# Let's Build: Are We Prepared?

*Investing my Time, Talent, and Treasure in God's Grand Plan Series*

**Nehemiah 2:1-3:32**

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In 1911 two explorers set out to get to the South Pole, leading two separate expeditions—Roald Amundsen who was Norwegian, and Robert Scott who was English. These men were both very experienced explorers. They were of similar age. They both set out at the same time and they both experienced almost identical weather conditions on their journey. One of them made it to the destination and the entire group made it back safely to home base. The other got to the South Pole but they all perished—all seventeen of them—before they made it back home. And for those who have studied these two expeditions through the journals that were written and found—even the journals of those who died—there was one significant, major factor that was the difference between the success and thriving of one team and the failure and death of the other. We find that same factor at play in our Nehemiah story. Nehemiah set off on an incredible expedition to do something that hadn't been done in one hundred fifty years—restore and rebuild the flourishing of a city that was devastated. Its people were devastated and the physical city itself was decimated. One of the key factors—and the same factor in the Nehemiah story—was what I want to propose to you this morning was the same factor that will make the difference as to whether or not the church in the 21st century will fulfill our mission in the world. So let's dig in and see what this is. If you have a Bible, turn with me to the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. You can work backward from Psalms if you need to find it; it's not too many books prior to that.

Last week we started in chapter one and Nehemiah discovered through inquiry the condition of the people of Jerusalem. This was the place where God had chosen to dwell on earth—Jerusalem—and the Jewish people, the Hebrew people, were His people. They were the lights that were supposed to radiate around the world. These were the people who were to bless the earth because of God's presence with them and among them. But because of their sin and disobedience, they had been disciplined by God. The people were miserable; the city was in ruins, and Nehemiah, even though he was eight hundred miles away and had never been to Jerusalem, when he heard this news, because of his heart for God and what mattered to God mattered to Nehemiah, he was deeply grieved by this condition. We see that he wept and he mourned for days over this condition—the brokenness of the world that God cared deeply about. Then he went to God in prayer and for months he prayed, earnestly. He not only prayed that God would do something about this situation, we learned that he confessed his own part in the destruction of the flourishing of that city—his own sin that contributed to the brokenness of the world. And as he prayed, he also made himself available to God, to be an instrument, to be a tool in God's hands to actually make a difference—to actually correct the situation, to bring healing and restoration into that brokenness. And that's where we left it at the end of chapter one last week. We learned that Nehemiah is an important official in the super power of the world at the time. He's the cupbearer to the most powerful man on earth, which means he was the right hand man, a trusted security guard, basically a confidant of Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the world at the time. So in chapter two we begin with the first eight verses where the scene is the throne room of the most powerful man in the world. Nehemiah has just been praying. That's all he's been doing for four months as we learn here at the beginning of chapter two, verse one:

**And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine *was* before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid.**

((NASB, Nehemiah 2:1-2)

Nehemiah, I'm not doubting, was, as he was praying, thinking, "*God, I wonder how You're going to open the door of opportunity for me with the king to be able to present this plan that you're putting on my heart*," but I think he was caught very much off guard. He had tried very hard just to carry on his duties, not letting what was going on in his heart show on the outside, and yet God gave Artaxerxes a special discernment to see the depth of angst that was happening deep in Nehemiah's heart. And because Nehemiah was not expecting Artaxerxes to see it, even though he's been praying and praying and praying, this is the opportunity he's been wanting. I love the vulnerability, **Then I was very greatly afraid** and we get this picture that sometimes even though we're walking closely with God and we're praying about situations, there's that moment that comes when it's like, "Okay, this is it. This isn't what I was expecting. It wasn't quite my timing. But here it is." There's this sense of fear, but Nehemiah didn't let that fear cause him to pull back. He spoke. Verse 3:

