

Planning Like Nehemiah

We're looking at Nehemiah to find out why he was so effective and productive in his life. The first thing that he did was pray. His next step was planning. You pray and then you plan. Nehemiah 2:1-9 reveals that Nehemiah was a master planner. We're going to look at the six things he did. But first, let's go over three reasons why you ought to plan.

Why Plan? **1. To Follow God's Example.** In Jeremiah 29:11 God told the exiles in Babylon, *"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."* Psalm 40:5 says, *"O Lord my God, you have performed many wonders for us. Your plans for us are too numerous to list."* God plans. Isaiah 25:1 says, *"O Lord, I will honor and praise your name, for you are my God. You do such wonderful things! You planned them long ago, and now you have accomplished them."* God has long-term plans. That's a pretty good indication that it's something we'd do well doing too.

2. To Be Consistent with God's Word. Proverbs 4:26 says, *"Know where you are headed, and you will stay on solid ground."* In 2 Corinthians 1:17 Paul says, *"You may be asking why I changed my plan. Do you think I make my plans carelessly? Do you think I am like people of the world who say "Yes" when they really mean "No"?"* Paul says believers work on being consistent in their plans. When they change plans, they change them for a reason. 1 Corinthians 14:40 says, *"...be sure that everything is done properly and in order."*

Now, that's not to say that any plans we make take precedence over God's plans. If our plans aren't in line with what God is doing, we're wasting time and energy. Proverbs 16:1 says, *"We can make our own plans, but the Lord gives the right answer."* James 4:15-17 says, *"What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.' Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil."*

Our plans must be based on God's word and God's purpose and be fair and caring to others. Proverbs 12:5 says, *"The plans of the godly are just; the advice of the wicked is treacherous."* And we don't plan in a vacuum - we are part of Christ's Body - the church. We need to plan in communion with one another. 1 Corinthians 12:27 says, *"All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it."* Proverbs 15:22 says, *"Plans go wrong for lack of advice; many advisers bring success."*

3. To Be More Effective. Ephesians 5:15-17 says, *"Act like people with good sense and not like fools. These are evil times, so make every minute count. Don't be stupid. Instead, find out what the Lord wants you to do."* Time management involves making the best use of opportunities and that requires planning. It's good stewardship to plan. We can't go through life without planning and be effective. Proverbs 21:5 says, *"Good planning and hard work lead to prosperity."*

So let's look at five steps in planning based on what Nehemiah did.

The first step is **1. I Take Time to Think it Out.** Nehemiah 2:1 says, *"Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence."* So it's been four months since Nehemiah learned about the problem and started to pray. He's been waiting and thinking this through. We know that he's been thinking things out because when the king asks him in verse four what he needs, Nehemiah has a list ready in his mind of exactly what would be needed. He knew what to ask for because he had been thinking it through and planning.

Howard Hendricks once said, *"Nothing is more profitable than serious thinking, and nothing is more demanding."* Believers need to take time to think, time to get away and go over things. Smart people make time for think time.

Proverbs 13:16 says, *"Wise people think before they act; fools don't—and even brag about their foolishness."* Proverbs 14:8 says, *"The prudent understand where they are going, but fools deceive themselves."* It's wise to spend time thinking about your life. Ask yourself three questions: Where am I now? Where do I want to be? How will I get there? Nehemiah was thinking it through. He was praying and he was also planning for four months. Failing to plan is planning to fail! You've got to think it through.

The next step is **2. I Get Myself Ready to Move.** When opportunity knocks, you need to be ready to open the door. Your life is full of opportunities, most of which you never even notice. There are overlooked opportunities all around us. But even when we notice them, a lot of times we're not ready for them. Verses 1 and 2 say, *"Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence. So the king asked me, 'Why are you looking so sad? You don't look sick to me. You must be deeply troubled.'" This is the moment of opportunity for Nehemiah.*

He's been praying about this. He's been praying for four months that the king would be receptive. He's thought things through and he knows what needs to be done and what needs to happen to allow it to be done. Now the king gives him an opportunity to state his case. Because he had prayed and planned he was ready with the answer.

He had a burden and that became obvious to the king and finally the king says, "What's wrong, Nehemiah?" Notice Nehemiah says *"I was afraid."* He was genuinely scared. In those days it could be a capital crime to be sad before the king. Kings didn't want any downers. If you frowned in the presence of the king you could get your head cut off. Notice it says, *"I had never before appeared sad in his presence."* Nehemiah is taking a real risk here. He's gambling his life.

Not only that, but Nehemiah is about to take an even bigger gamble – He's going to ask permission for a leave of absence. In those days if the king did not like your request that meant at least the end of your career, often the end of your freedom, and quite possibly the end of your life. No wonder Nehemiah was frightened. On top of that he was going to ask permission to go rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the king himself had put out a proclamation that the walls could not be rebuilt! He has reason to be afraid.

