

**A New Enterprise: Making Government Work**  
**Nehemiah 2:1-8**  
**October 20, 2013**

**Introduction – Government Gridlock**

There's a lot of talk these days about government gridlock and shutdowns. A few weeks ago the West-River ranchers experienced a devastating blizzard and lost thousands of cattle. But we don't have a farm bill and many of the ranchers are staring at financial ruin without government assistance. At the same time, our government partially shut down, furloughing thousands of "non-essential" personnel for over two weeks. In the end, both sides were intransigent and nothing was accomplished but to "kick the can down the road." We all know Washington is broken and there's not a lot of hope for getting it fixed.

Perhaps you had some personal dealings with the government before. While there are certainly good people who work for the government, its power is intimidating and its bloated bureaucracy makes it almost always inefficient. Generally, the government is incapable of "thinking outside of the box" because everything has to fit into their fixed categories and procedures. It took me a whole day to register a homemade wooden boat in Indiana because they didn't have a category for my vessel. I had to call the fish and game department, who referred me to someone else who referred me back to the DMV. Fortunately, I got a different agent who could think creatively. But it took a whole day to file paperwork just so I could pay taxes on my homemade boat.

Even with all our frustrations, government is a blessing. The Scripture says that God ordains it for our benefit (Romans 13:1-6). But it is sometimes very intimidating (ever get a letter from the IRS?) and nearly impossible to deal with.

Nehemiah was a government worker. He was a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. Because he was the last person to handle the food the king would eat, he held a position of high trust. No doubt, he was physically attractive and schooled in court etiquette and diplomacy. But prior to the story that we are about to read in chapter two, he had become distracted by the terrible news that he had heard regarding his homeland. According to the first chapter in Nehemiah, he had spent the last four months in mourning and prayer for Jerusalem. The circumstances of his kindred brethren lay heavy on his heart and he longed to do something to address their misfortune. Reading between the lines, we know that God laid it on his heart to go to Jerusalem and make the wrongs right. The only problem: he was employed by the King of Persia who, at the time, was the most powerful man in the known world. Talk about intimidation! How could he secure a leave of absence as well as the assistance that he needed in order to accomplish what God had put on his heart? Nehemiah faced a real crisis. That's why he prayed for the king's favor.

### **The Word – Nehemiah 2:1-8 (ESV)**

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. <sup>2</sup> And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick?”<sup>1</sup> This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. <sup>3</sup> I said to the king, “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?” <sup>4</sup> Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup> And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.” <sup>6</sup> And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. <sup>7</sup> And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, <sup>8</sup> 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 of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

### **Prayer**

The passage we just read is Nehemiah's crisis moment. The passion that had been cultivated for four months of prayer collided with his role as the king's trusted cupbearer. He could no longer hide his burden and the king noticed. Now it was no small thing to be depressed in the king's presence. Even more, it is quite possible that the setting of this story is a feast that the king and queen are attending. The host would not be very pleased with the help whose somber expression might be “raining on his parade.” The king had the power execute anyone who displeased him at any time. Nehemiah was on dangerous ground and he knew it. That's why verse two tells us he was terrified.

Ever been there? Probably every guy who's ever proposed marriage felt like Nehemiah. Everything is riding on the hoped for positive response. Maybe it was a school you applied to or a loan you were seeking. Perhaps it was that interview for the job you really needed. Everything – your life's direction, provision for the day and plans for the future – are riding on you being received favorably. One of the most intense crises I ever faced was an interview for a job I needed one week before I got married. I don't know if I've ever been more panicked in all of my life. If I didn't get something worked out, Diane would move her stuff from Los Angeles to San Jose and we would have begun our married life together in the extra bedroom of her parents' house. That's crisis. That's panic. In God's mercy and grace, I was received with favor by my future employer and a timely deal was struck. That's what Nehemiah was hoping for.

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, “Why is your face so bad?”

