerusalem because enemies of the Jews back in Judah had already reminded the king that Jerusalem was a “place of rebellion from ancient times” (cf. Ezra 4:15). So for Nehemiah to get permission to rebuild the walls he was basically going to have to get the king to write a brand new law.

⁴ *The king said to me, “What is it you want?”* Moment of truth—and what does Nehemiah say? Well for a brief, silent moment...he doesn’t say anything, does he? A couple times I actually read through this chapter before I even caught what the next words said: *Then I prayed to the God of heaven.*

Did you catch this? Here’s his opportunity. Yet what did Nehemiah do? He *prayed*. It wasn’t lengthy. It wasn’t elaborate. It was just a short, silent prayer like, “LORD, have mercy. LORD, help. LORD, grant success.” What an awesome reminder, friends! There’s a verse in the Bible that says, “*Pray continually*” (1 Thess. 5:17). If you’ve ever wondered what that looks like, here’s a great example. Prayer takes us beyond what human beings can accomplish into the realm of what only God can accomplish. Nehemiah was a man who prayed continually because he was tuned into God in every circumstance of his life. He did nothing without asking for God’s help. It was simply an outflowing of the faith in his heart that he had this relationship with God.

And you know what, friends? You can too. You and I have access to God’s heart 24/7 because of Jesus Christ, His Son, who has secured for us even 3 am access to the King who is greater than Artaxerxes, to the Maker of heaven and earth himself—at all times and in places even when you feel small and all alone and you don’t quite know what to do or what even to say!

Then I prayed to the God of heaven,⁵ 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 ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

⁶ *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.*

⁷ *I also said to him, “If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?”⁸ And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, 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?” And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.⁹ 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.*

Wow! Talk about a plan. It’s apparent that Nehemiah wasn’t just lucky. He was ready. He was ready when the opportunity came. So he got permission to go. He secured permits, safe passage, and even an armed escort. He obtained building materials and would eventually get the title, Governor of Judah. Well it must have been because he was so smart, right? Yet that’s not what Nehemiah says. *And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.*

¹⁰ 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. So we're going to see that it wasn't just going to be a cakewalk for Nehemiah even with God's help. There would be opposition. Nehemiah would have to adapt and adjust his plans. He couldn't possibly have foreseen all the challenges. He couldn't possibly have all the details worked out ahead of time. He'd have to pray and adapt on the fly once in a while. We'll talk more about this next week.

Nehemiah Inspects Jerusalem's Walls

¹¹ I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

¹³ By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; ¹⁵ so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." ¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

²⁰ I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

Again we'll talk more next week about this opposition that Nehemiah and the builders faced. But suffice it say, the opposition wasn't going to win. I mean they couldn't because Nehemiah had God's help and he was confident in it. *The God of heaven will give us success.* Friends, **what has God put on your heart to do with His help about whatever breaks your heart?** Well the reason you can trust God for His help is because He's already removed the greatest things we would otherwise have to fear which we could never handle unless God just did it all Himself. You see at the moment of truth—when we needed His help the most—He rescued us from sin, death, and the power of the our greatest opponent, the devil.

So as you pray about what God has put on your heart to do with His help...don't forget what's always been on God's heart to do *without* your help. It was His plan to use Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem so

that one day His Son, Jesus Christ, would walk through its gates, that one day His Son would worship in its temple, that one day His Son would heal people besides its pool, that one day His Son would die outside its walls on a wooden cross upon a hill. God's plan in all this? To build something far more lasting than a city that needed walls to be defended from its enemies. But to build His Church—a forgiven family of believers from all nations dependent on Him and Him alone for saving grace. And of His church in which we belong by faith, the LORD God declares, *“And I myself will be a wall of fire around it and I will be its glory within”* (Zechariah 2:5). This is God's vision even to this day—a vision for forgiving, cleansing, and inviting people like you and me into His family, into His work, for His glory, and ultimately to enjoy His company forever and ever safe and secure. This is the vision we have and have to share with others. Amen.

My Next Steps

Point to Ponder: Nehemiah planned to do what he could while trusting God to do what he knew he couldn't. Why is “pray and work” a healthy paradigm for anyone's life? Does your life reflect this kind of balance?

Treasure to Share: *“The God of heaven will give us success”* (Nehemiah 2:20).

Action to Take: What has God put on your heart to do that requires God's intervention for success? To spark your imagination and fuel your prayers, you may want to start with the phrase, I imagine.

I imagine an opportunity to...

I imagine a family that...

I imagine a church where...

I imagine a marriage in which...

I imagine a world where...

I imagine a company that...