

Nehemiah 2:1-20

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[0 : 00] 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, and the king said to me, Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.

Then I was very much afraid, and I said to the king, Let the king live forever. Why should not my face be sad when the city, the place of my father's graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?

And the king said to me, What are you requesting? So I prayed to the God of heaven, 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 father's graves, that I may rebuild it.

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 time.

And I said to the king, If it pleases the king, let the letters be given to me, to the governors of the province beyond the river, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah. And the 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 all the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.

[1 : 10] And the king granted me what I had asked, for the good hand of God was upon me. Then I came to the governors of the province beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. So I went to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me, and I told no one what God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the valley gate to the dragon spring and to the dung gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down, and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.

Then I went on to the fountain gate and to the king's pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered the valley gate, and so returned.

And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing. I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.

[2 : 24] Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, also for the words that the king had spoken to me.

And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite, servant of Geshem the Arab, heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, What is this thing you are doing?

Are you rebelling against the king? Then I replied to them, The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we, his servants, will rise and build. But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, at some point this afternoon, somebody might ask you, I heard you went to church today.

What did you get out of the sermon? And within about 30 minutes' time, I think you'll hopefully agree that this text will prove two things to take away.

[3 : 39] First, it wants to indicate to the church reading today that it is God, God is the one who arranges events to accomplish his purposes.

And secondly, that this same God invites his people to participate in bringing about that plan. It's really the way the two halves of the chapter worked. If last week we saw Nehemiah and his prayer to the king of heaven, this chapter opens with Nehemiah's petition before a king in Persia. And it will be followed by his invitation to the people of God. And so, as we begin to consider what is here from this ancient text for us, we might want to know who is this king of Persia and what was Nehemiah's request.

Verse 1 indicates a couple of things. The name of the king, Artaxerxes. Not only that, but evidently in the 20th year of his reign.

[5 : 05] And we are now in the month of Nisan, some four months on from where we were last week when Nehemiah began his praying.

What do we know about Artaxerxes? Well, a straightforward reading of the text. Artaxerxes indicates that he is a son of Xerxes.

From other documents, the reign would have been from 465 to 424 B.C. That his reign was challenged, and we know this from extra-biblical accounts.

In 460, Egypt wanted out from underneath his thumb. And it was a severe resistance until he put them back in order.

And then later, 448, Syria would also revolt from his reign until he could restore order there.

[6 : 06] We know from the text that he had a member of his cabinet, pun intended, named Nehemiah, who was cupbearer, the one who oversaw the king's cabinet.

His wine cabinet, that is, if you're still wondering. Nehemiah had a place of influence under this king, and he had now been sad for some four months.

And in verse 5, you see Nehemiah's request. 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 father's graves, that I may rebuild it.

Here's his request. Appoint me, as the head of the state, to become project manager on the rebuilding of a city within your realm.

Now, if you read the Bible with some regularity, you'll know that 2 Chronicles, there was a ruler prior to Artaxerxes over Persia named Cyrus, who had already begun a repatriation of the people as a way of keeping civil rest.

[7 : 40] In other words, he repatriated people from Persia back to Jerusalem with the ability to rebuild a city.

It was a civic strategy. Keep the people in their regional areas comfortable in the places in which they live. You could also go to the British Museum, after a seven-hour flight landing in Heathrow, and take a look at the Cyrus cylinder, where we see other instances actually inscribed where this is the way he dealt in his realm.

So Artaxerxes' predecessor had a way in his realm that repatriated people to build under their own sense so that they would be subjects at rest under his rule.

given that, we really ought to wonder, why is Nehemiah so afraid to make a request to be the project manager of such a thing?

I mean, you look at verse 2, the very end, he says he was very much afraid. And then, when he's wondered about the request, in verse 4, he throws this quick, one-off prayer heavenward.

[9 : 06] So I prayed to the God of heaven, and then I said to the king. You know, the way you do, when someone meets you with something, and they are asking you a question concerning your own condition, and immediately in your mind, you have nothing more to say, but other than, oh, Lord, help me, and then you launch in.

