



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 2:1-8

Topic

Nehemiah's sadness prompts the king to ask him what is wrong with him

Title

"I See a Sad Mood Rising"

Starlord claimed to have a plan for defeating Ronin in order to obtain the infinity stone. When pressed, he admitted that he only had 12% of a plan. Groot kindly commented, "I am Groot," translated, "It's better than 11% of a plan."

Colonel John "Hannibal" Smith, leader of *The A-Team*, was fond of saying, "I love it when a plan comes together." The movie inspired by the TV show had the tag line, "There is no plan B."

Nehemiah was definitely a man with Plan-A.

At the end of chapter one, we read, “O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper **this day**, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man” (v11).

Emphasis on “this day.” After months of praying, the day arrived on which Nehemiah planned to take action.

His asks in chapter two definitely reveal careful planning:

- Verse 7 - “Furthermore I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors *of the region* beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah...” Nehemiah had planned-out his travel.
- Verse 8 - “And [give me] a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which *pertains* to the temple, for the city

wall, and for the house that I will occupy.” He had planned ahead as to how he would rebuild the walls, and what materials it would require.

In chapter one, Nehemiah was introduced as a *pray-er*. In chapter two he is introduced as a *planner*.

We’ll look at Nehemiah’s planning with an eye towards God’s plan for each of us. I’ll organize my comments around two points: #1 Your Plan Should Be To Discover God’s Plan, and #2 Your Plan Should Be To Implement God’s Plan.

#1 Your Plan Should Be To Discover God’s Plan

(v1-4)

I know; it sounds like double-talk. But it’s true. If you are in Christ, God has a plan for you. It involves His working *in* you, then *through* you.

The apostle Paul revealed this precious truth when he said, “For we are His workmanship,

created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

- God is working *in* you: You are His “workmanship,” a beautiful new creation who is predestined to be conformed into the image of Jesus.
- God is working *through* you: He has “good works” “prepared” for you to “walk” in. It’s subtle, but notice, Paul doesn’t say you have works to perform. He says you have works to discover, preplanned by God. Your part is to “walk” in them - meaning you are to walk by faith in the Spirit in every situation.

It’s not double-talk. It is keeping our dependence upon the Lord to finish what He has started in us by working through us; not by our works, but as we walk by faith in the works that He has prepared in advance for us to discover.

Nehemiah discovered God's plan, and began to walk in it. Let's start in the last verse of chapter one.

Neh 1:11 "O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." For I was the king's cupbearer.

Comparing the dates in chapter one with those in chapter two, we learn that Nehemiah had been praying and intermittently fasting about the sad conditions in Jerusalem for a period of four months. In those four months, he discovered God's plan for him was to travel to Jerusalem and rebuild its broken down walls.

We don't know a lot about Nehemiah before we meet him as the king's cupbearer, but I think it's safe to speculate that God's plan was way beyond his training and talent.

To put it another way, if you were looking for someone to build an addition to your house, you wouldn't search Angie's List for wine tasters.

The work God has prepared in advance for you, by which He will be glorified, can seem foolish to you, and to others. One of the first things we need, then, is an openness to whatever God wants to do through us. The less our serving Him has to do with our abilities, the better.

Nehemiah mentioned other servants who were praying. This could refer to Jews in general, who might also be burdened for the welfare of Jerusalem. But it reads more like a prayer-group Nehemiah had gotten together.

You're only going to discover God's plan for you while in fellowship with other believers. For example: In the New Testament, we read a lot about the gifts of God the Holy Spirit. Except for the gift of tongues as a personal prayer language, aren't all the other listed gifts for the purpose of serving others?

The Contemporary English Version (CEV) puts it this way: “The Spirit has given each of us a special way **of serving others**” (First Corinthians 12:7).

If you’re not in regular, personal fellowship in a local church, you’re not going to discover God’s plan.

Nehemiah wanted mercy from God in the sight of the king “this day.” It was time to act.

Neh 2:1 And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, *when wine was before him*, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before.

