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NEHEMIAH 2:1-10

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

[PRAYER] Lord, we imagine your throne room being just surrounded by angels and singing holy, holy, holy, drawing attention to your glory and your power. Just your revelation of yourself as God Almighty. Lord, we know that because of your sovereignty that you are Lord over everything. You are in control. Lord, we're drawn to trust you and sometimes we find that to be a challenge. We just want to be reminded about how great and how big you are. And even in the immensity of your greatness and your power and your strength that you are caring and you know every detail about us. Lord, give us the ability to trust you this morning. I pray for those that are coming with some hurts in their lives that need some care, that you would fill in those special crevices of pain in their lives with who you are and the strength that you provide. I pray for our sister Dolores who has cancer who's been moved to hospice in hospice care. I pray that you would be comforting her this morning, caring for her heart. Lord, I thank you for the young people that are here today and I ask that you'd speak to them and teach them. We ask that you would give them an experience with you today. Lord, as we open your word we ask that you'd teach us from it. Help us to apply it to our lives this week. In Jesus' name, amen.

We like to study the book of Nehemiah because of the man Nehemiah, the man behind the book. In fact you can tell as you're reading the book that he's writing it himself. He's uses the word 'I'. "This is what I did" and so on. So we're getting the journal essentially or at least the biography of Nehemiah here as he's going through this experience.

Now one of the reasons we like to look at Nehemiah is because he was successful. He rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. But I think the thing that helped me this week or the thing that struck me in my own personal life that might be helpful for all of us is to recognize that success is not outcome based. Nehemiah was not successful because he built the walls of Jerusalem. He was successful already and then given the opportunity to build the walls of Jerusalem.

What is success? then becomes an important question. Or how are we going to move to the next level of our personal development? I think we all got to be asking that question. Where are we going next? How can we move forward? I would suggest if we're going to develop a measure of success and we're going to say, "Am I successful today," I think we can do that. Were you successful yesterday? I think you're going to answer these questions. If you're going to be successful, you're going to say first of all, have I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior? That's your first step to accept Christ, to make Him your Lord, to become a Christ follower. But then to ask the question, am I growing?

So if you look at yesterday, can you say, “Yeah, yesterday I was successful because yesterday I managed that situation okay,” or “I allowed God to work in my life this way.” Or maybe you weren’t successful yesterday. You blew it. The beautiful thing about God is that He offers us forgiveness. So if yesterday wasn’t too good of a day for you and you really blew it, then you can embrace the forgiveness of God because today is a new day and with God His mercies are new every morning.

I just want to suggest that success is not one of those things that’s outcome based. I think we tend to think it is. When you’re a young person you think, “Boy, I’ve got to get a good grip on this test,” or “I’ve got to get a good grade on that paper,” or “I want to get a good grade in this class or I want to get good grades period so that I can get into the right college.” “I’ll be successful if I can get out of high school and I can get into the right college or I can get into the military. If I can do that, then I’ve been successful.” Or “once I get there then I’ve got to get into the right job or I’ve got to earn enough money.” And pretty soon we start pushing off this measure of success that’s very illusive and it’s very future-oriented. So we have a hard time evaluating whether I was successful today.

I think God wants us to live in the moment. That doesn’t mean we don’t plan for the future, but we have to look at today. Am I doing what God wants me to do today? Am I being successful in this understanding of who God is? Am I growing? Am I growing in the various qualities that God wants me to grow in? We’re going to see today that Nehemiah’s success doesn’t happen because of the walls.

But I’m going to take a look at his kind of diary here as an example about himself. He’s talking about himself in chapter 2 in the story. This is the fun part of the story where it kind of unfolds and God does some amazing things. As He does, we’re going to see that Nehemiah already had several qualities of success.

If you think about the guy, here’s Nehemiah, he’s grown up, and somehow he’s a slave, he’s a servant in Persia, he’s a Jewish guy, but he’s earned himself the rank of a high ranking official, a cupbearer to the king. A cupbearer is not just walking around with a cup, although that is part of his job. He was like a governor, someone who was a righthand man to the king himself. In order to get to that position he had to have been doing something, growing in some areas. I think we’re going to see some of that in his own response today as he’s telling the story. So keep that in mind as we read the story today from Nehemiah 2.

Would you stand with me as I read this passage? Nehemiah 2:1-10.

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, 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, 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?”

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 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."

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.

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? 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. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

And then a preview of where we're going in the future here because of the opposition. *When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.*

Would you please be seated.

