

BUILD MY LIFE "STEP-BY-STEP TO SUCCESS" NEHEMIAH 2:1-20

References to prayer occur frequently throughout the Bible—either in *exhortations* to pray or in *examples* of prayer. For instance, when his disciples ask him to teach them to pray like John taught his disciples, Jesus tells them, "When you pray, say:

'Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.'" (Lk 11:2-4)

And then he immediately tells them the parable of the Friend at Midnight, which ends with the exhortation: "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (vv. 9-10). And in another place, he tells them the parable of the Persistent Widow to teach them that "they should always pray and not give up" (18:1-4).

Jesus not only teaches his disciples to pray, he gives them the consummate example to follow. Luke tells his readers that Jesus "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (5:16). What's more, he often takes his disciples with him to pray. About eight days after telling them "some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God," he takes Peter, John, and James with him to the Mount of Transfiguration to pray (9:27-28). And prior to his arrest, nearing the end of his earthly life, he takes them

with him to pray: "Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you will not fall into temptation.' He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done'" (22:39-42). Christ followers pray because Jesus prayed and taught his disciples to do likewise.

This Week's Core Competency

Prayer – I pray to God to know him, to lay my request before him and to find direction for my daily life.

The book of Nehemiah opens with Nehemiah's prayer of confession and petition in chapter one followed immediately by God's answer in chapter two. (Ignore the chapter division.) The first chapter closes with the request, "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man" (v. 11), namely, Artaxerxes I, the king of Persia. The second chapter opens four months later with Nehemiah's request for permission to return to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem. "Send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it," he asks the king-asking, too, for letters guaranteeing safe passage and gaining access to the timber needed to repair the city gates. And God gives him the success he requested. Nehemiah testifies: "And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests" (v. 8).

On Nehemiah's prayer and God's answer, one commentator writes: "What Nehemiah's narrative is telling us is this: that his three-month prayer for favor in the king's presence was accompanied by complete uncertainty as to how the question of his going to Jerusalem could ever be raised; that he had

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Prayer changes things!

– J. I. Packer

no idea of what volumes his face, which as a good courtier he was trying to keep happy, was actually speaking about the state of this heart; that he was not expecting to hear the king diagnose sadness of heart and quiz him as to what the trouble was, and he was certainly not manipulating the situation by putting on a sad look in order to be noticed and questioned; and that in retrospect the entire episode appeared to him as a fantastic answer to prayer . . . The development was truly amazing, for it involved a direct reversal of Artaxerxes' own previous policy. Ezra 4:7-23 tells how some years before he had been petitioned by leaders of city-states in the Jerusalem area to stop the building of Jerusalem's walls and had done as asked. But the 'the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases' (Prov. 21:1). On the spur of the moment Artaxerxes decided to make Nehemiah governor of Trans-Euphrates and give him authority to rebuild, and so Nehemiah's course was set for the next several years. Prayer changes things!" (J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 65, 66).

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Nehemiah 2:1-20

1 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?"

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.

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.

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."

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Circle "Nisan" in v.1.
- * Circle "sad" in v. 2.
- * Highlight v. 4b, v. 8b, v. 12b and v. 18.
- * Bracket "with the queen sitting beside him" in v. 6.
- * Underline the king's question in v. 6.
- * Circle "Trans-Euphrates" in v. 7.
- * Box "so that" indicating *purpose/result* in v. 7.
- * Circle "royal park" in v. 8.
- * Circle "Sanballat" and "Tobiah" in vv. 10, 19 and "Geshem" in v. 19.
- * Bracket v. 10.
- * Underline the question asked by Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem in v. 19.

day **2** EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. How long does Nehemiah have to wait before he has an opportunity to petition the king?
2. Nehemiah is "very much afraid" in the king's presence (v. 2). Explain why.
3. Before answering the king's question, Nehemiah "prayed to the God of heaven" (v. 4; cf., 1:11). For what do you think he prayed?
4. Why mention the queen sitting beside the king?
5. For what *exactly* did Nehemiah ask?
6. Nehemiah refers to "what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem" (v. 12). What do you infer from his statement?
7. Describe what Nehemiah saw when inspecting Jerusalem's gates and walls.
8. What made rebuilding them so important?