How are we to understand his “sad” countenance? **I think it was the plan to get the king to engage in conversation.**

I submit two observations in support:

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- The first observation is that Nehemiah indicated he was going to act “this day.” The only action we read about is his sadness.
- The second observation is that he specifically mentioned his need for “mercy in the **sight**” of the king.

You could say that the future of Jerusalem depended on one man’s ability to make a sad face. Not too sad; just sad enough.

I wonder how that plan was revealed. Did God suggest it to Nehemiah? Or to one of the other guys in his prayer cell? It’s just funny - admit it. And it worked.

Neh 2:2 Therefore the king said to me, "Why *is* your face sad, since you *are* not sick? This *is* nothing but sorrow of heart." So I became dreadfully afraid,

Lots to fear. King Artaxerxes wasn't someone you wanted to mis-serve. These Persian kings might kill you for less.

Neh 2:3 and said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, *lies* waste, and its gates are burned with fire?"

Pretty bold, I'd say. He was respectful, but brutally honest. Any plan of God's is going to be without deceit. It won't be manipulative or tricky. It's not a sales pitch.

Neh 2:4 Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah prayed under his breath before answering. I do that all the time - not because I'm so spiritual, *but because I'm not.*

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious is what Mary Poppins wants you to say when you don't know what to say. Doesn't work in discipleship or counseling. Pray under you breath or silently.

I know we can't be certain, but it doesn't seem like Nehemiah the cupbearer's first thought upon hearing about the walls of Jerusalem was, "I'm the man to go and rebuild them." And if that was his first thought, he most certainly had little or no training or talent to accomplish the task.

He discovered it was God's plan to send him. Through prayer and fasting, the details came to him.

You and I probably don't need to be sent somewhere. We're most likely right where God has brought us. His plan is to make us more like Jesus day-by-day.

We discover the particulars as we yield to the indwelling Holy Spirit, acting and reacting as a believer can and should.

Walk this way and you will discover God's plan, and your works in particular, that contribute to making you like your Lord over your lifetime.

#2 Your Plan Should Be To Implement God's Plan

(v5-8)

Before we get too much further, I want to clarify something about the phrase, "God's plan." I don't want us to get the idea that there is always a three-point or five-point, step-by-step, blueprint-style plan to implement.

An example might be better than an explanation.

Abram, who would later have his name changed by God to Abraham, discovered and

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implemented God's plan for his life. But listen to the plan:

Gen 12:1 Now the LORD had said to Abram:
"Get out of your country, From your family And
from your father's house, To a land that I will
show you..."

Gen 12:4 So Abram departed as the LORD had
spoken to him...

"Abram, take off; I'll show you where to later."
Could you call that a plan? It sounds like 12% of
a plan to me. But it was enough for Abram to
begin walking. He would discover more as he
obeyed.

Some of God's plans are Abram-like; some are
Nehemiah-like. There's no one-size-fits-all when
it comes to walking with Jesus.

Nehemiah had a three-point, bullet point, PowerPoint presentation. Point #1 - Send Me to Judah.

Neh 2:5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."

Twice he mentioned his “father’s tombs” to the king. As cupbearer, Nehemiah did more than serve wine. The position gave him close, even intimate, contact with both the king and his queen. They would confide in him. He would converse with them, probably counsel them. So perhaps Nehemiah knew something about the king and queen we don’t - that they would be moved by his connection to his fathers.

He had a clear starting point. And it wasn’t just “Let me go to Judah”; it was “Send me to Judah.” He wanted support, not just permission.

For this task, in that political climate, implementing God's plan would require support.

Here is how I'd apply that to us. A believer may think they've discovered God's plan, and want to implement it. But you should seek the spiritual support of the fellowship of believers. Not everything I think is a plan from God is something from Heaven. It may be my will, not God's; so confirmation is a good thing.

Neh 2:6 Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), "How long will your journey be? And when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

There's no reason to think this "queen" was Esther. It would be fun; but it wasn't her.

It reads like they were having a quiet dinner, with Nehemiah pouring the beverages as usual.