Why the fear? Why the fear? To be the appointment by the state, to be the project manager of the reconstruction of a city within that king's realm.

Well, the answer is that it would have been a reversal of the public policy that this very king had put in place sometime earlier.

You might want to take a look at this. He had already shut down this federally funded program. Just scroll back into the book ahead of you, Ezra, which I mentioned to you last week, has many textual interconnections with Nehemiah.

And let me take you to chapter 4, where you'll see that there are adversaries of Judah and Benjamin that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel.

[10:32] In other words, the construction project was underway. This precedes Nehemiah's time period. Verse 7 of the same chapter. In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithradath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes, king of Persia.

The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. And Rahum, the commander, and Shimshai, the scribe, wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes, the king, as follows.

And there you have the text of the letter. The reason for which they're writing, the reason for which they want the wall to stop being built, is laid out clearly in verse 13.

Now, be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the wall's finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.

And so as a result, this Artaxerxes, fearful that there might be an element within his realm that resists his rule, shuts down a federally funded program that would have erected the city.

[11:46] To the point where you see his own words still in chapter 4 of Ezra. Now, at verse 21, he acts a decree that these men be made to cease and that the city be not rebuilt until a decree is made by me.

Evidently, Artaxerxes, and there was a first Artaxerxes and a second Artaxerxes, and you get into the weeds of it, the understanding is this, the initiative of rebuilding a city within the realm of Persia under the name of Jerusalem had been put to rest, funding cut off, directives to cease, signs on the building wall, no more construction going on here.

So, now you know that when Nehemiah stands before Artaxerxes and he asks for the appointment to be the project manager of a reconstruction project, he's aware it reverses everything and it will stir up within the king.

Do I have elements within my realm who would yet resist my rule? Jerusalem and its wall.

I want you to think about walls for a minute. We've been asked to think about them in our own country for some time. But Robert Frost said something there is that doesn't love a wall.

[13:34] walls can be good or bad. They can be positive or negative. They can be constructive or deconstructive depending upon the purpose for which a wall is built.

Want to build a school wall? Let's get after it so we can educate the people of the city. what was with this wall in the text?

Jerusalem's wall. What now is before Artaxerxes and in Nehemiah's mind is this. If the wall of Jerusalem recommences in construction, people have told the king it will mean there is a resistance within your realm.

You will have people living here who are no longer under your rule. The wall was the geographic indication of an interior separate rule.

The wall was connected to rule. But he makes the request doesn't he? In Nehemiah if I can get back to him he's there verse 5 if it pleases the king send me that I might rebuild it.

[15:12] What's interesting is that the king does not reject this request out of hand. Look at verse 6 and the king said to me with 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 a time.

And once Nehemiah knows that he's had the favor of the king and he's been appointed as the project manager to rebuild the wall in Jerusalem he goes all in.

Look what his request his requests enlarge. verse 7 and following and so I said to the king well if it pleases the king let letters be given me to the governors to the province beyond the river a reference most likely to the Jordan over which he would pass then into this territory or region or province and he says a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates and the forces of the temple and by the way why don't you let him supply my own house that I would occupy.

In other words he says I want to be the project manager I want permits from the federal office that allow me safe transport and when I get there I want local permits already drawn up and signed for you that articulate the work has already been paid for.

Which is why this text is proving one thing in the first part it must be God who is arranging events to accomplish or bring about his own purposes.

[17:13] That's the one thing the writer wants the reader to take away. Verse 8 And the king granted me what I asked for the good hand of my God was upon me.

Nehemiah wants the reader to know it didn't happen because I went to prayer for four months. It didn't happen because I had a conviction in my heart that wanted the rebuilding of something great

for God.

It didn't happen because I was just special access and envoy to the king. It didn't happen because I took initiative. It happened because God's good hand was upon me.