I'm sure you already noticed this, but notice in the passage that the verse that's got to be the key verse in this whole passage is this: *And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.* This is this factor in his life that I think we want to be more aware of in our lives. I'm sure there's times in your life where you've said wow, here I am. God has brought me here. It's only by the grace of God that I'm here. That God shines His light of favor on us and we have the privilege to be where we are. If you want to see God's hand of favor, read the prayer wall and see some of those things that's listed on there where God has answered prayers. It's only by this favor of God, this gracious hand of God was on me, he says.

See when you've trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, He has His gracious hand on you and He's guiding you through life. There's this confidence we have. There's this factor in our lives that others can't see. You don't have to be educated. You don't have to be rich. You don't have to be good looking. You don't have to have other things that maybe other people have. What you want is this favor of God. *The gracious hand of God was on me.* We're going to see how this gracious hand of God works out the details of life. So when you see that in your life, you just want to thank the Lord for what He's done and recognize that you have confidence. You can have confidence in our life that God is working. It's this gracious hand that's maneuvering the situation. We enjoy watching that happen. It's a special thing.

I want to talk about some of the character qualities that we see in Nehemiah's life that really helped him to move to the next level in his life. So how are you going to move forward in your life? How are you going to evaluate was today a good day? Was I successful today? When you

put your head on the pillow at night, how are you going to be evaluating that? I think this idea of growing in our walk in the Lord, growing in character, becoming this new person is all a part of what God does and He does it on a daily basis.

So I want to share with you some ideas from this passage. The first one is we need to be patient, wait for God's timing. I think we can ask ourselves yesterday, was I patient yesterday? Or is that an area where God is stretching me a little bit more and that's why He's put me in this situation today or tomorrow so that I can grow in this area of patience? Why do I say patience?

Let's just look back at the passage. You might not catch this right away, but let me show you why I say this. In the first verse notice that the story is taking place right now in this month of Nisan, which is the first month of the year. But if you were to go back in your Bibles, if you look back to the last chapter, chapter 1, you'll see that it tells us that the story starts when Hanani and his friends come to Persia from Jerusalem. They tell the story. It took place in Kislev, which is the ninth month. That means there's four months from the time Nehemiah heard the story of the walls being broken down and the gates being burned and his people being disgraced. Four months from hearing that news until the time when this takes place.

I don't think it's because Nehemiah delayed acting. I think he's ready. He's ready for what needs to take place, but he has to wait for the timing, the right timing of God. It's hard to wait sometimes because there's some people who just say whatever they think, there's no filter on their mouth, there's no timing, there's no patience, their no godliness when it comes to time. So they're just out there. But I think it's hard to wait. Sometimes it's just waiting for something to happen. We're waiting for this thing. We don't like to wait. So the waiting becomes difficult. And I think there's godliness in the timing.

That's what patience is. It's the use of time in a godly way. Sometimes it's waiting for something. But sometimes it's even more innocuous I think. Sometimes it's waiting or putting up with. Patience – we sometimes use that word as putting up with something that's annoying. So sometimes a young person might feel like my mom is trying to get me to do something when I'm involved in something already, and there's a patience that they're developing in the midst of that experience. Or you're waiting for something in the job field, waiting for something to happen, and there's this patience you're required to have. Just waiting. There's other times when you're in the job already and you're working with annoying people. So patience is required.

So there's this patience that Nehemiah has where he's waiting for the right timing in order to do what he needs to do, to be able to share this message with the king. It's a pretty important message that he's going to share and patience becomes one of the qualities that marks Nehemiah in his leadership wisdom in the midst of the challenge.

How was your patience yesterday? Well you've got a new day today. How was your patience today? I just think we can measure our success a little more tangibly when we start looking at particular qualities that mark that. That's one of the ones that we see here with Nehemiah.

As the story continue it says – *when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king.* Now his job as the cupbearer was to be the food tester. If someone was going to poison the

king, the cup bearer would die first (ideally, if you're the king and you would not die). So his job was to take the food and test it.

It's also important that anybody around the king, especially someone who is his righthand man like this, be happy. Nobody likes to be around complainers and whiners. So he had a job to do and that was to be pleasant, to communicate, that he's adding energy to the environment just by being pleasant. He can't be sad. But he's got this weight on his heart and he is sad about what's going on. So he's got this thing going on inside of his heart. At the same time he's got this responsibility to be out there and to be pleasant in front of the king.