It doesn't say, but it is strongly implied, that Nehemiah answered the king's questions. He'd thus given a great deal of thought to implementing this plan - enough that he could give a reasonable guesstimate as to how much leave from his position he would need. He could break it down to round-trip travel, as well as time in Jerusalem rebuilding. Maybe he had charts??

Sometimes meticulous planning is called for. For example: I'm aware of several fellowships that purchased land expecting that, as soon as they did, their numbers and their income would swell. Didn't happen, and now they are strapped. Unless God specifically told them to do so, that's not a good plan.

Here's another example: The organization Youth With a Mission (YWAM) has (or had) a training facility in Hawaii. If you applied to go to school there, they would not accept you unless you had all the funds necessary to get there and back.

We came into contact with a pastor from Burma on his way to YWAM. He had enough money to get from Burma to Hanford. When I contacted YWAM, they told me he was now our problem.

Point #2 - Authority.

Neh 2:7 Furthermore I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors *of the region* beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah,

There had been significant opposition to the resettlement of Jews to Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the walls especially. Nehemiah wanted the authority of the king to travel and to build.

How does this speak to implementing God's plan or plans?

Well, it is important to remember and to respect that we who are in Christ have been granted great authority - great spiritual authority.

For example: You have the authority on earth to tell a sinner that, at the Cross, their sins can be forgiven, along with the guilt and shame associated with them. You can confidently promise them they will be new creations in Jesus - born again recipients of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And you guarantee them eternal life in Heaven in a sinless glorified body.

Just to compare... Buddhism says that when we die the mind that has been developed and conditioned for this life re-establishes itself in a new being. The new individual will then grow a new personality that is conditioned by those life circumstances. This process of dying and re-establishing itself continues until one reaches Nirvana - a state of enlightenment that does not desire or crave but simply lives in peace and with love.

In other words, after you die, you'll be reincarnated. According to Buddhism, there are several different realms one can be transported to. Some may be reborn as animals, while others humans. Rebirth occurs over and over again. Lame.

Back to our thoughts about implementing God's plan with authority. BE CAREFUL. Try to not mis-speak. Don't, for example, put burdens on people that are unbiblical and legalistic. Don't misrepresent God's grace.

On the other side of that, know something about the author whose book you are about to read; or the doctrine of the Bible teachers you listen to; or the perspectives of the biblical counselors you seek out. They might do more damage than good - depending on their core beliefs.

Implement God's plan with His authority, being careful to apply grace with compassion.

Point #3 - Materials List.

Neh 2:8 and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which *pertains* to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy." And the king granted *them* to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

This guy was thorough. He had thought it through right down to his own need for housing while on site. He knew how he wanted to build, and with what materials - taking into account what was readily available to him.

We would say that he counted the cost. Always a good idea. While we must take ventures of faith when called upon, we should not presume upon the Lord in foolishly tempting Him.

We could also talk about the materials with which we are to build for God. The apostle Paul illustrated it by saying, “Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw...” (First Corinthians 3:12).

These all were possible building materials that were used in temples being constructed in the first century. Think of the projects around your house. There are always choices in materials. Some will do the job but won't last as long. You might choose them when you're putting your house on the market! Other materials have a much higher quality. You choose them if you plan on living in your house for a long time.

You can choose either *costly* or *common* materials which are either more or less permanent. In practical terms, it boils down to how much you're willing to sacrifice in order to implement God's plan through the works you discover He has for you.

I've told you about the couch that was donated to our old office on 11th Avenue. One of the cushions was eaten out by a German Shepherd. You could hide that by flipping the cushion over... But if you sat on that side, there was no support, and you'd sink.

The time and the talent and the treasure you are applying in your walk - Is it like that couch?

God is a planner. He has big plans for you. One day, you will awake in the likeness of your Savior, Jesus. Mean time... Walk by faith in every situation, yielded to the Holy Spirit, and you will discover and implement His pre-planned works for you.

A.W. Tozer reminds us, "God wants worshipers before workers; indeed the only acceptable workers are those who have learned [to] worship."

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