**I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"**

It's interesting here what Nehemiah shares with the king. It's very wise. Now Nehemiah had this deep spiritual understanding of the importance of Jerusalem and of God's people in Jerusalem. The king would not have understood that. The king had no concept of this God who Nehemiah served, who the people followed or of the valued importance of the worship and the spiritual life of the nation. But what he did understand was the importance of your ancestry and your native home and where your tombs were, and the place where you were born mattered to him. He got that, and that's what Nehemiah shared with him. There was a wisdom and a shrewdness that Nehemiah exercised. Jesus, when he sent out his disciples in Matthew chapter ten told them, "**Be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.**" In other words, just be wise about what you communicate to whom and when. Tune into the situation. Think about what might be the best way to move and advance the mission forward because God oftentimes wants to use unbelieving people to advance His own mission. But we have to be wise. Nehemiah exercised that wisdom. Verse 4:

**Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.**

Here's a great example in the Bible of spontaneous prayer, right? You've probably done this many, many times—prayed about a meeting you were having, somebody that you had to talk with, some presentation that you were going to make, some big moment. You prepared and you planned and when you get to the door of that room, you know and say, "Oh, Lord, You know, this is the moment. Help me," because there's still this sense of dependency. I love that vulnerability and honesty that Nehemiah has. So he prayed to the God of heaven in that moment. 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." 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. And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors *of the provinces* beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, 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." And the king granted *them* to me because the good hand of my God *was* on me.** (Vs. 5-8)

Now it's important to note here that Nehemiah gives God credit for the favor of the king but what and how did God give favor to Nehemiah? Where God gave favor to Nehemiah is in the planning and preparing process. When that moment came to share what was on his heart and a burden, Nehemiah was ready. He had prepared; he was planning, and in this prayer time we learned in those four months that it wasn't just a one-way conversation. God was giving him detailed plans on how to get to Jerusalem with the supplies he needed in order to rebuild the *shalom* that was destroyed. And because of that great preparation, led by God, he was ready in that moment, and the king granted everything that he requested. Nehemiah did his homework in prayer before God; he had a plan. He had thought through what steps needed to be taken in order to accomplish this mission. We're going to see it again in just a little bit. Verse nine tells us that he made the journey:

**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.**

So that's all that's said about this eight hundred mile journey. Probably it took several months with animals and an entourage of horsemen and people with him. In verse ten, we see that he gets to Jerusalem and there's a foreshadowing of what we're going to talk about a lot next week.

**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.**

And what we get is this sense that whenever we go out to serve, to love, to try to bring redemption and restoration through the gospel, there are people who are advantaging themselves by disadvantaging others and they will not like it when we come on behalf of the people they are oppressing—and that's exactly what happens here. These names are going to come up again and again and again. They're a thorn in the flesh for Nehemiah. They are constantly on his heels. And we're reminded that when we set out to do something that God's called us to do in the world, there will be opposition that we will face. Now in verse eleven begins this sort of next season of homework for Nehemiah. He's now in Jerusalem and the scene shifts there.

**So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. 15 So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.** (Vs. 11-16)

Nehemiah wasn't going to just take the word that others had given him about the condition; he was going to make sure he saw it firsthand. Nehemiah confronted the brutal facts of the situation. He fully assessed what they were up against to seek to rebuild the city. There had been attempts to rebuild the city prior to this and they had failed. Nehemiah made careful examination and I think what he said is, "Yes, the report I got was absolutely dead on. This place is awful. It's decimated." He couldn't even get his horse to walk through the rubble. There was so much destruction, so much rubble; it was absolutely devastating—two and a half miles around this city—and the people were also in a bad state. But Nehemiah is assessing that situation. He's under no illusion of what was happening. He was an outsider. He's an unknown person and he's coming into this situation and he's taking on this huge project and he's got to make sure that people trust him and that they believe he knows what he's doing. So he makes very careful inspection of the city. Again we see this preparation that Nehemiah does for the challenge that was in front of him. This makes all the difference in the success that Nehemiah experiences. He had a great plan and it was well thought out. It was directed by God but it was something that was going to work. In fact there was no other way that this restoration and the renewal, the spiritual renewal that followed, could have happened had Nehemiah not had the plan that God gave him. But he worked very hard to prepare and be ready for the challenge.

