

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Preparation for a Tough Job

Nehemiah 2:1–11



LET'S BEGIN HERE

While carrying his great burden for the people and conditions in Jerusalem, Nehemiah began the tough job of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem . . . by getting on his knees in prayer. He asked God for compassion and understanding to come to the heart of King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 1:3–4, 11). In the second chapter of Nehemiah, we see God's gracious answer to Nehemiah's prayer, an illustration of Proverbs 21:1, giving us insight into how we should handle a difficult boss or authority figure today.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Principle from Proverbs (Proverbs 21:1)

In the last message, one banner of truth waved high above all others: the banner of *prayer*. Nehemiah learned firsthand the power of prayer to persuade others. When he faced a boss who seemed impossibly immobile, he applied this timeless principle from Scripture.

The first half of Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD.” The word *channels* refers to canals or irrigation ditches that run in various directions from a main source of water. The writer says that the king's heart—the center of his will, intellect, and emotions, the place where all decisions are made—is under God's sovereign control. The second half of this proverb comes in the form of a declaration: “He turns it wherever He wishes.” Whether or not the person in charge is a believer, whether he or she consciously submits to the commands of God or shakes a fist in rebellion against Him, the sovereign God ultimately determines the direction in which the decisions of his or her heart will flow.

This verse from Proverbs 21 forms a perfect prologue to the drama in Nehemiah 2. Nehemiah served as the cupbearer to a dictator infamous for his rigid and stubborn will—a tough boss! The distressing news of Jerusalem's defenseless position raised in Nehemiah an urgent desire to rebuild his city's walls. He knew Artaxerxes was unlikely to give him leave. So he did the only thing he could do. He started praying.



Quotable

*Praying and
waiting go
hand in hand.
You haven't
really learned to
pray until you've
learned to wait.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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2. Nehemiah in Persia (Nehemiah 2:1–8)

Through Nehemiah's personal account, we're given front-row seats in a dramatization of Proverbs 21:1. The events of Nehemiah chapter 1 occurred in December, while the action in chapter 2 took place in the month of Nisan, or April. In between were four anguishing months of praying and waiting.

The first verses of Nehemiah 2 record what is known in narratives as an interchange—the back-and-forth conversation between two characters. Nehemiah supplemented the account of this dialogue by candidly inserting his emotional responses. In doing so, he intensified the pall of sadness hanging over the entire scene. Let's examine how the conversation unfolds.

Nehemiah's distress caught King Artaxerxes' attention. The king's observant question about his cupbearer's obvious sorrow passed through Nehemiah's heart like a dagger. With the knowledge that Artaxerxes had already prevented previous attempts at reconstruction, Nehemiah chose his next words carefully—and prayerfully.

3. Nehemiah en Route to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:9–11)

In a brief interlude before the final scene concludes this message, the setting of Nehemiah's chronicle moves more than eight hundred miles. With the king's letters and a royal escort, Nehemiah had no trouble securing passage through the gates of distant provinces (Nehemiah 2:9). God had provided far more than Nehemiah needed! He had letters from the king, officers and horsemen, resources for his journey, and even the means to procure timber for his own house! What a thrill it must have been for Nehemiah to recognize God at work as he followed God's lead. But verse 10 reveals a hint of opposition in the form of two antagonists, Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite.

For many people, an encounter with opposition immediately raises doubt about whether or not they're really following God's will. In Nehemiah's case, however, the opposition of those who despised the things of God served as an affirmation that he was doing God's will.

Nehemiah spent four months fervently praying and waiting, risked his life before Artaxerxes, and journeyed more than eight hundred miles through hostile lands. Finally, he passed along the rugged ridge leading up to Jerusalem. There, from a distance, he surveyed the rubble he would use to somehow rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.



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A CLOSER LOOK

Who's In Control?

God's sovereignty and human responsibility tug at each other in theological tension. Is God sovereign? Yes. Are people responsible to act? Yes. We can stretch to its breaking point this tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, if we try to fully comprehend the power of prayer as it relates to God's predetermined plan.

We know that in His sovereign plan, God works out all things for our good (Romans 8:28), and yet He always responds to our prayers (1 John 5:14–15). How can that be? Scripture presents a great variety of prayers that were answered—often in ways that surprise us. God answered Paul's reasonable prayer for freedom from his “thorn in the flesh” with a clear no (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). He chose to answer the misguided petition of the Israelites for a king “like all the nations” according to their will, even though the answer involved negative consequences (1 Samuel 8:19–22). In the case of Solomon, God answered his prayer for wisdom and then added blessings for which Solomon didn't even ask (2 Chronicles 1:11–12). In short, in concert with our prayers, God works in various ways to bring about His perfect will as well as our ultimate good.

How, exactly, do our own wills, responses, and choices harmonize with God's sovereign will and infinite knowledge? Such a profound mystery we may never understand, but we can still respond to this mystery by obeying Scripture's admonitions to do our part in seeking the Lord in prayer and giving Him the glory for what He accomplishes in, through, and often in spite of us!



LET'S LIVE IT

Nehemiah's preparation for a tough job surfaces four important principles for us today.

First, *changing the heart is God's specialty.*

Second, *prayer and waiting go hand in hand.*

Third, *faith is not an excuse for disorder or failure to plan.*

Fourth, *opposition often reinforces the will of God rather than hinders it.*

As you consider any difficult people in leadership over you, can you identify any manipulative technique you use—the silent treatment, flattery, or sarcasm—that you need to replace with prayer? If so, what is it?



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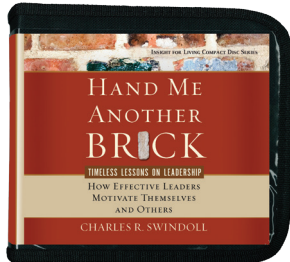
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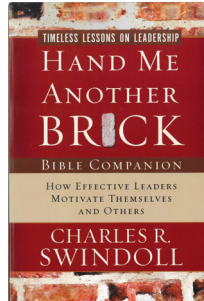
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