I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill?" The other reason you wouldn't want to have a downcast face is because maybe you're sick or maybe you've been poisoned and the king's saying, "Hey, what's going on here? What's happening here?" So there's no sadness in the presence of the king. *So the king asked, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."* We're going to see that his heart is going to be revealed in a moment, but it's already starting to be revealed in his countenance.

Notice the very next statement. *I was very much afraid.* I paused here in my reading because here's a guy who's successful, he's being successful, but he was afraid. I don't think that courage is absence of fear. I think courage is the ability to overcome those fears, to have the internal strength to be able to do this. God has His gracious hand here on Nehemiah. Nehemiah's aware of what's going on and he's trusting God and he's afraid. I think he's afraid because now is the moment he's been waiting for.

It's like when you're sitting there out in the waiting room and the new employer calls you into the office. There's this sense of "oh I'm afraid. I'm coming in there." Or it's like you're talking to someone about Jesus, or you're not talking to someone about Jesus and they ask you a question. "Aren't you a Christian?" and you immediately go, "Oh whoa. Yes. This is the moment I've been waiting for." I think that's why he's a little bit afraid. It's the butterflies in your stomach before you get up on stage, or you turn in that report, or you go in and meet with the doctor or whomever it is. There's this *I was afraid*, but it didn't limit him. I think we have a tendency sometimes to allow our fears to limit us.

So I see another principle in Nehemiah that I admire that I want to grow in and that is that he had courage to overcome his fears. Fear has this ability to limit us. If you just think about what you're afraid of or what you're anxious about then it starts to reveal some things that may be limiting for you, hindering for you in going forward. If we want to move forward in life, we have to be able to deal with our fears. We've got to be able to allow God to use His gracious hand to maneuver us into the right place. So being able to overcome those fears is a strategic part of the process.

"I was very much afraid, he said in verse 2, but (in verse 3) I said to the king. So he continued with this courage to go ahead and speak. And notice what he's going to do. He's going to pour out his heart to the king. He says – *"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?” This is a personal issue. This is an issue that doesn’t really apply to the king, but he’s pouring out his heart to the king and he’s willing to share his heart.

In fact I would suggest that that’s another mark of Nehemiah’s success here. All of these marks of success prepared Nehemiah to be in a position where opportunity would be met with that character that he had with that success. He was willing to share his heart.

It's hard sometimes, isn't it, to share our heart? To share your heart with someone and say, “You know what, I’m just feeling uncomfortable about the way that we’re relating. I’d like to talk about that.” That’s risky. “Hey, I just to talk to you about something important.” You know someone who’s going down the wrong path or getting themselves in trouble. They’re on that path that is leading to destruction that Jesus talks about. They don’t even realize it. To go in the wrong direction and you share your heart with them and you say, “Let me just tell you, I’m concerned about you. I ‘m concerned about where you’re going, what’s happening inside of you. I’m concerned.” Just being willing to share your heart is risky. Recognizing you made a mistake and saying, “Hey, I just want to share my heart with you” takes a lot of risk. It's not easy to do that.

Nehemiah says I just want to share my heart. There’s something about vulnerability, transparency that’s not easy. But it is a mark of someone who’s positioned well, successful, as it were in Nehemiah’s case, for the opportunity to do something really big. He’s going to go and he’s going to get all the things he needs to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem a thousand miles away. It’s an amazing thing that happens here. It doesn’t happen just because of an accident. It happens because something significant is going on in the life of Nehemiah already. He’s ready for this and the opportunity presents itself and God’s gracious hand is moving and it starts to move forward.

We have to be willing to share our hearts. I encourage you young people, share your hearts with your parents. Sometimes young people feel like they’ve got to keep it closed. I can’t really share what’s going on inside of me. You want to share your heart. That takes courage to be transparent and open. I would encourage parents to share their hearts with their kids, mates to share with each other. That we’re sharing our hearts in a way that’s saying yes, I just want you to know a little bit more about my heart and I’m thinking what’s important to me.

He has no problem doing that. He’s asked the question by the king and he just shares. He says, “Why wouldn’t my heart be sad when my people are in such struggle in their lives?”

And so *the king said to me*, “*What is it you want?*” It’s like whoa. Nehemiah must have been really pleased at this point. “What do you want?”

I really like this answer. It says – *Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king.* This is a different kind of prayer than the one we saw in chapter 1 where he’s praying and fasting and weeping before the Lord. This has got to be one of those arrow prayers because he’s right in the midst of what’s going on. He’s going, “Lord, help me with this.” It’s that kind of prayer you pray before a test and you go, “Lord, please help me as I take this test,” or “I’m going into

disappointment. Lord, please help me with this.” “Lord, I’m facing a challenge in this situation. Lord, I’m asking for your grace here. Would you help me?”