9. Explain the *contrast* in verse 20.

10. **Discussion:** Talk about your takeaway regarding prayer from this chapter.

day 3 **EXAMINE** – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

Prayer forms the link between the first two chapters of the book of Nehemiah. Chapter one contains its content, closing with the words: "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man" (v.11), namely, King Artaxerxes. Chapter two contains its answer and outcome. In verse 8, Nehemiah testifies: "And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests." In other words, God gave him the success he had requested. And in verse 18, he says concerning the Jews: "I 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." However, along the way, hints inserted in the text suggest that Nehemiah will face stiff opposition and the task of rebuilding the city will not be easy. According to verse 8, Nehemiah has to request letters from the king to ensure safe passage to Judah. According to verse 10, two influential political figures are introduced, Sanballat and Tobiah, who are none too happy to hear that "someone has come to promote the welfare of the Israelites." And finally, according to verse 19, these two are joined by a third powerful person, Geshem, to mock and ridicule the rebuilding process, suggesting that the people are rebelling against the king.

The chapter can be cut in two. Verses 1-8 contain the *answer* to Nehemiah's prayer. Verses 11-20 contain the *outcome* of his prayer. (Verse 10 serves as a transition.) Four months pass before Nehemiah has an opportunity to petition the king—four months in which he no doubt continues to mourn, fast, and pray about conditions in Jerusalem (cf., 1:3). On the occasion in question, perhaps a banquet (v. 1) followed by a private audience (v. 6), the king notices his cupbearer's appearance and diagnoses it correctly as "sadness of heart" (v. 2). The king's question provides Nehemiah with the perfect opportunity he's been waiting for: "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill?" the king asks, then overcoming his fear, Nehemiah answers, "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?" He carefully avoids mentioning Jerusalem by name, since the king had issued a decree earlier that work on the city should cease (Ezr 4:17-23). No use placing that fly in the ointment at this point. When the king throws his follow-up question right down the middle—"What is it you want?"—Nehemiah hits it out of the park. He asks for one thing followed by two things. He asks the king to send him to the city in Judah where his ancestors are buried, so that he can rebuild it (v. 5). Appealing to the king's reverence for the dead proves to be a good thing. Then he asks for letters—one addressed to the governors of Trans-Euphrates guaranteeing him safe passage (v. 7) and one addressed to Asaph, guaranteeing him access to the timber needed for rebuilding (v. 8).

Verses 11-14 contain the outcome of Nehemiah's answered prayer. He goes to Jerusalem with the authority and resources he needs to rebuild. Three days after he arrives, he reconnoiters the city. He knows what he has been told by his brother and others about its condition: "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire" (1:3). But he needs to assess the situation with his own eyes. What he sees indicates Jerusalem is in a deplorable state. Without walls, it's defenseless; in shambles, it's a disgrace. One author comments: "Guided by God, Nehemiah had already made plans, but he wanted to keep his thought to himself until he had inspected the position to see if his plans could be executed" (Fensham, 165). Attempts to retrace his steps have failed to achieve a consensus. Nevertheless, one commentator suggests: "In his nighttime inspection he rode his horse or mule (**mount**, 2:14) from **the Valley Gate** in the southwest wall east to **the Jackal Well**, the site of which is unknown, **and to the Dung Gate** in the southeast part of the city. Possibly this is the same as **the Potsherd Gate** (Jer. 19:2). **The Fountain Gate** was north of the Dung Gate on the eastern wall.

The King's pool may be the same as the Pool of Siloam which was near the King's Garden (Neh. 3:15), or the King's Pool may have been south of the Pool of Siloam. Apparently, the rubble there kept him from proceeding on his mount, **so he went up the valley** (probably the Kidron Valley east of the city). Either he went all round the entire wall or, more likely, he retraced his steps from the eastern wall. He went back into the city at his starting place, **the Valley Gate**" (Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 677). In a nutshell, he reconnoitered the southern end of the city by exiting on its southwest side and proceeding south, counter-clockwise around to the eastern side and then back.