Nehemiah's screaming to the reader it is God alone who arranges human events to accomplish his own purpose.

I want to sit there. I want to sit there for just a moment. I want to illustrate it by telling you again that God arranged the events for this church to obtain a building.

[18 : 47] not me not you not cleverness not something contrived not something orchestrated but granted.

In fact it began with the people of the congregation on October 27th 2017 in northern Indiana at a camp beside a lake where elders and wives deacons and wives community group leaders and wives sat around eight or nine tables and I simply asked from the front talk to your table and see if you can come up with what you think God might require of us in the next 20 years.

And for the first time in 20 years the people of the church every table indicated among three priorities their prayer was that God would grant this church a building that no longer could we subsist out of our living rooms that no longer could we count on the Chicago public schools or any other world to secure what needs to be done here long after we are dead and gone.

And I was the most surprised person of all because for 20 years I have said the church is not the buildings in which we meet it is the people who are meeting with God.

And every time there was a movement to try to accelerate the mission of the church we moved through people and through congregations and through the renting of space.

[20 : 40] So what did we do? The elders of this congregation appointed three lay people and Vince Scaletta Sharice Barr and Kelly Wigman agreed by January and in February of 2018 to simply look for space in a two mile radius so that over the next two years perhaps we would know where to go.

It would coincide with our exit from this present lease that takes us through August in 2018. And they went to work. And some five or six months later July 17th 2018 they asked the elders of this church and a few deacons of this congregation to come to a meeting in the loft because they felt they had been given direction by God.

And they walked in with a PowerPoint presentation and indicated all that they had been looking at over five and six months and they said we feel God would have us speak to St. John the Baptist Temple in Woodlawn.

And as the indication of where they were going was unfolding I thought you have it wrong. This cannot possibly be where God would have us if he would have us anywhere.

But by the time they were done I was as convinced as they were before they came. And I said where do we go from here? And they said well this is a city.

[22 : 20] We think we know the place. You better go talk to the pastor. So by November of that year I met with the pastor of St. John the Baptist Temple.

They were not interested in selling. They wanted to rent. I said we rented a long time. Two decades. I'm not sure that's what we have in store. He said well go talk to this other pastor.

I went to the other pastor and he said well we actually do want to sell it to you. In fact we voted on a Saturday morning and we're unanimous we want to sell it to you. I thought well this is just the way God works.

It's not what you think it is but it leads you to what is. And then a week later he called me and said by the way we took another vote and nobody wants to sell it. at which point I told our property search people and our elders I'm done.

The church is the people of God not the buildings in which they meet. I'm not forcing myself to have any more appointments with local pastors in an effort to cleverly determine what would do.

[23 : 24] Until April March I'm sorry March 25th I stood on the 57th Street platform at 1145 connecting to a train downtown and got a text from the pastor of St. John the Baptist Temple and he said did you ever land with space?

No. God's mysterious. Hope you're doing well. He texts back we should have a serious conversation. I said I'm here this week and next.

He said how about five o'clock today? I met him at five o'clock on March 25th 2018 and he said I've made an executive decision.

We want to sell this building. We want to sell it to you. I don't want to sell it to anyone else. All the gentrification is in play. We don't want it to go to a developer. We don't want it to go to the university.

We don't want to betray our spiritual legacy and we want you to buy it. And it comes with a parking lot kitty corner. I said well what's the price?

[24 : 32] And he said 1.8 million. I said well we have \$10,000 in a bank to look around for space. I said when do you need to know? He said I need to know within a week, two weeks at the most.

Come on. I call up Dortsbach, Hensel, Rothschild who have been appointed by you for the spiritual oversight of this congregation. I ask them to come to my home that night and on a Monday night, March 25th, I said do any of you guys have \$1.8 million?

They said Helm, we gave you our life, we got nothing left. I said let's pray. We prayed. I said I'll write a few emails on fewer than one hand and on Thursday the 28th a small number of emails went out with a few pictures of a building to people that I'd known for decades and said I have no idea if this interests you, there's an opportunity here, if you want a conversation give me a call.

