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Title: The Process of Preparation

Text: Nehemiah 2:1-20

Last week we began a series on Leadership from the book of Nehemiah. Today we are looking at the 2nd chapter of Nehemiah. Many a teacher, preacher, and public speaker has the same recurring dream. For the preacher, the dream goes something like this – you’re invited to speak, the church is full, the service has already begun, and it suddenly occurs to you that you forgot to prepare a sermon. You go to look for some notes in your Bible, when you realize that you forgot your Bible. You are UNPREPARED. Or you have a guest scheduled to preach, and this has happened here a few times – the service has started and there’s no guest. The worship is almost over and still no guest. Your heart races as you fear you may have to preach when you’re not at all prepared. I’m not particularly fond of not being prepared. It happens sometimes – people come across a great opportunity that they are just not prepared for. This has happened at the Oscars – a person wins that didn’t expect to win. As they accept their award, it’s obvious they didn’t prepare an acceptance speech – because they never dreamed in a million years they would actually win. But this just might be why Williams Matthews said, “Unless a man has trained himself for his chance, the chance will only make him look ridiculous.”

If you want to be a leader, if you want to facilitate great things happening in your life and you want to make a difference in the world you live in, you HAVE to spend some time in preparation – not JUST learning what you need to learn, BUT also preparing yourself MENTALLY & EMOTIONALLY for the challenges ahead. Leadership is NOT easy. It’s rewarding. It’s ultimately satisfying. But it’s NOT easy. It requires a lot of hard work – much of the work no one else ever sees. It’s work done out of the spotlight. It’s what we call PREPARATION. Roger Staubach said, “Spectacular achievements come from unspectacular preparation.” There’s nothing glamorous about getting ready, but in order for you to move to the next level of leadership, you will HAVE to spend time in preparation. Bear Bryant said, “It’s not the will to win that matters – everyone has that. It’s the WILL TO PREPARE that matters.” And so today, as you think about where you lead, and all the possibilities that exist there, I want you to consider five ways in which you need to prepare.

- 1. Get Ready to WAIT.** Last week, we saw how Nehemiah became inspired with the idea of traveling to Jerusalem to help rebuild the broken down walls of Jerusalem. This happened, he says in chapter one, verse one: *“In the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year.”* Kislev coincides with late November, early December. Chapter 2 begins... *“In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes...”* Nisan coincides with late April, early May. So there was about a 5 or 6-month stretch in between the time that Nehemiah heard about the problem and the time that he had the chance to do something about the problem. Six months he spent WAITING. As we’ll see, he didn’t spend that time doing nothing, but there was a period of several months when Nehemiah’s heart was on fire to do something about this problem – and he waited and waited. Do you know what I’ve noticed? There’s a waiting room between the inception of our dreams and the realization of our dreams. I wonder if God doesn’t allow this period of waiting to see if we will stoke the fire of our dream, OR if we’ll let the spark die out. I heard a number of people over the years who have told me in a moment of emotion that they were going to be a missionary, or a pastor, or work with young people, or old people, or single people, or poor people – and they’re completely enthusiastic about the idea – for about three days. Then they seemingly forget about it. When God gives you a dream, He will likely give that dream the opportunity to incubate in your heart for a while. He’ll give it time to grow. YOU CAN EXPECT TO SPEND SOME TIME IN WAITING. Nehemiah did it right – HE WAITED. However, while you’re waiting, you don’t want to waste your time doing nothing. You want to make the most of it, just like Nehemiah did.
- 2. Get Ready for the OPEN DOOR.** In the 5-6 months that Nehemiah had been waiting, he had been getting ready for the opportunity to share his dream with the king. He knew eventually the day would come when the king would say, *“What is it that you want?”* (vs. 4). When it happened, Nehemiah was ready. He said, “Send me to Jerusalem so that I can rebuild the city.” The king asked how long it would take, and Nehemiah was ready with an answer. And then Nehemiah said, “Plus, I will need letters of safe passage for the governors of surrounding territories, AND I’ll need a line of credit to buy timber for the temple and the gates and the house that I will be staying in.” Clearly, Nehemiah had thought this through. He had done his homework. WHEN THE DOOR OPENED, HE WAS READY. And the king gave Nehemiah everything he asked for. IF GOD has given you a dream, you can be sure – even though it may seem like things are on hold for a time – that God will provide an open

door when THE TIME IS RIGHT. The question is: Will YOU be ready? Start asking yourself now: What do I need to do in order to get this thing started? What information should I gather? What facts do I need to know? Which skills do I need to develop? Who are the people who can help me most get to where I need to be? Start asking these questions now, so that when the door is open, you're ready to go through it. We often attribute success to someone being lucky, or being in the right place at the right time. Luck will not help you unless you're prepared for the opportunity. Being in the right place at the right time will not help you, unless you're prepared for the opportunity. Get ready for the open door. Make sure you're in a position to go through.

