

Dismiss Kids, Welcome Guests...

This morning I want us to think together about...

“The Foundation of Favor” Nehemiah 2

What is favor?

Favor refers to receiving the grace and kindness of God. The words favor and grace are closely connected. That’s why we often define “grace” as “unmerited favor.”

When someone is favored by God, it indicates they are pleasing to him and accepted by him, that they enjoy friendship with God, and that the good things happening in their lives are a result of his love and gracious hand.

Nehemiah was a man who found favor in God’s sight. When we come to Nehemiah 2, we receive the all-important encouragement to...

The Point: Seek God’s favor when you do God’s work.

Nehemiah 2:1-8 (text displayed)

When God’s favor is the foundation...

1) Desperate prayer ignites bold action. (2:1-8)

- Verse one says it is the month of Nissan. That means Nehemiah has been fasting and praying, not for 30 days, not for 60 days, not for 90 days, four months!
- He is wrecked. His heart is broken over what breaks the heart of God. Jerusalem, the city of God is still in shambles, the people are shamed, and God’s reputation has taken a major hit!
 - For four months, he begs God for help, for wisdom, for strength, for favor. Day and night he cries out to God. “God, we need you to move. Restore our fortunes. Vindicate your name and your glory, God!”
 - As we BUILD AGAIN around the values of the Gospel, Community, and Mission, we can expect that God’s power will, in large part, be connected to our prayers.
 - You say, “Pastor Tanner, prayer is hard.” I get it.
 - But here’s a simple tip for you: The best way to develop a heart for prayer is to PRAY! Even better when you pray with others.
 - Wednesday morning Zoom - Mel A & Tomisin (6:15-45a).
 - Friday morning RHCC - Pastor Tanner (6:30-7:30a)
 - Fire Nights (first Friday night of every month - 8-9p at RHCC)
 - Lent Prayer (coming...) when we’re really going to pray into our Empowered Vision.
 - Nehemiah prayed with a sense of holy desperation.
- Though he had not been sad in the king’s presence, when Nehemiah brought in the wine on this particular occasion, the King saw through it. Verse 2
 - We reflect the heart of God when we express appropriate emotions to the highs and lows of life.

- Jesus is described as the God of joy and the dance! But in Isaiah 53:3 he is “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Don’t ignore your emotions. Take them God, filter them through his heart.
- When the king asked him why he was sad, Nehemiah became afraid. Why?
 - Artaxerxes was a violent man. He had killed his brother in order to take the throne.
 - Not to mention, “he had already stopped the work of rebuilding the temple in Ezra 4:17b-22”

But Nehemiah’s response reveals his wisdom. verse 3

- Rather than speaking about Jerusalem explicitly, he speaks of the city of his fathers’ tombs.
- Why? Ancient peoples, especially nobles had the highest respect for ancestral tombs. (Betts. 35-36)
- Nehemiah presents a shared value, thus “maximizing the personal element and minimizing the political.” (Nykolaishen)

T; Then we come to the moment of truth.

Verse 4

- King Artaxerxes asks: “What do you want?”
- Nehemiah: rather than immediately responding to the king, first talks to God.
- Look at that paradigm shifting, heart convicting line at the end of verse 4: “So I prayed to the God of heaven.”
 - This is – in the moment praying.
 - This is – pause to pray time.
 - This is – “God, I need you, and I need you *RIGHT NOW*.” kind of praying.
- Nehemiah is living the words every human being should know from age 3 to 103: “When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.” (Psalm 56:3)
 - When is the last time you prayed like this?
 - Did you know you can pray like this?
 - Jesus tells us explicitly in the sermon on the Mount, God is not impressed with our word count in prayer.
- Prayer is about relationship. It’s about recognition and dependence. The word for prayer here is the word for “plead. [Like someone] begging for justice or mercy.” (Goldingay)
- Nehemiah is saying: “God, ultimately, YOU ARE all I’ve got.”

Then Nehemiah makes his request in verses 5-8 with great respect and boldness.