Here's an important principle for believers: Faithful believers move ahead in spite of their fears. This is true for all believers but it's particularly true for Christian leaders. There is a myth that leaders are never afraid. Courage doesn't involve having no fear. Courage is moving ahead in spite of your fear. Notice what Nehemiah did with his fear. The king said to him, "What do you want? You're upset obviously." In verse 4 it says Nehemiah prayed. He makes a quick prayer. This isn't the four months of prayer; he's already done that. This is a silent, quick, on the spot prayer. "God, give me wisdom. Help me know what to say."

So the king asked *"Why are you looking so sad?"* He answered the king in verse 3, *"Long live the king! How can I not be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."* He chooses his words very carefully; he assures the king of his loyalty, *"Long live the king!"* Remember, this guy is also the king's bodyguard. Then Nehemiah appeals to the respect for ancestors that was a main characteristic of that particular culture, *"...the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins."* These guys were very concerned with taking care of ancestral graves. The king can understand this as a reason for sadness and his response was, *"Well, how can I help you?"*

Nehemiah's answer shows just how much thinking and planning that he had been doing.

The next step is, **3. I Declare and Establish Specific Goals** - Verse 5 says, *"With a prayer to the God of heaven, I replied, 'If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried.'"* Nehemiah gets specific here. He establishes a goal. He wants to rebuild the wall.

Goal setting is the next step in planning. You have to have a target. If you aim at nothing, you'll probably hit it. Ask what do I want to be and what do I want to accomplish? Those are the questions to ask in establishing goals.

There are two common errors we make in goal setting: We set our goals too low and we try to accomplish them too quickly. Set big goals, make big plans - so big that God has to bail you out! It honors God to be a big planner. Nehemiah said, I want to go rebuild a wall around a whole city. He'd never built a wall. He was a cupbearer. He had a big goal.

Then, **4. I Set Out the Timetable** - First prayer, then think it through and prepare for the opportunities. People sometimes say things like, "That guy has all the luck. He gets all the breaks." I've found that the more you plan, the luckier you seem to get.

Verse 6 *"The king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked, 'How long will you be gone? When will you return?' After I told him how long I would be gone, the king agreed to my request"* He set out the timeline for the project.

A goal must have a timeline. If your goal doesn't have a timeline, it's not really a goal yet - it's speculation; it's something maybe you'd like to do, but haven't really thought through far enough yet. This is the scheduling part of planning. You know what you want to do and then you need to know when you want to do it and how long it will take.

Nehemiah 5:14 tells us that Nehemiah actually did come back twelve years later. Nehemiah must have been very popular with this king. The king didn't want him to leave, but allowed him to take on a long term project. That shows just how much the king liked and valued Nehemiah.

The next step is, **5. I Plan for Needs, Costs and Contingencies** - He's asked for permission, now he's trying to deal with what he needs to begin the project and with contingencies; possible problems. Verses 7 and 8 say, "I also said to the king, *"If it please the king, let me have letters addressed to the governors of the province west of the Euphrates River, instructing them to let me travel safely through their territories on my way to Judah. And please give me a letter addressed to Asaph, the manager of the king's forest, instructing him to give me timber. I will need it to make beams for the gates of the Temple fortress, for the city walls, and for a house for myself."* And the king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on me."

It's about a 900 mile journey between there and Jerusalem. He's got to go through a lot of provinces. You didn't just travel freely in those days. You had to go through proper procedures. Nehemiah wanted letters of authority so he'd have clear sailing and no problems in traveling.

That demonstrates again that Nehemiah had thought it out. Remember he's just asked here on the spot, "What do you want?" He obviously had already thought it through. He was ready to say what he needed.

There are questions to ask yourself in your own planning. You have to anticipate needs; you have to anticipate problems: What is necessary? What could hold me back? What are the problems? What could go wrong? Because if anything can go wrong, it probably will.

This is one of the differences between managing and leading: Managers focus on solving today's problems, leaders focus on solving tomorrow's problems. Both are absolutely essential to any organization, family, business - you need both managers and leaders. Managers focus on day to day details The task of leadership, is to anticipate what no one is even thinking about yet.

Years ago the leaders of this church planned out where we would be going as a congregation in general. To go along with that I began working out where I'd be going with my messages and how that would match up with what we needed to do and how we would need to change. I was thinking about this sermon series three years ago. I was praying about what to preach and listening to God. After prayer and study I outlined this entire series in general two years ago because I was anticipating we would eventually need it. Originally I planned to preach this series next year, but it became clear it needed to be preached at this point. A leader must think further in advance so that when you get there, you're already ready to go and know how you're going to deal with things.

