

ESF, Lord's day service message
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The Gracious Hand of God Nehemiah 2:1-8

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, ² so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid, ³ but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

⁴ The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵ and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it." ⁶ Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

⁷ I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? ⁸ And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.

Nehemiah faced a task impossible for him to accomplish. It was to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem while he was in captivity in Persia. Nehemiah was a slave. As a slave he was living in the palace as the king's cupbearer. To go to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall, he needed the

king's permission. But it was impossible for a slave to get the king's permission.

But one day the Persian king gave Nehemiah a chance to speak out his concern for the city of Jerusalem. And the king not only permitted Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem, but also gave him all the necessities for his travel and for the rebuilding of the city. It was a miracle that the king did such a special favor to Nehemiah.

How could this happen? Nehemiah gave the answer in one sentence: ***because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.*** Because God's gracious hand was on him, an impossible task was made possible. "The hand of the Lord" is used throughout the Scriptures to describe God's favor for us (2Kings 3:15; 2Chron. 30:12; Ezra 7:28).

You may face a task which is too difficult for you to resolve today- in your marriage, in your financial matters, in your health, and in your job. But as you see here in Nehemiah's case, if God's gracious hand is on you, everything can be turned around in favor of you. Let's see how the hand of God blesses us in the story of Nehemiah.

Love the Lord passionately

Before receiving help from the gracious hand of God, Nehemiah prayed and fasted. His prayer came from his heart for the ruined city, Jerusalem and for the suffering people in the city.

We can see that in Nehemiah's own confession in Neh. 1:3-4: *They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.*

He lived in a palace. He was a cupbearer for the king of the Persian Empire. He was in a safe and comfortable place. Then, why was he concerned about the Jews who lived hundreds of miles away? Why did he not just mind his own comfortable life in the palace? Because Nehemiah had a deep love for God and God's people. His heart was broken when he saw that the city of God laid in ruins and God's people were suffering.

His fasting and prayer came out of his passionate love for God and God's people. And God touched the heart of the king to be gracious to Nehemiah. God's gracious hand moved the king's mind to bring miraculous help to Nehemiah.

An American pastor Bob Pierce went to Korea in 1950 when thousands of soldiers and civilians were killed by the Korean war. He saw hundreds of orphaned children. There was nothing much he could do to help the orphans. While he was praying for the orphans, his heart was broken. He felt that God's heart was broken too. And he wrote down a phrase on the cover page of his bible, "*Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.*" With this passionate heart he founded an organization called "World Vision" to raise funds for the orphans. God blessed his passionate heart to save thousands of orphans during the war. After the war, God has kept using the passionate spirit of Bob Pierce in World Vision to take care of the poor, the weak and the sick around the world. Today "World Vision" operates in 97 countries through 22,500 employees with about 1 billion dollars revenue per year (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Vision_International).

If you passionately love God, your heart cannot but be broken when God's people are suffering. You have anger and tears when God's name is dishonored. Because of this passion, you cannot just sit and enjoy your life when you see God's business in ruins.

We can't have a passionate love for God by our own effort. Passion for God first comes from God to us. When God loves us, He passionately loves us. How passionately? God sacrificed His own son to deliver us from the curse of our sins. As soon as you come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He sacrificed His life to save you, God pours His passionate love into your heart. As a baby knows mom's love in his heart, a believer also knows God's passionate love given through His son.

Do you want to receive favor from God's gracious hand? Remember how passionately God has loved you. Use God's passionate love in you to serve God and to do God's business. Let your heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.

Be bold with faith in God's protection

One day Nehemiah came to the king as his cupbearer. At that time, he looked sad. And the king asked Nehemiah why he was sad. It could be either a moment of tragedy or a moment of opportunity by how Nehemiah would answer the king. Why?

In those days, showing a sad face in the king's presence could be interpreted as an insult to the king. It could be punishable by death. It was a scary moment for Nehemiah. He was afraid. But, Nehemiah boldly answered the king the reason for his sadness: *"May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire"*

After hearing the reason, the king asked Nehemiah what he needed to go back to Jerusalem and to rebuild the wall. The king's response was unbelievably generous. The king showed Nehemiah favor by allowing him to go to Jerusalem and granting him everything he requested to rebuild the wall.