- Nehemiah’s request could have been interpreted as seditious, a threat to the throne.
- But when God puts something into your heart of this magnitude, you will be willing to put your life on the line!
- They talk logistics in verse 6.
- Then in verse 7, with zero authority, but increasing confidence he is moving under the authority of God, Nehemiah makes two additional requests
 - Protection. Safe Passage
 - Provision. Lumber. Perhaps referring to the rich cedars of Lebanon, as with the wood to rebuild the temple under Cyrus’ reign (see Ezra 3:7).

This brings us to the second truth I want you to see: When God’s favor is the foundation...

2) Closed doors swing wide open. (2:8)

God’s hand.

We use anthropomorphic terms to describe God. That means we use human characteristics to describe him. God is God. God is a spirit, "an invisible being who does not have a body like us."

What do you do with our hands? We work, serve, create. We build!

We refer to "God's hand" to describe his activity or his working, and his hand is a "good" hand. He accomplishes good things from his good plans because he has a good heart.

"You are good and do good." Psalm 119:68

Is that your confession today?

Two insights here... We have to zoom out for the first.

1) God moves in diverse ways at diverse times...

- Just years before, Ezra refused military escort when he returned to Jerusalem, because he wanted the king to know God would protect them on the journey (Ezra 8:21-23).
- Now... Nehemiah asks for a military escort. Did that mean he lacked faith? He just risked neck for God and his people. I don't think that was the issue.
- Here's part of the issue for us. God is unboxable. "Ezra, go without help! Nehemiah, here's your bodyguards!"
- Raymond Brown puts it like this: "One man's commitment to God precluded the escort; the other welcomed it. Ezra regarded soldiers as a lack of confidence in God's power; Nehemiah viewed them as evidence of God's superlative goodness.... [and then I like this] We must not rigidly stereotype believers into identical patterns of spirituality." (Betts, 40)

2) The king showed favor because God extended favor.

- "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." (Proverbs 21:1)
- Nehemiah communicates this with the phrase: "Good hand of God was upon me." We see this language in Ezra 7:6, 7:9; 7:28, 8:18, 8:22, 8:31, as well as here in Nehemiah 2:8 & 2:18.
- If we look close enough, we can see that favor deals with so much more than physical provision.
- **THE FAVOR OF GOD**
 - moved Nehemiah to fast, pray, and mourn.
 - and opened the door for Nehemiah's request when the king saw his sorrow.
- **The GOOD HAND OF GOD**
 - spared Nehemiah's life.
 - provided protection for the journey and the best wood for the walls.
 - led him back to Jerusalem, for the very first time.
 - and blessed him with wisdom, vision, clear communication, collaboration and a tenacity to push through opposition.

Nehemiah depended on God in prayer, which put him in the perfect position to say: "Look at what God did." Nehemiah can't point to his intelligence; to the MBA on the wall; or even to his conversation with the king, because all of it was predicated on his conversations with God.

That's the beautiful thing about being a praying people. That's the beautiful thing about favor. God gets the credit.

T: When God's favor is the foundation, desperate prayer leads to bold action; closed doors swing wide open, and #3.

3) Compelling vision inspires strong collaboration. (2:9-20)

Listen to Nehemiah 2:9-20 (text displayed)

- Like wind at his back, Nehemiah arrives with the king's authority in verse 9, but verse 10 tells us about two characters who will provide A LOT of headwind.
 - Sanballat was likely already the governor of Samaria to the north.
 - Tobiah probably served as one of his chief assistants.
- Verse 10 says, they were "displeased greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel."
- As soon as Nehemiah arrives in the region, he faces opposition, but that will certainly not deter him!

Verse 11-16 describe his...

Preparation for the Work

- Look carefully at verse 11. "So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days." What did Nehemiah do for three days? Rested. Dude just traveled 1,000 miles!
 - It took me a long time to learn the proverbial truth: "Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is take a nap."
 - If you struggle with pace and not getting enough rest, check out John Mark Comer's podcast or book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*.
- After he recharged, verses 12-16 say he went out on a reconnaissance mission to examine the wall. Why?
 - He needs to know the scope.
 - He needs to prepare materials.
 - He needs to strategize. Great vision always requires a solid strategy to accomplish it.
- The text mentions that he inspects the walls at night no less than three times (vv. 12, 13, 15) likely to bypass the schemes of enemies and before doubters could spread the discouraging prophecy: "This can't be done!"

After Nehemiah prepared, he invited others. Verses 17-18 capture how Nehemiah inspired others for the collective work.

