

Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

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Nehemiah 2:11-20

“Practicing the Presence of God”

In his helpful book, *The Call*, Os Guinness begins with the story of a prominent businessman who was speaking at a conference near Oxford

- This is part of what he said: “As you know, I have been very fortunate. I’ve made lots of money, far more than I ever dreamed of, far more than I could ever spend.”
- But a moment’s hesitation in his talk revealed unsettledness: “To be honest, one of my motives for making money has been this - that I can hire people to do what I don’t like doing. But there’s one thing I’ve not been able to hire anyone to do - find my sense of purpose. I would give anything to find that.”

Perhaps you identify with him

- Staring at you has been this question: GOD, WHY DID YOU CREATE ME?

It’s the question of our age

- If you go by the book sales of Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* That at this point has sold more copies than just about any book in history

In Nehemiah, however, we have the story of a man who found his purpose

- God summoned him to rebuild a city
- And in chapter 2, the story describes his journey there
- Having traveled nearly 1000 miles over several months
- Nehemiah entered Jerusalem to assess and mobilize people to build
- Listen to his account (read verses 11-18)

Here’s what is amazing: How does an outsider come into a situation that has been a mess for 140 years, a populace stuck in desolation and despair, and muster a taskforce – inspire, commit, rebuild a city?

It would be like someone coming to New Orleans 140 years from now

- After years in which nothing has happened
- FEMA has been unable to get things going
- Mayors, governors have come and gone, absorbed with their own concerns
- The city remains in squalor
- Forces have converged to keep people in their shame
- And then, in 2145 AD a man comes in, surveys the scene, and mobilizes the will to rebuild

How does that happen?

- What explains his remarkable ability to influence, inspire, rally people to action?
- People moved from broken spirits to resolute hearts, from passivity to activity?

There are some clues -

1) Nehemiah did his **homework** (verses 11-16)

- He saw what he needed to see, assessed the needs, surveyed the damage, did his DUE DILIGENCE
- Nehemiah would have gotten nowhere if his ideas were half-formed, his plans half-baked

2) Nehemiah **identified with the need** (verse 17)

- He didn't say "Look at the terrible situation YOU are in"
- Rather, "You see the trouble WE OURSELVES are in"
 - Their despair was his despair
 - Their grief his grief

3) Nehemiah **spoke to the issue behind the issue** (verse 17)

- Appealing to something far more significant than brick and mortar
- It's not about merely about insecurity
- It's about the "evil" (ra'a), the "wrongness" of it all
- Something must be done about the disgrace
- A shame has hung over this place like a deep fog for 140 years
 - A disregard for the people, a contempt for the name of God
- But something else was working here, that despite the enormity of the task moved, the people to action

4) Nehemiah had a **certainty of will**

- Things had converged inside of him, holy discontent, holy prayer, holy nerve, turning into a **holy conviction**
 - A deep assurance of vocation
 - That has incredible power to move the will of people
- And like all great convictions, Nehemiah's had these three sides that must be the three sides of ours

A) WE MUST HAVE THE CONVICTION OF GOD'S CALLING
(verse 12)

- Nehemiah had the certainty of something set in the heart
- A burden that turned into a summons
- We're back to the question I believe this book keeps posing to us "**What is God setting on your heart?**"
- Maybe it seems like nothing, and you might be part of a core who are roaming this earth lost and confused, or killing time
 - And it is killing you
- Maybe you are simply trying to live out someone else's script for you
 - Letting someone else tell you who to be, what to do
- Maybe this was Nehemiah, before chapter one
 - Fulfilling the king's script for him
 - Until the news of Jerusalem's condition reached him
 - And suddenly everything changed

- God set something on Nehemiah's heart
 - Created a profound discontent
 - That was nothing less than God closing in on him and calling Nehemiah to find his life, the calling, the mission, the VISION he was uniquely designed for
- We all have to be ready for this

* I have made this statement before but I will say it again

- If you are a Christ follower, you have been deeply and profoundly called of God - not once, but twice

1. Called to forgiveness, reconciliation with God
2. Called to the PURPOSE for which you were saved

- How does one go about discovering this?

