

The Call to Action

Nehemiah 2-3

SERIES “Next”

Jarrett Stephens

One of my favorite missionaries to ever read about is a man by the name of William Carey. He was born in England in 1761 and is held in high regard in Baptist circles because he was a Baptist minister and the founder of what we call “modern missions”.

Carey is an amazing person to study. He was a shoemaker by trade, but extremely smart. He taught himself Latin and Greek and had a certain gifting with learning languages that would prove to be extremely beneficial in his future.

At the age of 18 he was...we would use the word “saved” – “converted” mainly because of the influence of a friend...a mentor who would engage him in spiritual conversations. At 21 he was baptized by immersion and was ordained into the gospel ministry at the age of 25.

He would pastor and preach keeping his day job as a shoemaker. And as he grew in his love for God, he also grew in his love for those that didn’t know God.

In fact, one of the highlights of my life was two years ago, going to Carey Baptist Church in Moulton, England...they have there at the church he pastored his small workshop...it’s on the same premises as the church, and it’s a museum of sorts today!

It’s very small and in that workshop is Carey’s old pulpit that he preached from and there’s also a map that Carey had made of the world. He would pray over that map as he worked. I brought a picture to show you...you can barely make it out...I zoomed in, he would have the word “pagans”.

These people were lost, and in need of Christ. And as he prayed, the burden for reaching these pagans...these “heathen” as they were referred to by the Church of the day began to grow more and more in his heart.

The burden became so great that in 1793 at the age of 32, he left the comforts of England to be a missionary in India. He would serve in India for 41 years. I that time he would bury two wives on the mission field...three children. He didn’t see his first convert until his seventh year of laboring day in and day out.

He’s called the “father of modern missions” because when he went to India, that was NOT the mission’s strategy at the time. The thought was if God wanted to save people, he could do it without anyone’s help...there was no need to personally go to the lost!

Carey established schools to help educate children. He learned the language and dialects – over 40 of them to help translate the scripture into the heart language of the people he was trying to reach...he of course preached the gospel!

He made an impact. The quote that he is MOST famous for, and it is written across a room of Carey Baptist Church in Moulton. Carey is famous for saying: “**Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.**”

Now, I don’t know what exactly inspired Carey to say this, but it is EXACTLY the mindset we see in Nehemiah as we continue in our *NEXT* series today.

I’m titling the message: **The Call to Action**

Our text is going to be ALL of Nehemiah 2 and 3. We’ve got A LOT to cover, so let’s get after it. For context...and for those that perhaps missed last week, Nehemiah is serving as a cupbearer to the king of Persia.

As cupbearer, he is a trusted advisor to the king. We said last week, think of it like a personal valet if you will. He would have been privy to private conversations the king was having. He arranged the wine that would be served at parties and dinners -even tasting the king’s wine to make sure it wasn’t poisoned.

He and King Artaxerxes from all that we can gather had a good relationship.

Now, several Persian kings BEFORE Artaxerxes arrives to the throne, by God’s grace...by his providence (that was a theme we discussed last week) – Jews who had been exiled under the Babylonian Empire were finally allowed to go back to Jerusalem.

And they had been back for about 100 years (they went in three major “returns” if you will) and when some of them come back to Persia AFTER being in Jerusalem, they give a report to Nehemiah that it is NOT going well.

The report is the walls of the city have been destroyed and the gates have been burned (1:3). The walls represented security and stability...the fact that the holy city of Jerusalem was in disarray and disgrace was a reproach to the name and glory of God – and when Nehemiah gets this news, it buckles him.

Just go back and listen to last week’s message...we unpack all of this. He weeps...he mourns...he fasts...and check this...for FOUR months he prays. And this is where we pick up in Nehemiah 2.

I am going to break this message up in two big sections. The first, we’ll call: **Scene One: The palace in Persia**

Neh. 2:1-2 – “In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him (the month of Nisan is the Persian new year! So, evidently there is a party going on and the wine is flowing!), I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad (the word means “discouraged” “down” – “out of sorts”) in his presence.² (And he hasn’t been sad in the King’s presence because that is NOT something you do. You don’t bring your

problems to the king! Your job is to lighten his load, NOT weigh him down. Your job is to keep him on the up and up – cheerful and happy, NOT make him think of feel like something is wrong! The king notices this...remember there is an affinity there. They know each other well. The king knows something isn't right and asks Nehemiah...) **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.**"

Nehemiah was about to step out and make a request of the king. He's about to act on something he has been covering in prayer for four months...he seeks in his spirit, it's go time!