Sometime later, he calls the Jews together and issues this challenge: "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.' 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" (vv. 17-18).

At that point, Nehemiah's opponents—Sanballat and Tobiah, joined by Geshem the Arab—rear their ugly heads, mocking and ridiculing the work. But Nehemiah is unmoved: "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," he tells them.

Clearly, we cannot do what Nehemiah did, as far as the historical and geographical particulars are concerned, but we can do what he did, as far as partnering with God to accomplish his revealed purposes in our own historical situation is concerned.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

The Message of the Passage

After God answers our prayer and prepares the way for us to pursue our objective of partnering with him to accomplish his revealed purposes, we should inspire others to join us in doing whatever it takes to make the vision he has given us a reality.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22.

Describe what you think God is up to today?

Pen a prayer for guidance regarding partnering with him in his work.

Nehemiah was a volunteer. Has God put doing something for him on your heart?

v. 1 **Nisan** "Four months went by before Nehemiah's opportunity came—from Kislev (1:1, November-December) [445 B.C.] to Nisan (March-April) [444 B.C.]. Nisan was still in Artaxerxes' 20th year (cf. 1:1) because the regnal year started in Tishri (September-October)" (Getz, 675; cf., H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 16, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 168-70). "Artaxerxes' reign began in the seventh Jewish month, Tishri (late September and early October), of 464 B.C. Therefore Nehemiah presented his request in late March or early April of 444 B.C." (Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Nehemiah," 2019 ed., 16, planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf).

v. 2 **sad** "Despite his prayer and fasting, Nehemiah had hitherto 'kept up appearances' when attending the king. Now he allowed his emotions to show through . . . Nehemiah was conscious that he was exposing himself to considerable danger. Artaxerxes would not lightly revoke his previous decree (Ezra 4:21), while a gloomy appearance, as well as lack of courtesy, might well be interpreted as evidence of plotting against the king. The king's initial probing questions suggest such a suspicion on his part, making Nehemiah's fear understandable enough" (Williamson, 178, 179). "In the four-month interval, we may presume that Nehemiah had fasted, mourned, and prayed. This had an effect on his personality, making him become gloomy and dissatisfied . . . It is clear from the last words of this verse that this was the first time that Nehemiah had served the king with a gloomy countenance" (F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT, 159).

v. 6 **queen . . .** i.e., Damaspiia. "Why is this particular given? It might have been to show that a witness was present, or that Nehemiah was in her favor. We know that the influence of women was strong during the reign of Artaxerxes. Another possibility is that the party of Artaxerxes is described in vv. 1-5, but later on, while the king and queen were together and served by Nehemiah, the final answer to his request was given (v. 6)" (Fensham, 162). When he left for Judea, he was already appointed governor of Judah. "Nehemiah probably asked for a brief leave of absence, which he then had extended. We can infer from 5:14 that he spent 12 years on his first term as governor of Judah. In the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, Nehemiah returned to report to the king and then came back to Judah for a second term (13:6-7)" (*The NIV Study Bible*, note on Ne 2:6).

v. 7 **Trans-Euphrates** "Lit. 'beyond the River,' i.e., the Euphrates River. From Israel's point of view the land 'beyond the River' was Mesopotamia (Jos 24:2-3, 14-15; 2Sa 10:16). From the Mesopotamian point of view the land 'beyond the River' extended from the Euphrates to Gaza (1Ki 4:24)" (*The NIV Study Bible*, note on Ezra 4:10).

v. 8 **the king granted** "Artaxerxes' permission to rebuild the city of Jerusalem is the decree Daniel had prophesied 95 years earlier in 539 B.C. This decree was issued on March 5, 444 B.C. (see comments on Dan. 9:25)" (Getz, 676; see also Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 127-28, 138-39).