- 3. Get Ready to SPEND TIME IN PRAYER.** When the king asked Nehemiah, "What is it you want?", Nehemiah wrote – *"Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king..."* In other words, he prayed one of those "bullet" prayers – the type of prayer you pray real fast before you do something important. This is a good habit to get into. As you go through your day, and situations and problems and opportunities pop up, practice saying a quick prayer before you proceed: "God, help me with this presentation." "God, help me say the right thing." "God, help me control my emotions." "God, help me do what I'm supposed to do." I encourage you to do this until it becomes routine – when your immediate response – PARTICULARLY TO CHALLENGING SITUATIONS – is to call on God. That's where you want to be. But I want you to realize that this isn't the only time Nehemiah prayed. In fact, the 13 chapters of the book of Nehemiah records NINE prayers. From day one – as we see in chapter one – this project was a matter of prayer for Nehemiah. He was constantly calling God for help, for comfort, for forgiveness, for direction, for resources, for protection, for thanksgiving, for praise, and on and on. Project Wall was bathed in prayer from start to finish. If your dream came FROM GOD, you need to communicate with God throughout the whole of the project. That's why, whenever something went Nehemiah's way, he was quick to give the credit to God. In verse 8 Nehemiah wrote, *"And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests."* It was SECOND NATURE for Nehemiah to give credit to God, because it was Nehemiah's FIRST NATURE to make everything a matter of prayer. If God has given you a dream to lead in a certain area, to accomplish a certain task, begin praying about it now. Ask God to make you clean, to give you pure motives, to give you wisdom to make the right decisions, to give you courage to face opposition, to give you patience and discernment, to give you humility and to keep your ego in check, to provide everything you need, and to guide you with His hand day after day after day. MAKE EVERYTHING A MATTER OF PRAYER. If you're already in a position of leadership and you're not praying like you ought to be praying, START TODAY. Start with a bullet prayer: "God, help me get my prayer life where it should be." And, get in the habit of praying. It's an essential part of preparation.
- 4. Get Ready for some LATE & LONELY NIGHTS.** Here's what happened. The king asked Nehemiah what he wanted, Nehemiah told him, and the king delivered. Nehemiah then traveled 800 miles to Jerusalem and began sizing up the project. *"I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem..."* (vs. 11-12). He then tells how he examined the gates late at night, when no one was around. He says, *"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"* (vs. 16). There will come a time when you're ready to talk about your dream, but during the preparation process, it's likely best to keep it to yourself. During the preparation process, you can expect to spend some late nights all alone – thinking, planning, gathering information, evaluating, praying, thinking some more, developing a strategy, praying some more, until the time you are ready to move forward. No one might know about the late nights or the extra hours. No one needs to know. Leaders understand that they are often the ones to arrive early and leave late. Leaders do preparation that no one else sees. Leaders carry a burden that no one else feels. Leaders spend more time with a project than the spectators – or even the average participators – ever realize. The Olympics aren't so far away. According to USA Today, the average Olympian trains four hours a day, 310 days a year, for six years, BEFORE making it to the Olympics. In training, swimmers average 10 miles a day in laps. Marathon runners average 160 miles a week. They pay the price for their success. Every successful leader must do the same. Preparation for leadership often requires long days and late nights. There will be times when no one is cheering you on; the only thing that is driving you is the will to accomplish something great for the glory of God.
- 5. Get Ready for SOME OPPOSITION.** *"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"* (vs. 10). *"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?'"* (vs. 19).

One UNFORTUNATE side effect of leadership is that others – usually non-leaders – will criticize you. I think the camp evangelist said that if two were in a canoe, the one rowing the least would be the one talking the most. The same thing happened to David on the day of his battle with Goliath. His brother, Eliab – who himself DID NOT have the courage to face Goliath – ridiculed and insulted David, telling him to get back to tending sheep. I'm sure it was the same for Nehemiah. His critics no doubt said, "Who does this man think he is? He is just a slave with visions of grandeur. Does he really think he can rebuild the walls of Jerusalem?" And notice their allegation: *"Are you rebelling against the king?"* NO leader is immune to criticism; NO leader serves without opposition. We ALL face it. BUT it nearly always comes from the uninvolved. They will ridicule. They will mock. They will make allegations. Your job, as a leader, is to KEEP MOVING FORWARD. Listen to Nehemiah's response. *"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 historic right to it'"* (vs. 20). Nehemiah didn't argue with his critics. He didn't present them with his business plan or assure them the king was on his side or try to convince them that his strategy would work. He just said, "This is God's project and He will give us success. This doesn't involve you at all." Basically, he diplomatically tells them to keep their noses out of it. In the coming weeks we'll look more closely at the subject of opposition, but for now, suffice it to say that if you have to respond to your critics, Nehemiah shows us how to do it – with as few words as possible. The important thing is to keep focused on what God is calling YOU to do, NOT what your opponents or critics are saying.

6. **Conclusion.** The preparation process leads to what we read in Nehemiah 2:18: After Nehemiah had challenged the people of Jerusalem to join him in this task – *"They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good work."* Next week we'll look at how Nehemiah got the project started, but TODAY I want you to realize that Nehemiah was NOT an overnight success. He spent time preparing for the work God called him to do. He did his homework. He was able to answer the right questions. When the door of opportunity opened, HE WAS READY to go through. He spent time in prayer. He put in the late nights. He faced criticism and opposition. Why? Because he knew that the gracious hand of his God was upon him. Because he knew that the God of heaven would give him success. Preparation can be difficult. It can be long and it can be lonely. But IF and WHEN you prepare, God can use you. He WILL use you. But BEFORE God can use you, HE MUST PREPARE YOU. He's given you a dream of making a difference – at work, at home, in your community, in the ministry of this church. As YOU prepare your heart and life, GOD will take you to the place He has called you to be.