Now, the reason he is scared is three-fold:

1. He knows he is not to bring personal requests before the king, but he is sensing he is about to. If you have ever had to step out and have a conversation with someone of power and position and you didn't know how it was going to go, that can cause some fear.
2. This king...while there is an affinity for one another...there is a working relationship...he's still the king. And this king...King Artaxerxes...he has a reputation! He killed his older brother in order to ascend to the throne AND had the man that assassinated his father killed. This isn't Mr. Rogers here...this is King Artaxerxes. You don't make him mad or twist him off!
3. Thirdly, if you read Ezra (Ch. 4) you will see that this king has already stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem about 15-20 years before. There had been some troublemakers in and around the city that didn't want it rebuilt, and they sent word back to Artaxerxes spreading a whole bunch of rumors and accusations that Jerusalem being rebuilt would be a threat to his Empire.

Artaxerxes does what any earthly king would do in hearing. He doesn't want any rivals or nations being a threat to his empire, so he puts a stop to the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

So, Nehemiah knows exactly what he is about to request, and he is scared for all of the above reasons!

- He's sad in the king's presence...
- He's about to make a personal request that is outside his purview...
- The king has already stopped the work previously and...
- He's like most kings – he's power hungry and you never know what will set him off...

So, you can understand Nehemiah's fear. But he moves forward (he's acting on faith – remember, this was one of our "NEXT Steps" from last week): If God is going to use us for his glory, we better be ready to act on faith. Nehemiah was prepared to act on faith!

And listen: Nehemiah is no fool. In these four months of praying, he's also been doing some thinking and strategizing in that time. We know this because there's no way he comes up with WHAT he is about to ask and HOW he asks on the fly...on his own.

There is NO question he is modeling the lethal combination of praying AND planning. Praying and planning. Praying and planning.

Nehemiah has been doing what he can do from a human standpoint, and he had been calling on God to do what he can do from a supernatural standpoint.

Just a point of application here. If you are facing a dire situation...if there is something that is burdening your heart. Take a note out of Nehemiah's book on leadership here. You do what you can do – plan...prepare...think...strategize...work...and then you can only trust God to do what he can do.

It's the whole...I think the quote is from St. Augustine: "Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you."

I can tell you in this NEXT season we are in...we started having conversations about this last January...started having meetings in February/March...got clarity on exactly what we need to do last summer...and we've been working, planning, meeting, and strategizing all fall.

We're bringing it to you now...but hear me when I say this. This whole NEXT Initiative has been soaked in prayer and planning...planning and prayer, and I believe we can say with integrity we've done what we could do and will continue to. Now, God must do what he can do!

Nehemiah is prepared to answer the king because he's been praying and planning...planning and praying!

Neh. 2:3-4 - I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! (He's softening him up!) Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" (Notice, he didn't say the word, "Jerusalem" – this is Nehemiah having wisdom and discernment. He's being in the words of Jesus in the New Testament "as innocent as a dove and as cunning as a serpent". He doesn't want the word "Jerusalem" to trigger any negative reaction so he just says the "city of my fathers" and then he appeals to what many kings at that time would have been sensitive to and that is the taking care of ancestor's graves...there was a deep respect for the bodies and bones of those that had gone before them.) ⁴**Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?"** (And here Nehemiah steps out on faith...it's his "now or never" moment – and what does he immediately do?) **So I prayed to the God of heaven."**

This is the second prayer we find in the book of Nehemiah. Unlike the prayer in (ch.1) that took up seven verses – this prayer takes no verses!

There are long prayers and short prayers...bottom line is prayer (whether long or short) works!
And Nehemiah has been living in a posture of prayer.

I like what commentator, **Stephen Davey** wrote: **“A short prayer is best preceded by consistent praying.”**

This entire situation has been saturated in prayer – like marinating meat before cooking it, Nehemiah has soaked this moment in prayer and so when it is put before him, he breathes a quick prayer and makes his “ask”!