v. 8 **royal park** "As to the location of the 'royal park,' some believe that it was in Lebanon, which was famed for its forests of cedars and other coniferous trees (see notes on Jdg 9:15; Ezr 3:7). But a more plausible suggestion is that it should be identified with Solomon's gardens at Etham, about six miles south of Jerusalem (see Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8.7.3). For city gates costly imported cedars from Lebanon would not be used but rather indigenous oak, poplar or terebinth (Hos 4:13)" (*The NIV Study Bible*, note on Ne 2:8).

v. 10 **Sanballat** "Sanballat was the chief political opponent of Nehemiah (v. 19; 4:1, 7; 6:1-2, 5, 12, 14; 13:28). He held the position of governor over Samaria (cf. 4:1-2). An Elephantine papyrus letter of the late fifth century BC to Bagohi (Bigvai), governor of Judah, refers to 'Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria.' In 1962 a fourth-century BC papyrus listing the name Sanballat, probably a descendant of Nehemiah's contemporary, was found in a cave north of Jericho" (*The NIV Study Bible*, note on Ne 2:10). "He must have been an old man in 408 B.C. when this letter was written. With the discovery of the papyri at Wadi Daliyeh the sequence of the governors of Samaria became much clearer, namely, Sanballat I, Delaiah, Sanballat II, Hananiah, and Sanballat III. In this case Sanballat I is meant" (Fensham, 163).

v. 10 **Tobiah** "Tobiah seems to have been a Jew—his name means 'Yahweh is good!—who had attained a position similar to that of Sanballat in Ammon, east of Judah, under the Persians. Scholars have traced nine generations of his influential family in Ammon. In the light of references to him in this book, Tobiah seems to have been a 'Godfather' type of boss in Jerusalem: his 'family' was very influential and intimidating" (Constable, 20).

v. 19 **Geshem** "There is evidence that Geshem [v. 19] (cf. 6:1ff.), far from being a negligible alien, was an even more powerful figure than his companions, though probably less earnestly committed to their cause. From other sources it emerges that Geshem and his son ruled a league of Arabian tribes which took control of Moab and Edom (Judah's neighbors to the east and south) together with part of Arabia and the approaches to Egypt, under the Persian empire" (Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC, 83-84).

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

Difficult conversations are, well, difficult. We stumble through the hard parts and trip over our words as we struggle to make sense of and communicate our thoughts and feelings. We have difficult conversations because they're worth it and when done well they honor God. One of my bonus kids came home and told me about a difficult conversation he had with a teacher this week. I was so proud of him because three years ago he would have just failed the class rather than approach the teacher. Difficult conversations take courage. I can only imagine how Nehemiah felt when the king noticed his sadness, which at the time was punishable by death. We know he was afraid, likely terrified. Can you imagine the thought running through his head, "Am I going to do this?" He prayed and took the plunge. Nehemiah was bold and specific and got what he wanted. Are you teaching your kids how to have difficult conversations? Now is the time to train them how to talk to adults, how to approach teachers, and how to respectfully disagree with leaders or those in authority. We won't be there when they're 35 to solve their problems at work (or do their laundry, but that's another conversation). Teach your kids to always pray before speaking, just like Nehemiah. Help them understand that time and place are important and encourage them to always communicate face-to-face. We are praying for you as you lead your small adults into maturity.

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Nehemiah 2

1. Why was Nehemiah sad?
2. What did Nehemiah's request of the king?
3. What were the different reactions to Nehemiah's proposal to rebuild the wall?

What Do You Think

Why did Nehemiah inspect the walls at night?

What R U Going To Do

Nehemiah prayed before he answered the king. Before you have a difficult conversation or task this week, pray and ask God to help you.

Core Comp

Prayer – I talk to God so I can know Him and find out what He wants me to do.

Memory Verse

Proverbs 3:5-6 – *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.*

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized my verse _____, completed *Scrolls* _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

Series Discipleship Challenge located in KidPix Store.

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Earn 1 token by completing the PantegoKids Bible study and another token by reciting the memory verse.

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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