If Nehemiah had feared the king, he might have been frozen by fear when the king asked him why his face looked so sad. He might have been terrified and might not have known how to answer the king. Nehemiah might have said, *“Please forgive me, king. I’m OK. I’ll not be sad again. It has nothing to do with you, I assure you.”* Then he would have missed the opportunity to receive the king’s favor.

But he didn’t cave into his fear. He overcame the fear. How? Nobody can easily overcome fear in such a moment. Of course, momentarily he was afraid when the king suddenly asked the question. But he looked up to God and believed in God’s protection. He feared God more than he feared the king. That enabled him to be bold enough to speak what was in his heart to the king.

We have to be bold to seize a good opportunity. But to be bold enough when we have to be bold, we need more than just man’s courage. We need confidence in God’s protection. To build up the confidence, we need to fear God in our daily lives. When we fear God more than we fear men, God gives us faith in His protection for us. Then with confidence in God’s protection, we can be bold always. That is what Jesus encourages us to do always in Matthew 10:28, *“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*

Believe that God has given you not the spirit of fear but the spirit of boldness. 2 Timothy 1:7 says: *“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”*

Believe that without God’s permission, even one of your very hairs cannot be taken out by any power. Believe that when you fear God, God protects you from all harm and danger. And when an opportunity comes,

take it boldly even if there is a great risk. Take the risk with faith in God's gracious hand.

There is a story of an elderly lady who always expressed her faith boldly. She was well-known in the community for her bold faith. She would often stand on her front porch and shout: "PRAISE THE LORD!" Next door to her lived an atheist and he would get so angry at her proclamations. He would shout, "There ain't no Lord!!" Hard times set in on the lady, and so she prayed to God for some assistance. She stood on her porch and shouted "Praise the Lord. God I need food! I am having a hard time. Please Lord, send me some groceries!"

The next morning the lady went out on her porch and found a large bag of groceries, she shouted, "Praise the Lord." The neighbor jumped from behind a bush and said, "Aha! I told you there was no God. I bought those groceries, God didn't." The lady started jumping up and down and clapping her hands and said, "Praise the Lord. He not only sent me groceries, but He made the devil pay for them. "

In all circumstances, fear God rather than man. Build up your confidence in God's protection. Be bold with faith in God's protection. And God will be with you with His gracious hand. God will turn a difficult circumstance into a great opportunity to accomplish your dream.

Do your best to prepare well

While Nehemiah was praying and waiting for God's answer, he was constantly thinking about the project of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. He was thinking of a way to go back to Jerusalem from the capital city of Persia. Also he tried to figure out what were the things he needed if he did have an opportunity to go back to Jerusalem. Of course, such an opportunity seemed to be impossible. But he still prepared for the opportunity.

And when the opportunity came, he would be ready to seize the opportunity. How do we know that? Look at Nehemiah's replies to the king's questions regarding his concern for Jerusalem. *If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?* (verses 7-8)

His answer was not long, but it includes all necessary plans to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall. If he had not prepared for the opportunity, he would not have been able to reply that way. But because he had been thinking about it beforehand and carefully prepared for it, he was able to present a good plan which made sense to the king at the right moment.

Effective prayer goes together with preparation. If we have a dream to accomplish something, we must not only pray for an opportunity but also prepare for it. In praying, we must seek, think, plan and study hard.

Proverbs 21:4 says, *The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.* This word encourages us to prepare well for an opportunity while we pray. God's favor is upon those who do their best to prepare well for accomplishing their dream.

In 1976, Indiana University's basketball team was undefeated throughout the regular season and captured the NCAA National Championship. Controversial and colorful coach Bobby Knight led them to that championship. Shortly afterwards, Coach Knight was interviewed on the television show "60 Minutes." The commentator asked him, "Why is it, Bobby, that your basketball teams at Indiana are always so successful? Is it the will to succeed?"

"The will to succeed is important," replied Bobby Knight, "but I'll tell you what's more important it's the will to prepare. It's the will to go out there every day training and building those muscles and sharpening those skills!"

Whether we are talking about sports, or education or science or business or any worthwhile endeavor in life, success goes to the person who has the will to prepare!

Do you have a dream? Are you seeking a good opportunity to accomplish the dream? Then don't just wait passively until an opportunity comes to you. If you are not prepared, you cannot utilize an opportunity when it comes to you. Prepare yourself to be ready to seize the opportunity. Think diligently, plan wisely, learn and study hard to prepare yourself for seizing an opportunity when it comes to you by God's grace.