That was it. Everyone on that list said I want to talk, I want to talk, I want to talk. By Monday, April 1st, one week after that first meeting with the pastor, the money was committed to purchase the building.

By Thursday of that week, nine days after sitting down with him, the money was in an account under a newly formed ability to retain money called the Woodlawn Church Property Holding Corporation, which will one day soon become Christ Church Chicago.

[26 : 05] And within nine days, this church had a contract in front of an individual for a reduced price and an agreement to purchase it. within March 25th on a platform until May 17th, we closed.

That simply illustrates God arranges things to accomplish his own purposes.

That's what Nehemiah wanted you to know, and that's what I want you to know. It is extraordinary. Those ten days, someone said, what was it like? I said, I don't know how to tell you other than to say, we've been faithfully a congregation trying to do God's work, trying to keep our priorities in order, trying to do what he wants, fragile, frail, and all the rest of it.

And I know that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, but for nine days it felt like he stood up and just said, now, now, now, now, and it was done. And the day that Nehemiah walked in and said, will you send me to be the appointed state federally funded project manager to rebuild a wall that reverses a federal fallacy that you've already laid down?

[27 : 31] And by the way, will you provide the resources to do it? And a place for me to live while in it? The one thing Nehemiah wants you to know is, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

And it was upon this congregation. And it was upon those three lay people who went and looked at space. And it was upon leadership who prayed. And it was upon elders and deacons and spouses and community group leaders who for the first time in two decades thought maybe it's time we should do it.

God arranges events to accomplish his purpose. Part two, God invites his people to bring about his plan.

Verse 17 is the key. Verse 17 is the invitation. Then I said to them, you see the trouble we're in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.

Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good and also of the words of the king that he had spoken to me.

[28 : 56] Let's think about this for just a few moments. before the request or the invitation to the people, two things occurred in the text.

Verses 9 and 10. Before that request of the people or invitation, Nehemiah had some conversations with locally invested authorities.

Verses 9 and 10. You can see it there. Governors, state officials. And before he talked to the church at Jerusalem, verses 11 to 16, he had his own midnight ride to survey the scene for himself.

He did his own work, his private reconnaissance, and notice this strange emphasis he wants to draw.

Verse 12, I arose in the night and I had a few men with me and I told no one what God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.

[30 : 20] Or, he reiterates it again later in verse 16, and the officials, I take that to mean the civic authorities that he had spoken to in verses 9 and 10, they did not know where I had gone or what I was doing.

And he says, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. No one knew. And he basically wants you to know that.

I don't know why he wants you to know that, he just wants you to know that. Only then does the invitation come. That must have been a surreal scene. The gathering of the faithful redmond in Jerusalem to say, by the way, I've been appointed by the guy back in, Susa, to be the project manager.

By the way, here are the permits that have allowed safe travel. By the way, here is the construction bill already paid by the king's lumber. By the way, it's all here, and here it is.

Look at that wonderful word, come, let us build. Notice the word come. It's an invitation. I love this.

[31 : 31] invitation to participate in bringing about God's plan. It's not a command. He doesn't conjoin an individual.

He doesn't manipulate a people. They are invited. Nehemiah knows that you cannot coerce an individual against their will to take part in what he believed to be God's plan.

But look at their response. This is so amazing, so stunning, so invigorating. Verse 18, And they said, let us rise up and build.

So they strengthened their hands for the good work. Even the literary beauty is there. The good hand of the Lord was upon me. They rise up and strengthen their hands for the good work.

The good hand of God, the strengthening of our hand for that which is good. good. That's their response.

[32 : 46] In other words, they committed to securing a designated plot of land where God would rule. It's very important to understand. The walls of Jerusalem theologically signified a realm of God in an ungodly world.