Neh. 2:5-8 – “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 fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.”⁶ 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 a time.⁷ And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah,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 of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.”

Now, this is AMAZING! We know...and Nehemiah knows that what got him the answer to his request is the last part of (v. 8) – “the good hand of God was upon him”.

I just need us to realize though how monumental Nehemiah’s “ask” was! Again, he’s been planning because when “put on the spot” by the king on what he needs, he is ready to answer, and essentially here is his ask:

- I’m going to need some extended time off...
- I need your permission to go back and rebuild a city that you already put a stop to rebuilding about a decade before...
- I need a reference letter from you that will guarantee my safety as I travel and while there...
- Finally, I’m going to need you to finance the whole project...

That’s a CRAZY “ask” – but Nehemiah...soaked it in prayer. He knew the truth of (Prov. 21:1) – that “the king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it where he will.”

He had been praying to Providence and when given the opportunity he made his crazy, big “ask” and the king “granted Nehemiah what he asked for the good hand of God was upon him.”

This is scene one: It’s the palace in Persia. Now, we move to: **Scene Two: The Walls in Jerusalem**

Nehemiah it seems immediately leaves Persia and makes the 800-1,000-mile journey back to Jerusalem.

Neh. 2:9-10 – “Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. (This is just another way of saying that he has entered the region and surrounding regions of what we would refer to as “The Holy Land”.) Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. ¹⁰ 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.”

Now, I'll say more about these guys in a moment, but it's a good lesson to remember...this is a truth that's as old as time – not everyone is going to be excited about the work God calls us to.

There will ALWAYS be people out there that will choose to oppose a work of God – ALWAYS. So, I'm saying this to myself and I'm saying it to you...don't be surprised when it happens!

More on that in a moment.

Neh. 2:11-16 – “So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. ¹² Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. ¹³ I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected (this word “inspected” – it means to “carefully observe”. It was a medical term used to describe the intentionality of a doctor observing a wound – Nehemiah is looking deeply at the damage and he sees...) the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. ¹⁶ And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.”

So, Nehemiah goes out in the middle of the night to survey the damage. And he goes to all the different gates (all the gates had different purposes) and he makes his way counter-clockwise around the city – I'll put an image on the screen so you can kind of see the direction he went (SHOW IMAGE).

He observes all the walls...the burned down gates...I'm sure he is praying as circles the city and that burden, he had in his heart for his people – it just continues to grow within.

Now, remember from last week – it wasn't the physical walls of the city being down that burdened Nehemiah, it was what the walls represented! The glory of God's name...God's reputation was at stake in the city of God being in disrepair – that's what burdened Nehemiah.

And as he circles the city, don't you know that he is feeling the weight of getting this project up and running. It's been 100 years since the Temple and walls were destroyed.

But...Nehemiah...as he circles the walls, he doesn't feel hopelessness. Instead, he starts getting fired up. He starts thinking, "We can do this! God is with us!"

The challenge doesn't cripple Nehemiah, it inspires him!

Neh. 3:17-18 – “Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are 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.” (Notice how he makes it an “us” problem – this is “our predicament – we’re in this together! Let’s go!) ¹⁸ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. (He’s inspiring them...encouraging them! Speaking words of life over them...and look at the result!) And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So, they strengthened their hands for the good work.”

Now, don't miss that right there! What they are doing Nehemiah calls a “good work”. God has called them to this...he is leading on this...it's a “good work!”

And whenever there is a “good work” for God going on...we just said it a moment ago, we better steady our heart and hands because there will be opposition in the form of naysayers, cynics, and just plain negative people.

May I introduce to you one more time: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem.

Neh. 2:19-20 - “But when Sanballat the Horonite (governor of Samaria) and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”

There will always be critics when God's people set out to do a “great work”. And they will try to intimidate...they'll try to ridicule...they'll try to discourage in any way they can.

These are guys that you DON'T want to invite to your party. I tell our team don't be the person that lights up the room when they leave it! Well, that's Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem – just negative...cynical...mean-spirited...glass half-empty people.