Nehemiah was smooth. He was trained to be that way. Notice his diplomacy: *Let the king live forever!* Such a greeting may be the expected protocol in the court, but it is also the smart hand to play. Nehemiah was playing by the rules. Even if you are passionate and your cause is just, in dealing with rulers and the government, you will help your cause if you will “play by the rules.” Nehemiah’s reply to the king, however, is diplomatic and clever at the same time: *Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?* Nehemiah had already experienced a measure of favor from the king. Instead of being escorted out of the room for execution, the king had inquired about Nehemiah’s emotional state. Taking that measure of grace, the cupbearer pushes a little further, drawing out the sympathies of the king for this dishonor of his ancestral burial grounds. Ancient kings were sympathetic about burial as evidenced in the elaborate tombs for royalty during that era. Nehemiah also didn’t mention the name of the city at this point, either. His omission was strategic. Jerusalem and Judah lay in the region known as “beyond the river.” Jerusalem had the reputation of being a hard place to govern from a distance. Years before, a Persian king had already shut down the rebuilding of the city out of fears of rebellion. Nehemiah knew where the king’s sympathies lie and he wisely played on them. He also avoided resistance by not bringing up hot topics. It’s called “speaking their language” and Nehemiah did it successfully. He crossed another threshold of progress as the king asked him, *What are you requesting?*

As Nehemiah’s favor with the king became established, he centered himself with a quick prayer to the Lord. The writer of the book didn’t need to insert that comment. The narrative could have just continued with Nehemiah’s reply to the king. But noting Nehemiah’s quick prayer to the Lord while he is on the spot reinforces our understanding that he is dependent on God to give him success. This is, after all, God’s enterprise that Nehemiah is undertaking. Nehemiah’s direct reply to the king and the interchange that follows tells us that he is not only a man of prayer, but also a man who plans.

### **God Used Nehemiah to Answer His Own Prayer**

We Christians are sometimes prone to over-spiritualizing things. The Book of Nehemiah won’t allow that. We have already learned that Nehemiah was a man of passionate prayer. But what we observe in chapter two is the realization that prayer and planning go together. Nehemiah’s reply to the king with his list of necessities for success required forethought. He knew he would face questions and opposition, so he asked for letters of introduction and authority. He knew the name of the keeper of the king’s forest. I doubt that they were personal friends. He would have only known such a detail through personal research. We’ve said when praying, “Take your request to the Lord and leave it there.” Let’s not be naïve. Scripture won’t allow it. Prayer requires strong faith. It is true that we sometimes bring our burdens to the Lord and then try and take them back by fixing it ourselves. Many of us are guilty of that. I know that I am! But Nehemiah shows us another side of the prayer equation, and that is simply this:

### **God often uses you to answer your own prayers!**

Got a burden for someone you love? Don't be surprised if God uses you to address their need. Need finances for an immediate need? Sometimes God will give you paying work rather than just a handout of cash. Your prayers are still answered, but God may very well use your actions to answer them. Praying for the salvation of a loved one? It may be you that is instrumental in bringing them to the Lord.

Nehemiah was trained in the court. As cupbearer, he knew proper protocol and was an able administrator. But he worked for a pagan king. How could he, in his wildest dreams, ever consider that the God of Israel would powerfully use him for his purposes? And yet, God leveraged all of the abilities that Nehemiah had developed in the Persian court. He used his tact and diplomacy. His skills in planning and his knowledge of government working enabled him to navigate all the necessary channels to ensure the success of God's enterprise.

The title of this sermon is a bit misleading, I suppose. It's compelling because we live in an era of frustration. But I'm no expert in dealing with the government. Perhaps there are a few tips on negotiation that we can learn from Nehemiah when we have to deal with authorities. But in the end, it is God who works things through for his purposes, including using pagan kings. Proverbs 21:1 tells us:

***The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord;  
He turns it wherever he will.***

I have seen God move government to accomplish his purpose. Shortly after the fall of Communism in the small eastern European country of Moldova, a government university invited American missionaries from Campus Crusade for Christ to teach English and American culture. The university thought it was only getting exposure to English and Americans. They got more – much more. Our translator was a university professor who was converted by the Gospel presented by the Crusade missionaries. Diane and I also discovered that the government had given the church fifteen prime acres in the middle of the city to build a new church. Evidently, the city fathers didn't like the mass baptisms in the city park, so they gave the land away to build a sanctuary where people could be baptized inside! God is indeed sovereign over all. The New Testament reminds us:

***Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.***

Romans 13:1

In God's grand enterprise, he used what Nehemiah had considered his greatest challenge and crisis – negotiations with the pagan King of Persia – to accomplish his purpose. We will see, as we journey ahead with Nehemiah, that God will use all of the gifts and abilities he learned in the Persian court to accomplish the daunting task that so deeply burdened his heart.