Proverbs 22:3 says, *"A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences."* One law of life is that it's always easier to get in than get out. It's easier to get into debt than to get out of debt. It's easier to fill up your schedule than to eliminate things. Part of planning is to anticipate problems in advance and plan for them.

Nehemiah also gave the king a list of needed supplies, asked for protection, and asked the king to fund the whole thing. He asks for lumber to build three things: beams for the city gates, lumber for the city walls, lumber for his own house. Remember, Nehemiah is not a contractor. He's never built anything. But, when the opportunity arises he rattles off exactly what's needed. He had planned.

How did Nehemiah know what to ask for? Evidently he had calculated the cost. He had learned enough to know what he was doing. He even knew the name of the foreman.

God has wonderful opportunities for you but you have to be prepared if you're going to take advantage of them when they come. Nehemiah planned so well, he knew exactly what to ask for. He had calculated the cost.

In Luke 14:28 Jesus says, *"If one of you is planning to build a tower, he sits down first and figures out what it will cost to see if he has enough money to finish the job."* Jesus advocates counting the cost.

Nehemiah's taking quite a risk by asking all of this from a pagan king. He lays out all of his requests very clearly and trusts the Lord. This is a life or death situation and, hallelujah, the king says, OK. He had permission to go. Now if most of us had gotten that from the king, we would have breathed a sigh of relief and gotten out of there. We wouldn't have dared ask anything more. But Nehemiah hangs in there and asks the king to pay for it by taking the timber from his own forest.

Effective believers are willing to ask others for assistance. You have to learn to ask for help. No believer or leader can do it on their own. You don't know what people will say yes or no to. Let people say yes or no for themselves.

It does take real boldness to do the sort of thing that Nehemiah did: ask a pagan king for a favor who has life and death power in his hands. It was risky business. But because he had prayed and planned for four months his faith

was strong enough so he could keep pushing it, even though he was probably standing there with his knees shaking.

The wisest risks are those taken after prayer and planning.

Nehemiah didn't try to manipulate the king. He was honest: He didn't tell a sob story or try to trick the king. He didn't play games. He prayed to God about him. When you have to deal with someone about a project, don't manipulate them, don't play games. Just talk to God about them. The Lord can turn hearts around. Let God change the heart.

In verse 8, after asking all of these things, Nehemiah concludes: *"And the king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on me."* Notice Nehemiah gives the credit to God. Remember this is autobiographical and Nehemiah could have said, "Look at what my planning did." "Look at what my effort did." But he knew God was behind it all. Proverbs 16:9 says, *"We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps."* Nehemiah knew it was not due to his own efforts. But if Nehemiah hadn't prayed and planned and set this up, it wouldn't have happened at this point.

The story continues in verse 9 *"When I came to the governors of the province west of the Euphrates River, I delivered the king's letters to them. The king, I should add, had sent along army officers and horsemen to protect me."* The king sends a military escort. Nehemiah didn't even ask for that. He got more than he asked for. In Ephesians 3:20 Paul affirms that when he says, *"Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think."*

Nehemiah got more than he asked for.

Nehemiah was sensitive and available. He prayed devotedly. The burden he had for other people was translated into a vision. Persistent prayer changes a burden into a vision. When a person gets a real vision, watch out! God goes to bat big time for a person who has a vision from God.

This chapter is a beautiful example of the harmony that takes place between God's part and our part in accomplishing things on earth. We pray to God for the circumstances that are out of our control. Then we plan for all the things that are under our control. It's not one or the other. It's both. God's part and my part. It's prayer, leaning on God, and planning, doing the best I can. Prayer and planning go together.

Because Nehemiah had done his homework, when the opportunity arose he was ready.

Let's apply it to your life. Do you really want to grow spiritually? Do you want to accomplish things? What plans have you made for that? Do you have a plan to read through the Bible? Do you have a plan to set aside a certain time everyday for prayer? Do you have a plan to talk to that person you know about the Lord? Do you have a plan to invite that person over to dinner at your house, get to know them and then invite them to church? Have you planned it or are you just hoping it will spontaneously happen? Very few things simply happen spontaneously. You need a plan. A plan for witnessing. A plan for Bible reading. A plan for prayer. A plan for all of these different things in your life.

Are the plans you have ones that you just think up and then ask God to bless? Or are you getting your plans from the Lord? How do you know the difference? If you're getting your plans from the Lord they'll be big enough for God to fit in them. Someone said: "Make no small plans for they have not the power to move the souls of men." Whatever your plans, make them big enough so that they show off God to the world - that God is a great God!