Inspiration for the Collective Work

Here we find some really important leadership principles, which reflect God's heart. All leaders must assess the current condition and...

1) Confront the Brutal Facts

- If we want to attempt great things for God, we first must understand the current reality, even when the truth hurts.
- Jim Collins, in his excellent leadership book *Good to Great*, calls this "confronting the brutal facts."
- What were the brutal facts? Look at Nehemiah's opening words: "You see the trouble we are in..." (You can see it... all you have to do is open your eyes). Let us know longer suffer derision." In other words...
 - The wall is in shambles...
 - Our people are full of shame. We are being mocked and ridiculed, and worst of all...
 - God's reputation is bound up with our reputation, and WE are making HIM look really, really bad.
- Those were the brutal facts. In our day, in our country we are faced with the brutal fact of over 60 million abortions since Roe v. Wade. That is 60 million beautiful babies, made in the image of God who did not make it out of the womb. It is our job to speak up for them, to support great organizations like

the Boston Center for Pregnancy Choices, and to care for foster families, adoptive families, as well as offer love, counsel and hope to women and men who have made the painful and traumatic decision to pursue an abortion. If that is you or someone you know, please listen: God loves you and we love you. There is forgiveness in God's heart for you. There is an indescribable peace waiting for you.

- It's difficult to confront the brutal facts. Nehemiah took no pleasure in saying this. The people we're not excited to hear it.
- But it stirred their soul, because they longed for something better.

They needed a leader to come along and say, "This is not okay. Let's do something about it." That's what Nehemiah does in verse 17. He...

2) Extend a compelling invitation.

- "Come, let US build the wall." This is a great work. And we're going to accomplish it together! God envisions something greater than this!
- Notice three things about Nehemiah's invitation:
 - First, he appeals to their common identity as the people of God who value Jerusalem, the city of God. This city is a reflection of us. More importantly, it is a reflection of OUR GOD!
 - Second, he invites them to a community project. "Let us!" This is not Nehemiah's project. This is our project! In this, we also see how
 - Nehemiah invites them to work he is fully committed to himself. "Let us!" I'm going to get my hands dirty and bloody too.

3) Testify of God's work in the Past

- In verse 18 Nehemiah provides example after example of how God's good hand was upon him.
 - Don't underestimate the power of your testimony. God showed up. God's hand moved.
 - God changed their life. God restored their marriage. God opened that door. God provided again
 - RHC Locations: Springstep, Boys & Girls Club, Chevalier, MHS, and the same will be true when we acquire our own 24/7 space big enough for Sunday worship.
- When God moves the seemingly impossible becomes reality.

Nehemiah's rousing speech, likely much longer than what have in verse 17, moved the people to action. Look at the end of verse 18.

"And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work."

I love this... they started encouraging one another. I love how I'm hearing this regarding our 2022 Empowered Vision.

2022 Vision Slide

But listen: when you receive great vision, just know opposition will be lurking around the corner.

4) Persevere through opposition.

- When Sanballat and Tobiah hear of their intention to build, they stir up another man named Geshem to oppose the work.
- Here's what you need to understand: Nehemiah was surrounded by opposition. Sanballat and Tobiah to the north, Geshem to the south and east. It is likely they all viewed the rebuilding of Jerusalem as a threat to their influence.
- Verse 19 says they jeered at them and despised them. They did anything they could do to discourage and destroy the work. We even see a veiled threat in their words: "What is this thing you are doing?"

Are you rebelling against the king?" As if to say, "We'll tell the king you are rebelling against him. Then your work will be stopped.

- Favor does not exempt us from trials or trouble, but it does motivate us to persevere through it all!

Look at Nehemiah's response in verse 20. "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."

Conclusion:

God is his confidence. He looks to him and him alone.

What about us?

Jesus, the favored Son of God, is our access point to the favor of God.

When we place faith in Christ - FAVOR!

As we abide in Christ - FAVOR.

How is God leading you to respond? Do you need desperate prayer to drive you to bold action? Are you waiting for some closed doors to swing wide open? Have you received a compelling invitation that moves you to strong collaboration?

"Come, let us build."

"Come, let us build!" Let us strengthen our hands for the good work before us!