### **Reflection and Application**

This is exciting stuff! Nehemiah wasn't a pastor. He wasn't a minister. He was, by every definition, a layman. God has a place for you in his Kingdom. You don't have to go to seminary or Christian college. Your vocation is every bit as sacred as mine if you are willing to let God use you for his purposes.

Nehemiah shows us in this passage that prayer is not enough. I know that almost sounds sacrilegious. But God gave you gifts and experiences that he can use to accomplish his purposes. Use them! If you have a problem or a challenge in your life – like the song says – “take it to the Lord in prayer.” But as you linger in prayer, it is my experience and the experience of countless other people, God will often begin to show you how to address the issue. That's what happened with Nehemiah. As he mourned and prayed, God began to impress ideas in his mind that he formulated into plans. When the crisis moment arrived, he was ready to unfold the plan to the king. God will do the same for you. As you wait on the Lord, he will begin to speak to your mind and fire your imagination. Do not discount those thoughts! They come from the experiences, training, and personality that God has given you. They are his gifts to you for you to use.

Has God given you a burden for something or someone? “Oh, someone ought to do this or that!” That someone may just be you! This is not self-help or the power of positive thinking. This is how God works in prayer. He often empowers and enlightens your imagination to find a solution to your own problem. **God often uses you to answer your own prayers!**

### **Corporate Application**

Last week, following Nehemiah's example, I challenged us all to pray and reflect for God's direction over the next several months. Let me add to that challenge. Our prayers cannot be disengaged from the realities around us. As you begin to pray that God would break our hearts for what breaks his, be alert and on the lookout for what God may show you. If our hearts and minds are engaged in this constant prayer, I believe God will begin to show us what he wants and where he is working. Be alert.

Engaging our spirit in prayer doesn't mean that we disengage our minds and imaginations. As Nehemiah's heart was burdened for Jerusalem, his mind was open for possibilities. And while his spirit was engaged in prayer, his imagination was formulating a plan.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes observed, “*For everything there is a season, and a time for everything under heaven*” (Eccl. 3:1). Each season has its blessings and challenges. I remember some of those seasonal changes in life: beginning high school, going away to college, early years of marriage and career, the challenge of raising teenagers, and now being an empty nester. Life does not remain the same. Seasons are inevitable in our personal life as well as our church life. Pastor Salem led this church for fifty-two years through many different seasons. Upon his retirement, we entered a season of hard testing. Pastor Phillips brought healing and pointed us in a new direction. My first year here has been a time finding our bearings together. But now it is time to move forward. It is time to discern God’s leading and make plans to mobilize. Put January 12 on your calendar and circle it. That is the day we will convene and bring our thoughts together. It will be an exciting day!

Now is the time to pray and reflect as we’ve been prompted with the insert that has been prepared for you. Be alert and watchful for God’s direction. For surely if we pray for it, he will show it to us. But hear me: God intends to use you to answer your prayers. That’s how he works.

### **Take My Life and Let it Be Consecrated**

In just a few moments we’re going to sing a hymn of response. Too often, we go through the motions and mouth the words without really making any commitment to meaning them. We can’t afford to do that. The hymn was written by Francis Havergal in 1874. She had just about everything but good health. She was fairly well off as the daughter of an Anglican minister. She had a brilliant mind and was a sought-after musician. But she gave it all to Christ. Let’s take a moment to consider the words she gave us. She writes: (Hymn 455)

Take my life, and let it be  
 Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;  
 Take my moments and my days,  
 Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move  
 At the impulse of Thy love;  
 Take my feet and let them be  
 Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing  
 Always, only, for my King;  
 Take my lips, and let them be  
 Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold;  
 Not a mite would I withhold;  
 Take my intellect, and use

Every power as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it Thine;  
It shall be no longer mine.  
Take my heart; it is Thine own;  
It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour  
At Thy feet its treasure-store.  
Take myself, and I will be  
Ever, only, all for Thee.

**Invitation –**

*Open mic to affirm what God is saying through these messages.*