

“How To Tackle A Tough Task”

Nehemiah 2:1-20

Series: Book of Nehemiah [#2]

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Theme: **Getting The Job Done Requires Active Faith.**

Introduction

Challenges! We all face many different kinds of them. Some are exciting; others are scary. Some we seek; others crash into us. Some of them are hard, tough ...

- A stubborn problem which doesn't go away and doesn't seem to be getting resolved.
- A person you have to work with who, *everyone* agrees, is a person “no one could get along with, let alone like.”
- A difficult assignment ... so much to be done, and it's almost due!
- A bruised or broken relationship, where the feelings run deep and the conflict and stress are high.
- A family member or friend who does not know Jesus, and who is not open or responsive.
- A work you believe needs to be done, but little support.

How do you “Tackle A Tough Task?” Think about four widely-used methods:

- The *ostrich method*, i.e., ignore it and it will go away. This approach is very popular, but not very helpful.
- The *grasshopper method*. This comes from the old story of the grasshopper fiddling and dancing in the summer while the ant worked. *Procrastination* — “I intend to get to it, but later, not now”
- The *Henny Penny method*. “The sky is falling!” Worry, panic, frenzy, but no positive or constructive actions.
- The *bull in the china shop method*, i.e., straight ahead at full speed! Moving, but causing great damage along the way.

Nehemiah is a wonderfully practical book. We met Nehemiah last week. He was an exile from Judah serving as cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes I. We focused on his *spiritual fitness*.

Today we move into chapter 2 and are thinking about “*How To Tackle A Tough Task*.” Nehemiah gives and teaches us a great example and principle, “Getting the job done requires active faith.” What does *Active Faith* mean? What does it involve? First, ...

Pray In Faith To Sustain The Work.

Last week we saw from Nehemiah that a high priority on prayer is one mark and test of spiritual fitness. There are more lessons on prayer here. We see persistent prayer. Let's clarify this a bit.

- Negatively: being persistent in prayer does not mean that if I hang in their long enough I will receive *what I want*.
- Positively: To continue firmly in the conviction and practice of taking my praise, thankfulness, my questions, needs and desires to God to seek His wisdom and His will.

Nehemiah was persistent in prayer.

- 1:4, "...I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven."
- 1:6, "...I am praying before You now, day and night..."
- 1:1, the month of *Chislev* [November-December]; 2:1 the month of *Nisan* [March-April], or about four months.

Now, look at what we see in 2:4, "Then the king said to me, 'What would you request? So I prayed to the God of heaven.'" This was a quick prayer — based on his prayer and preparation from the preceding four months.

Nehemiah *prayed in faith* persistently to sustain himself, to sustain the work. Does this description fit you? *Persistent Prayer* is foundational to tackling a tough task.

Secondly, there is patient prayer. Praying and waiting go together hand in hand. While persistence involves a firm continuation in prayer, patience involves trusting and waiting in prayer. When we come to chapter 2, after 4 months of prayer, Nehemiah is not frazzled, frenzied with worry.

Look at 2:1, "...I had not been sad in [the king's] presence." But, on this day, his sadness showed. He had not been "*putting on a show*," but doing his best to carry on his duties as he ought to, being a diligent, faithful servant of the king, despite his heartaches. *Faith in Action!* This record also shows the reality that even people exercising faith and patience are affected by crises, stress. A cultural, historical note: the Persian kings, and many others also, required their servants to be upbeat, even entertaining. Many heads rolled, literally, for not being so.

Nehemiah's *Faith in Action* was demonstrated by his praying in faith to sustain the work ... praying with persistence and patience. *Tackling A Tough Problem* and *Getting the Job Done* requires this kind of *Active Faith*.

Plan In Faith To Prepare For The Work.

The fact is that many people don't like to plan. In Christian circles we have *nice* excuses:

- “Detailed planning squeezes out, replaces faith in God.”
- “Planning doesn't leave room for the Holy Spirit to work.”
- “Developing plans questions God's sovereignty.”
- “Planning takes the place of doing.”

Note two important lessons on planning from Nehemiah.

First: state your objectives clearly and simply. By objective, I mean *what you want to do, accomplish*. We see Nehemiah's objective in verse 5,

“ I said to the king, ‘If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it.’”

“Send me to Judah. Let me rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.” He had a clear view of what he wanted to do. Four months of prayer and thought resulted in a clear objective which he stated succinctly, simply. Without this clarity he could have had uncertainty and then faced discouragement, “*What am I doing here?*” Without this clarity the king may have responded much differently. So, first: state your objectives clearly and simply.

Then, formulate your plans thoroughly. When the king asked for details, Nehemiah already knew not only his objective, but how he would carry it out. He had a thought-out plan. He did not “*wing it*” and try to cover it by saying, “King let me go and rebuild the walls. I'm not sure how or how long, I'm just trusting God.”

He had a *schedule*.

“Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, ‘How long will your journey be, and when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.’”

The king would not have been impressed with “I don't know how long. Just trust me.” Nor would it have gone well if he picked a time frame out of thin air that could have been way out of line.

In addition to the schedule, he had a plan for the *support* need to get the job done.

- He planned for proper authorization.

“And I said to the king, ‘If it please the king, let letters be given me for R34 the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah.’ (7)
- He planned to have sufficient supplies, go on to verse 8,

“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 which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go.”

- He planned for adequate protection.

“Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.” (9)

Once we define our objective, we also should “*Plan in Faith*” with God to prepare for the work. And, remember, “ And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.”

Getting the job done requires active faith. Prayer in Faith to Sustain the Work, Planning in Faith to Prepare For the Work. These factors are critical, but not complete. The best plans left on the shelf will not get the job done.