That, as it turns out, is the difference between the success of Amundsen, who made it to the South Pole and back safely with all five of his accomplices and Scott, who perished with all seventeen of his men. Amundsen was a meticulous preparer and planner. As a matter of fact, about a decade before this, he was going to go to Spain to get some sailing lessons so he could be an excellent sailor as they made their way to Antarctica. He decided he was going to ride his bike all the way to Spain. (I think he had to have some help over some part of the water) but that was part of the training and preparation. He said, "If I'm going to take an exploration to the coldest place on earth, I should probably learn from people who live in very cold places," and so he apprenticed with Eskimos for a very long period of time, learning how they survived in the extreme cold, how they conserved energy, how they ate, how they functioned, how they used the dogs. He also was thinking ahead that when he got there he would leave supply depots. So he brought four times what he thought he might need in terms of supplies, and every so many kilometers he left a supply depot and he put a big black flag on that supply depot which stood out against the white terrain that was all around him. And not only did he put one flag, but he put flags every so many kilometers from that supply depot so that in case he got off course just a little bit he would still be able to find it. And then he determined that they would move twenty miles every single day. Whether the weather was good or whether the weather was bad, they were going to do that meticulously and follow the plan. And it just so happened that he returned back to home base on the exact day that he had circled and penciled on his calendar about six months prior, because he had followed that plan meticulously.

Scott, on the other hand, was a guy that wanted to wing it. He decided that new technology was maybe the way; there were different animals that maybe he could use. So he brought motorized sleds that obviously in 1911 had to have been completely untested. So within a matter of days the motors cracked under the extreme cold. Then he brought ponies instead of dogs. The ponies sweat and the sweat encased them in ice and within a matter of days the ponies were dead. They were left on a fourteen hundred mile round trip journey to haul all the supplies on their back. They would wait on bad weather days and then push super hard on good weather days and it wore out the men. So he arrived at the South Pole a month after Amundsen. The flag of Norway had already been planted, and then they perished some two months later, still struggling to get back home. They had failed to prepare well for the mission.

I want to suggest to us this morning that this is a critical factor if we're going to be the children of light in this culture, in this place, to bring redemption and restoration and hope of the gospel to the people that are in our community, in our culture. There is a tendency at times among Christians to think, "Well, you know what, we'll just pray and then do whatever comes to mind." It's sort of like that, somehow, in some people's minds, is more spiritual. Mike has often talked about how the Spirit leads in the preparation of worship in the planning process. "We don't get up on Sunday morning and wing it," but you can sense that God has put it together, can't you...time and time again? There's careful preparation. You can't just wing it if we're going to reach this culture, if we're going to identify with people, if we're going to connect with people, if we're going to serve people well. If we're going to be the children of light, the light of the world, if we're going to see how Jesus prayed, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven." If we're going to see that reality begin to take shape and unfold in our culture, we will have to be as prepared as anyone has ever been at any time in human history.

That is the challenge of our day because we live in a post-modern, post-Christian world, and our understanding of the world and how it operates and the view—the common view, the common perception, the common beliefs and thinking and acting of our world—is so far removed that we need great preparation, very careful thinking. The church must rise up and think. We can't just stick to what was working fifty years ago or a hundred years ago and think, "Well, that was working then; let's do that again. Let's have another crusade." We can't also just embrace every new technology or idea that comes along and depend on those devices or those things to do it. We have to think deeply as the people of God and prepare to be on mission. Our mission is so big, so important; it's life and death for people, so we must be very well prepared. You may be asking, "How do we prepare?" I'm really glad you asked. We'll talk about it in just a minute.

So there's this moment of truth—back to Nehemiah—all the assessment and planning has been done and so he gathers the people together in verse 17,

> **Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in**—"we" are in. Notice his identification with them even though he's been there only a few days—**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." 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. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work.** (Vs. 17-18)

Nehemiah does a brilliant job of casting a vision for these folks. He first says, "I see the situation we're in. I have a full grasp of what we're up against, but I'm saying all of us together, we can do this. If we all join hands, if we all arise and build, we can do this." And then he reminds them of the basis on which he believes that, the fact that God is with them in it and the king has given and supplied them with the resources that they need. They're not alone. This is not just a futile attempt. This is God-ordained! It's well thought out; it's well planned, and God is in it as evidenced by all the things that have led to this point. And their response is, "Absolutely! Let's build; let's go!" And not only do they say it, but they actually get up and start building. An awesome, awesome moment for these people! They have been invited into the greatest adventure of their lifetime. These people who were involved in this at this time would never forget what happens over the coming years. The most amazing transformation begins to take place because all of them—together—all of them begin to buy into this vision, and they get up and start acting on it.