They were the place that separated out his rule. Now, within that place would dwell the temple. And within that temple would dwell the tabernacle with the very word of God. And so what they have done is they have now basically grabbed hold of what Isaiah prophesies in chapter 2 verses 2 and 3 that in latter days Israel will come and to Mount Zion and to Jerusalem God's people will again return and from there they will hear God's word proclaimed.

Now, what can be said rightly rather than allegorically about that truth and our building? I've thought about this this week because I'm not an allegorical preacher.

We are not saying that when we commence to try to restore that building that is like a wall in Jerusalem and like our project is that wall.

[34 : 25] No, that's a very poor handling of the scriptures. But just as Jerusalem's walls were a set apart space where God would rule and just as that temple within was the household in which they would then gather around and just as that ark which contained the eternal word of God was that which brought everyone to the people so too a building in wood lawn restored would be unto us a set apart designated space where we have said here God rules.

Amidst a world of many voices these property lines are committed in principle to the very rule of God and we the church are the temple that will enter in and when we enter into those walls as Christ's temple we will give ourselves to the proclamation of his very work.

Let me put it to you as clearly as I can. We stand today on the cusp of making a commitment to restore an architecturally significant building in an educationally and in a culturally important community and we do so so that it would become a home for the proclamation of God's word and this must be a place where anyone can learn that Jesus Christ can be known and we must be a people who are covenantally committed to one another wherein we will grow in grace and we will train for godliness and this must be a place where the name of Jesus goes forth from us into our neighborhood into our city into the very ends of the earth we seek nothing less than the restoration of that place for 50 years of gospel ministry so that many of us we will be dead gone and our money of restoration and our life of commitment will be greatly at work more so than at any time when we were alive god arranges events to accomplish his purposes god invites his people to bring about those plans and so i invite you today to begin building together what are we building two things a people and a place how do we build a people well we're going to do over the next 20 months we're going to be like on a we're going to be like a harley davidson making a lot of noise and traveling to a

lot of places we have to build a people it will start with leadership it will start with nominating for officers of elder and deacon it will start it will start by harnessing adult education to its present beauty to something unknown and unexplored to this point in our life it will begin by an entire church committing to training for godliness and what it means to be a person even this even this spring it will be nine weeks under the direction of jim white and shonda richardson and a curricula they create woodlawn learning from her learning about her it will pick up again in the fall with a year-long curriculum that will train us to be the very people of god we have work to do we have we have work to do we have to become very people of god the people that he would want us to be and a place there's going to be a capital campaign here it is god has already supported the purchase of the building god has already supplied 1.5 million dollars in hand which is 10 percent of the complete project and don't ask me how he did that amount of money and i have no idea how he's going to do a remaining nine but it won't be any more difficult for him to do nine if he's done three before we even knew that he had something in mind lastly because you've got enough today did you notice at a literary level how that great invitation is bracketed verses 9 and 10 on the front end verses 19 and 20 on the back it's bracketed by san ballot and to buy the great invitation to participate in what god is going to do at a literary level is hemmed in by an author who says oh and by the way as god's people participate in accomplishing god's plan it will not go unopposed so get that right up front he says the civic and religious leadership within the local context were actually a detriment at times to their fulfillment of their work it's as simple as that that's what you need to go home with all right nehemiah wants the reader to know that god accomplishes or arranges things to bring about his own purpose and nehemiah wanted the people to know that they were invited to a participation in that which would affect that plan and he wanted everyone to know that while the work was great and glorious and in the terms of the text good it will be resisted not everyone's gonna not everyone's in but look at what nehemiah says to them verse 20 the god of heaven will make us prosper and we his servants will arise and build but you have no portion or right or claim in jerusalem in other words i hear you i'm so sorry that you won't be part of what god is doing in the world that's the one thing you gotta figure out in life folks what is god doing and then get on with it and not everybody does nehemiah prayed nehemiah made a petition nehemiah extended an invitation next week what did it look for the like for the people who accepted the good work that god had planned our heavenly father we ask that this book would continue to not be manipulated in my hand but simply a rich biblical source of edification for what you are doing in jesus name i pray amen