Illus. Farmer and neighbor – Charles Swindoll tells the story of a farmer who was rather optimistic, but had a very negative neighbor. The farmer would see the sun coming up and shout, “Look at the beautiful sun and clear sky!” To which the negative and cynical neighbor would say, “Yeah, it will probably torch my crops!”

When there would be clouds and rain forecast, the optimistic farmer would say, “Isn't this awesome! God is giving our corn a drink today.” The pessimistic neighbor would reply, “I hope it's not too much of a downpour or it will flood and wash away everything.”

Finally, one day the optimist farmer thought I'm going to trump my neighbors pessimistic/negative attitude once and for all. And so, he went out and bought the most remarkable hunting dog ever trained – a dog that could literally walk on water!

The farmer eventually invited his neighbor out for a duck hunt and the ducks flew over, they both took shots and multiple ducks fell into the pond. The farmer with this dog shouted, “Go get em!”

The dog leapt out of the boat they were in and ran on the water –gathered the ducks in his mouth and brought them back to the boat.

After the dog accomplished this feat and was back in the boat the optimistic farmer rather proud of his dog for walking on water said, “Well, what did you think of that?” To which the pessimist and negative neighbor said, “Ha! He can’t swim, can he!”

Negative...glass is “half-empty” people. Nehemiah had to deal with them. Let’s take a note out of his leadership playbook on how did he respond to them? How did Nehemiah respond?

- Did he answer their accusations?
- Did he get in a back and forth with them?
- Did he fire off a passive/aggressive Facebook post?

NOPE! Look at how he responded. When they went low, he went high!

Neh. 2:20 – “Then I replied to them, “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.”

He just shut them down...he knew opposition was a reality. He knew he would face resistance, but he was NOT going to let the naysayers, critics, and “negative nelly’s” have the final word.

He would rise above, continue on mission, and he draws a line in the sand between those that belong to the Lord (it’ll be those that rebuild) and those that don’t – they have no portion! AND...those that have no portion or part in what’s going on, don’t get a say in the process and FOR SURE won’t get to determine the outcome!

And it’s at this point that Nehemiah puts the people to work. Now, we’re not going to read ALL of chapter three, but there are several highlights here that we need to mention.

First, there are over 50 names listed in (ch. 3) – they represent ALL walks of life. People that participated in this project – they were priests, goldsmiths, perfumers, merchants...there were families working in front of their homes rebuilding walls and individuals that traveled in to help lend a hand.

35x the words “made repairs” is mentioned and there were 40+ different places that people were stationed at around the wall. Some are working near gardens (3:15) while others work near the garbage dump of the city (3:14).

Bottom line: this took coordination...it took leadership...it took teamwork...

In fact, if you read (Ch. 3) the MOST often repeated phrase in the entire chapter is “and next to him/them” or “after him/them – you see it almost EVERY verse in Nehemiah 3.

People are working...and they are working together!

There are three names I would highlight here and then we'll get to our NEXT steps. We'll do this very quickly. First, notice who is mentioned first:

Neh. 3:1 – “Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Tower of Hananel.”

The rebuilding starts with the spiritual leadership. It should always be the spiritual leaders taking the lead. I tell our team ALL the time, that we cannot take our people where we ourselves are not willing to go!

As it relates to NEXT, this next week (Tuesday), we are having a time together as a staff where we will make our commitments and lay our pledges before the Lord. We want to do it BEFORE we ask you to do it.

It's a spiritual principle...the spiritual leaders should lead by example. I would widen this out and say this doesn't just go for staff, but life group leaders, deacons...anyone in leadership at the church whenever we step out on faith, we need to be leading the way!

Second, in this chapter all you see is people working...it's name after name after name. But right up front, notice:

Neh. 3:5 – “And next to them the Tekoites (group of people that lived south of Jerusalem, near Bethlehem...this is where the prophet, Amos was from) repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.”

It's the only time in the chapter were told someone wasn't working. We're not given a reason why...I don't know:

- Did they think they were above the work?
- Too important to get their hands dirty?
- Didn't agree with the plans and how it was being rolled out?
- Cowed to the fears of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem...