This chapter concludes with, again, this foreshadowing of what's coming and Nehemiah having to stand in the gap as a leader to protect them against the onslaught of those who would discourage them. Verse nineteen says:

> **But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard *it*, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" 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."** (Vs. 19-20)

Nehemiah wants to make sure that the people who have now bought into this vision, are not discouraged by the opposition. He says, "We will succeed because the good hand of God is with us and because we're committed to this mission."

Now chapter three, which we're not going to read this morning, is really connected to our story this week. It's one of those chapters in the Bible where we usually just skip right over it because all it is, is a long list of names—a list of all the families and people groups who God involved in rebuilding the wall—and Nehemiah goes through and names every single one of them. It's also said by scholars that this is one of the best geographical descriptions of the city of Jerusalem because he literally goes around the city, point by point, and names who was rebuilding what. And I think there's something very significant about that, and that is Nehemiah is communicating to us and to the world the value of every single person being involved. This wasn't Nehemiah's project; this was *their* project, and he goes so far as to name every single person and why their role was so critically important—and he tells us a little bit about each one.

There are a couple of other things that are significant here. Thirty times in chapter three it says, **Next to him…next to him…next to him…after him…after him…next to him…next to him…"** and what you get is this incredible picture of shoulder to shoulder, side by side, every single person doing their section of the wall. Every person mattered! This could not have been accomplished if half of the people decided to sit it out and watch. This was an all hands on deck, moment by moment, and I want to suggest to us this morning that if we're going to be the children of light and see God's redemption and restoration come to our community, to our nation, to our world, this will require *all* the disciples of Jesus to be involved. This is the grand adventure that we are invited into to be a part of changing the world by introducing Jesus and His kingdom values and His flourishing and the life that comes with it, and it requires all the disciples of Jesus to be involved, not just a few. Bryan has talked about this over the years—that we want to make sure that no one is just sitting in the pews. No one is in the balcony just observing. (We actually have a balcony. You can't get there; there's a reason why you can't get there. So there's no balcony here; there're no "stands". Russell Moore, a great thinker and leader in the Christian movement these days, has said he thinks we ought to celebrate that nominal Christianity is dying and what would be left would be authentic followers of Jesus, who understand the mission we're on and the significance of it and they're committed to following Jesus out into the darkness to carry out that mission. Every single person matters! There is no way that our mission can be fulfilled without all of us participating side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

There's also one other significant thing that gets repeated in this chapter and you see it more toward the end of chapter three, but a number of times it says that this person rebuilt the wall **...as far as the end of his house...each in front of his house...in front of his house...in front of his house**. Eight times it says **...in front of his house, in front of his house**. And I think what we're reminded

of here is that the place where we begin to get involved in being the children of light is right where we are...right where we're planted...right in our profession...right in our neighborhood. Back in the 1920's, a Christian leader at the time said, "The adventure has gone out of the Christian venture." That's a tragedy. It's a tragedy if we don't see the adventure—that we are planted in a particular place—that our profession matters! If you're called by God, whether your calling or passion is education or it's law or it's medicine or it's art or music or media or technology, that you would see that as the place from which, the platform from which you can help bring *shalom*, *restoration*, and *redemption*. That's your primary place of calling—"I don't have to go somewhere else first; I just start where I'm already at. This is where God has put me; therefore I will build here,"—and let's see how God can use us. There are also several reminders in here that some people were called to do things other than what their primary talent was. He talks about perfumers, priests and goldsmiths. So sometimes we're called out of what's natural and normal for us to serve somewhere else because that's what's required to fulfill the mission.