A) It may involve that walk in the woods

- Silence, solitude
- Listening to that still voice that can only be heard when nothing else is heard
- That listens for clues in our past, signals in our present, to the discontent

B) More often than not, this summons will encounter us, as it did Nehemiah, Gideon, Amos, Paul, Jonah

- Who did not go for some walk in the woods, but were confronted with something God brought their way
 - A divine discontent that suddenly took hold, dramatically, or over time like a slow drip
 - That often is confirmed in community
- Maybe it is a certain injustice that serves as a calling to seek public service
 - Immoral practices in a workplace
 - The dysfunctions in a church
 - The aimlessness of kids that serves as a call to give your life to youth

* I have used this illustration, but I go back to it because it illustrates the point again

- William Borden, of Borden dairy fame

- A millionaire by the time he was a senior in HS
- And as a grad gift, he was sent on a trip around the world
- And while journeying through Asia, the ME, Europe, his soul turned sideways
 - He experienced a divine discontent, a concern for the hurting and the lost

- So he came back and prepared for his journey, first Yale, then Princeton
- And while receiving lots of opportunities in the corporate world, he wrote in his Bible “no retreat” (no retreat from this God shaped summons)
- Finished seminary, sailed for China
- Determined to build this part of the world’s broken walls
 - All of these serve as “whispered words and events” (MacDonald) that may lead us to China, but often right where we already are
 - A teacher, an engineer, a stay at home parent, suddenly elevated from profession to calling
 - Life will now be done for His purposes
 - And now one finds him/herself living large on the stage we find ourselves, rising to our full standing
 - Saying no the evil one who would desire to keep us at the level of insignificance
 - *It means living as called individuals*
 - I am not merely raising a child to one day be a responsible adult
 - I am stewarding property owned by God, with this goal of turning his/her world upside down for God
 - *It means living as a called church*
 - We are not merely holding services on Sundays
 - We are grabbing hold of a call to be a church where people radically connect
 - Becoming a community shaped by mission, bent on being an incarnational, permeating culture
 - Determined to influence the world
 - The vision we hold for Village is nothing less than a summons from God
- Nehemiah’s journey took a more transcendent purpose, as ours must
 - Filling life with something he heretofore had not had - CONVICTION
- Nehemiah’s conviction had a second side, one ours must also have

B) WE MUST HAVE THE CONVICTION OF GOD'S HAND
(verse 18)

- What moved the people to reply, "Let's start building?"
- It could only be explained as this: They saw something they had perhaps never seen in their lifetime
 - A man with a vital sense of God's presence
- It was clear to him, and now to them, that heaven had spoken and Nehemiah had heard

- Are we convinced God's hand is upon us?
- What tells us?
 - 1) When we find ourselves in a place that on our own we WOULD NEVER be
 - Building a boat in the middle of the desert (Noah)
 - Preaching to Gentiles (Paul)

Illustration - Nigeria-hoping I would never go again

- Then pleading for God to let me go
- What else explains this but the hand of God?
 - 2) When we find ourselves doing what otherwise we COULD NOT do
 - Leading a nation in the wilderness (Moses)
 - Staring down a wicked king (Elijah)

- We know we are responding to something God has set upon our heart...
 - Driven by a conviction the hand of God is on us
- ...when we are no longer driven by financial security or location or notoriety
- But rather compelled by something far more significant

Finally, Nehemiah had this third side to his conviction

3) WE MUST HAVE THE CONVICTION OF GOD'S SUCCESS (verse 20)

- Motion usually creates friction

- Nehemiah's actions created huge opposition, horrific pushback
- Building this wall will not come without everything the devil can throw at Nehemiah
- But Nehemiah would not, will not, be shaken
 - Because he had this fundamental conviction
 - The same conviction all of us must have
 - GOD WILL ADVANCE, PROSPER—DO IT!

So... some assessing

What is God setting on your heart?

- What is the broken wall he is calling you to rebuild?
- Is there a sense of God's hand resting on you?
- When is the last time you prayed for this work?
- Are you convinced God will bring success?
- Are you able to stare down the darkness?

Such questions are not for the faint of heart

- But consider the importance
- As Eldridge put it, "Where would we be if Abraham weighed the pros and cons of God's invitation and hung on to his material benefits in Ur? What would have happened if Moses steered clear of burning bushes? What might have happened had Nehemiah decided to hang on to security, to his cushy job and governmental pension, and ignored the fierce discontent raging in his soul?
 - And allowed the walls to remain broken?