We don't know why the nobles chose not to work, but just contrast their attitude and action with that of the last person we'll look in detail and that is in (v. 20).

Neh. 3:20 – “After him Baruch the son of Zabbai repaired^[g](vigorously repaired) another section from the buttress to the door of the house of Eliashib the high priest.”

This is the only time in the 50+ names were given that the attitude of the person is listed – he “vigorously repaired” – the word means to “burn or to glow”. Baruch was whistling while he worked!

Truthfully, Baruch would have probably gotten on all our nerves – showing up EVERY day with a smile and asking people how they are doing, but wouldn't you rather have Baruch than the nobles from Tekoa that did nothing!

I found myself praying this week for our NEXT Initiative, “God give us some Baruchs! Give us some men and women that don't just choose to participate in the project because they are a part of our church, but give us some people that are vigorous about it...PUMPED about it! We need more Baruchs in our life!

These people in (Ch. 3) – they had a mind to work! And just a spoiler alert here: What hadn't happened in 100 years – that's how long the walls were in disrepair...BUT...because of the people mentioned in (Neh. 3) ...because they choose to work together the task is accomplished in 52 days! It was a miracle!

So, let's bring it to a close. What does Nehemiah's story mean for us as we stand at our own moment of rebuilding?

Here are the **NEXT steps**. Remember, we're focusing on the NEXT Initiative in the application of this series, but it's certainly not limited to it.

1. Realize what we are seeking to accomplish is a “good work”

All five of our initiatives: restoring the worship center, adding on to the North Klein campus, the expansion of our broadcast and digital ministry, our international church planting projects, a third campus in Magnolia – this is a “good work”.

You know how I know it's a “good work”? Because of the WHY behind what we are doing!

It's all about the glorification of Christ's name! Obviously, that's what the expansion and reach is about from Northwest Houston to the world, but even in restoring the worship center, we have a core conviction that if it's done for God, it ought to be better!

Excellence in all things and all things for the glory of God. This is a “good work God” is calling us to and I believe his good hand is upon us.

Don't lose sight of this...we're doing projects, but these projects...they are a “good work”.

? – Are you asking God what your part is in this “good work”?

2. Keep moving forward despite opposition, resistance, negativity, or cynicism.

Let's be a people that refuses to allow opposition or negativity or cynicism to “win the day”. Instead, we want to anchor ourselves in the “WHY” behind this good work and let that be the fuel that moves us forward.

Listen, I know when we do a project like this there are a lot of opinions. And as I have said before we want to answer questions and deal with honest concerns. It's totally okay if you

disagree with something we are doing...what's NOT okay is to be disagreeable and to spread that spirit around.

I've said before, my goal...one of the "wins" if you will that I am praying for is by the end of this whole initiative, we are stronger and more unified as a church than we have ever been!

So, let's decide now that one...we're not going to be disagreeable...and where there is, we're going to keep moving forward in the direction God is calling us.

One commentator I read this week referred to Nehemiah as having a "holy stubbornness". I like that! You don't have to be Baruch, but you don't need to be Sanballat, Tobiah or Geshem either.

3. Play your part and look out for one another

That's what the people of Israel did in rebuilding the walls. They each played their part and they had someone next to them playing their part as well.

We've said this before...in this campaign, that's all we're asking you. Play your part. Do what you can. It's not equal gifts, it's equal sacrifice and it is going to take every one of us.

I want to ask you to pray if you are not already about the part you are to play? Talk to your spouse if married. Ask those questions – this is about sacrifice?

? - What can we cut back (i.e., sacrifice) in order to give toward this project?

- Skip a \$5.00 coffee once a week- \$260/year (2) = 520/year
- If my family cuts Chic-fil-a ONCE a week \$60 tab - \$720/year

There are somethings we could sacrifice we'd barely miss! I don't know what it is for you, but I want to encourage you to take this part of the journey seriously...because it's in asking these sorts of questions that God does his best work in our hearts.

And remember, who you're next to...who's next to someone else...who's next to someone else.

Let's expect great things from God and attempt great things for God – TOGETHER. And if we do, I believe we'll see God do something special just like in Nehemiah's day.

Will you pray with me?

Please Note: This document is not meant to be published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.