There are really two applications that we need to think about as it relates to this text: The first is what we just talked about—that this is a full participation event—everyone was involved, and I have to tell you that that is so important for us to understand in our own time! In the mission that God has given us in the world—*Everyone. Every day*—that's our little moniker to describe our mission in a phrase. Your life matters...What you do matters...Where you work matters...Everyone needs to be involved! There's no pew sitting. It's not any longer our understanding that God simply called us to come to church, believe the right things, be moral and stay busy at the church. God's calling to us as His people is so much bigger and greater than that! This is the *grand adventure*. This is: "Go and make disciples everywhere you go." "Go and shed the light of Jesus everywhere you go." "Go and sacrificially love and serve everywhere you go." "Go and bring grace and truth everywhere you go." *All of us, all of us together*—which leads to the second application:

We have to prepare well for this mission. We can't wing it. We can't depend on the pastor to do it. We have to, ourselves, be fully prepared to engage the world every single day, and so what kind of preparation do we need to make? I think one of the things we have to do is to prepare our heart, that we are wholly devoted to Christ. We "love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We love our neighbor as ourselves," because the life of God is fully alive in us and we're pursuing God whole-heartedly. That's the starting place. That's what led Nehemiah to even get involved with the mission—because his heart was so engaged with God. That's the start of our preparation.

But then we have to prepare our mind. We need to know theology; we need to have a biblical worldview. We need to understand what God's up to here on earth—the story from Genesis to Revelation. We need to know it and understand it. It's not okay to say, "Yeah, I really don't know much about the Bible. I really don't know that much about what God's up to." We just sort of have this piecemeal understanding and theology that isn't solid, that isn't core, because we can't operate in this world without a deep understanding of what God's up to, what His character is and what His mission is. We need to be deep in that. We need to also prepare our mind to understand the culture in which we live. We need to understand how people think the way they think, why they think the way they think. We need to understand where the connecting points are—where do we have things in common that can become the framework for opening conversations; how do we do that well? How do we understand the times in which we live? There's a great verse back in Chronicles that says, "The men of Issachar that understood the times and knew what Israel should do." We need to understand the times. We have to be prepared. We need to prepare in our professions so that whatever we do, we do it with absolute integrity and excellence because that's the platform and the

basis on which you can even have any opportunity to say anything. We ought to be the very best doctors, lawyers, businessmen—sound in our ethics. This matters! The mission will not be accomplished if we're not thoroughly prepared to be the best at what we do. People will not listen if we're not on point.

So I ask you this morning: what are you doing to be prepared? What are you doing to prepare for the mission that God's given us? Nehemiah should inspire us to do everything we can to prepare. We are an equipping church. We are a church that is primarily about helping God's people grow and develop sound theology, a sound biblical worldview, a deep understanding of the world in which we live, equipping us in every way. So I want to encourage you as we head into fall to take full advantage of every opportunity to equip and prepare yourself for the calling God has on your life, to be a part of His children of light movement in the world to bring redemption and restoration.

There are some things that we do with young professionals called *The Agora Fellowship* where we gather with young professionals, about a dozen a year, and for a year just deeply engage in: how do we, through our professions, live out our faith, serve the community and serve Christ? There are many things like that that are offered here. The *Foundations* class that Bryan teaches every year for seven months, has a deep linear understanding of the Bible and a Christian worldview. This is important. This is life and death. I want to encourage you to take seriously the need to prepare for the mission that we're going on because we're leaving here but we'll continue to live here in the years to come—into a place that maybe doesn't look like Jerusalem but it's a culture and world that is every bit as broken as Jerusalem—and it will require our very, very best...and it will be required from every single one of us! May God move us to action and to preparation.

*Father, thank You for inviting us to be Your ambassadors and to walk with You out into the needs and darkness of our world. God, I pray that every one of us would say together as the people in Jerusalem, "Let us arise and build," and that we would all put our hands to the good work. And I pray that we would be fully prepared and equipped for every good work so that we can be Your hands and feet in an effective way, that we would plant gardens in the cracks of our culture, that we would bring pockets of flourishing all across our city and world where the light can shine brightly. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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