Proceed In Faith To Accomplish The Work.

There four steps here. First, move ahead when ready. For Nehemiah:

- “Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters (9a)” “*Then.*” When the preparations were completed.
- “So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. “*So I came to Jerusalem...*” He didn’t strike out the next morning. He didn’t try to make a sprint to Jerusalem (it probably took about two months to make the trip). He moved ahead when things were ready, and he proceeded in an orderly fashion.

In practical terms for us there are a couple of approaches or responses to avoid:

- Avoid the *Grasshopper method*, or procrastination. You may plan, but no time seems like the right time to get going.
- Avoid the *Bull in the China Shop method*, or rushing ahead without adequate thought, direction, and care. *Move ahead when ready.*

Secondly, survey the situation personally. Nehemiah had arrived in Jerusalem. Verse 11 tells us he was there for three days before he moved into action. Time to rest, reflect and to observe. Then there is his *secret reconnaissance mission* at night, as described in 12-16. He wanted to see things for himself. He wanted to do this without any *minders* showing him only what they thought he should see, and interpreting things from their own perspective. He made his own, personal investigation.

We also need to “survey the situation personally.” Some years ago while serving in a denominational leadership role, the church planting team presented a plan for a new church in a major metropolitan area. The information, facts, figures and charts prepared by those who were going to lead the project were impressive. The project looked good, and was

approved. Not too long after it was announced, I received a call from the committee chairman, “We have a problem. There are no schools or other places to rent for services. The schools have several churches at different times — *there is no room in the inn.*” My reply, “Why didn’t we know this before?” The short answer is that the statistics and other data had been purchased from a firm that specializes in that, and was out of date. *No first-hand data.* The project was cancelled. A first-hand, personal survey is critical.

Challenge others to join with you. With a clear view, having personally seen the situation, Nehemiah then gathered the Jewish leaders of the area together. He proceeded to:

- Challenge them to the task,

“Then I said to them, ‘You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach.’” (17)

- Give them reasons to believe and respond positively,

“I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king’s words which he had spoken to me.” (18a)

- And then he received their agreement,

“Then they said, ‘Let us arise and build.’ So they put their hands to the good work..” (18b)

We live in *the age of volunteerism*. Perhaps. A recent Statistics Canada survey shows a substantial increase in the number of people volunteering across Canada. That’s the good news. The bad news is a dramatic drop in the average hours given per volunteer. More volunteers, but giving less time results in a net loss of volunteer service. In fact, the only significant increase in volunteers since 1987 has been among youth, aged 15 to 24, who have nearly doubled their rate of volunteering. But there is a caution here since most young people say they volunteer “to increase employment opportunities.”

We know about this in the church as the options, demands and on everyone are increasing. Then, there is also the growing *spectator mentality*—observe, get my needs met, but not serve. We could complain, criticize and worry. Instead, we should realize that God’s work down through the centuries has been carried out effectively when people have had a vision of the work, invested prayer and planning, and then *challenged* others to be involved.

And, fourthly confront the inevitable opposition. When Nehemiah came to Judah he met two big trouble makers. Go to verse 9, **9-10 READ.**

“Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that

someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.” (9-10)

He recognized them as opponents of God’s work and God’s people. A bit later, as the work was about to begin we are told,

“...they mocked us and despised us and said, ‘What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?’”

We will see more of these two in later events.

We can’t and don’t and should not try to respond to everyone who does not agree with us. The key for Nehemiah was that these were influential people who were opposed to him and, more importantly, to God’s work. So, he confronted their opposition directly and clearly, **20 READ**.

“So I answered them and said to them, ‘The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem.’”

Let’s turn to ourselves. When you are involved in a tough task, trying to move ahead, there always be the Sanballats and Tobiahs. Those whose interests are in opposition to your’s. Or, because it may be something a bit new, a few choruses of “We haven’t done it that way before!” As well, there are those who want to be in the *limelight*, or in control and don’t want others to be there.

How do we respond? Within the family of God we are to remember that we are not in competition with anyone. It is not a “he wins / I lose” issue, but that we are to think, pray and move ahead *together* with God’s plans. There are, and always will be times when people either inside or outside God’s family will be in opposition to God’s work. That needs to be confronted with grace, but also clearly and directly.

Getting the job done requires active faith. This means people ...

- Praying in faith to sustain the work.
- Planning in faith to prepare for the work.
- And, Proceeding in faith to accomplish the work.

Conclusion

How important is this? It is *vitaly important*, in all areas of life. Just over 25 years ago the American Institute of Architects’ annual conference met in Kansas City, near the Kemper Arena, which had been awarded a prize as “one of the finest buildings in the [U.S.]” On the first day the attendees toured the building and were amazed. On the second day, two great elevated walkways crashed to the lobby floor, filling the entire open area with a dramatic heap of tangled metalwork. 113 died; several hundred were injured.

A review showed the causes of the disaster to included poor communication among

contractors, pressure to fast-track the project and get it done on time, and a quick, fatal design change made over the phone without proper review.

Our tough tasks don't have to end up being dramatic and devastating heaps of tangled failures and disappointments! They don't have to if we live with *Active Faith*.

As you spend the next few moments in reflection with God and respond to His truth,

- Thank Him that He wants to, and *will* guide you through all the tough tasks you face.
- Look at the tough tasks you are facing now in terms of these truths God gives us through Nehemiah, the truths of *Prayer, Planning, Proceeding in Faith*. Confess any willful sin to rush ahead on your own, or not to move forward. Ask God to help you put these principles into practice now, and to ingrain them into your mind and heart.

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