So I called it this. As I looked at his response there's a practical dependency on God. It's not just a Sunday-only kind of faith. Here's a guy who lived with God every day. That when a challenge posed itself he shot up a prayer to the Lord and took a step forward. Wow. I just like that interactive daily dependency that's demonstrated in Nehemiah's life.

I just think we need more of that. More interactive time with God in the midst of the challenge I'm facing. You've got to be able to see the need. Lord, this is one of those times where I need your gracious hand of God to move. I need your help. It's not about me being successful and it's not all about me. It's about the gracious hand of God going forward.

So Nehemiah, who's interested in building character and growing in his own understanding of God and allowing God to work in his life, he's doing what's right and he's trusting God at the same time. There's a careful balance there that I really enjoy seeing in this passage. So when I saw that I go whoa, that's a cool observation. There's a daily practical dependency on God.

I think for most of us that means you're stepping out of bed in the morning and you're saying, “God, help me get out of bed,” and then we're trying to move forward to do the right thing as we face the various challenges of the day. It's just a walk in the Lord that's very special.

Then the last thing we see (and I think this is one of the things that's noted about Nehemiah historically) is that he was a planner. He was an organizer. He was strategic. I'm going to read about all his plans in just a moment to you.

But you know there's some people who when they look at planning think that somehow it's outside of spirituality. That we should just let the Holy Spirit move in our lives. That spontaneity is a form of godliness that excludes planning. Now I do believe that sometimes we can plan God right outside of our lives. We can push Him away by our organization and our planning, so we couldn't hear God speak if we wanted to because of our planning. But there's another kind of planning that says, “God, I'm laying out the plans here, I'm being sensitive to you, allowing you to speak into my life and my heart.” Lord, I want to plan to go to college. I want a plan to change jobs. I want a plan to buy a car. Lord, I'm going to start laying out the plans for these things, but I just want to be sensitive to you and what you're doing.

It's very clear here that Nehemiah is not coming up with these things on the spur of the moment. As we read the story I think you'll be impressed by his well-thought out answer. It seems like for four months he had been thinking about this, praying about it, dreaming about it, and now he's got a plan and he's just waiting for the door to open. The door opens and he's going yes, and the king says, “What do you want?” So he comes up, here's the things he wants.

It says – 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.

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?” It’s about 1,000 miles from Susa the capital or the stronghold there in Persia all the way to Jerusalem. 1,000 miles. You’ve got the whole Tigris-Euphrates River basin there that he’s got to cross. There are groups of people, little kingdoms of people that would often protect the trade routes. They would stop people, they would tax them if you would stay. There were bandits along the way. There are all kinds of things. So what he’s asking for is letters that he can take that say I’m going on behalf of the king or I’m going with the king’s authority, at least.

So there's these letters of commendation that he’s asking for for *“safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to (do three things) make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?”* So he’s asking for the donation.

So what he’s basically saying to the king: “And king, by the way I don’t have money to do what I want to do. So I’m asking you to finance this for me. I’m asking you to provide all of the supplies that I need in order to do this work.” He obviously had thought about it. How am I going to get the supplies for this? How am I going to get there?

And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. Oh that’s so fun, isn’t it? That’s what we call an answer to prayer. That’s why we write things on the prayer wall or that’s why we share answers to prayers with others because it’s just an encouragement to see the gracious hand of God at work in our lives.

See I think if you want to see the gracious hand of work at work in your life, you’ve got to be willing to ask Him for things. You have to be willing to trust Him. I think as a young person if you get up in the morning and you say, “God, how can I be used of you today?” He will answer that prayer and He will show you someone who’s hurting, He will show you something that needs to be done. You’ll be contributing to the world instead of just sucking energy out. You’ll be looking for ways to be helpful because you’re coming with this attitude of God’s gracious hand is upon me and God wants to do this work in and through my life.

As I finished this study this week and was pondering what to share with you, I was impressed with the reminder that life is not only in the destination, it’s in the journey. It's not only about where I’m going five years from now or ten years. You can have a five-year plan, a three-year plan, one-year plan, whatever it is. It’s not just about the destination, it’s in the journey. God often wants me to look at my life today and say, am I fitting in with the gracious hand of God today? What is God doing in my life right now? Because then the situations that I live in, the annoying brother or the people at work that I’m dealing with or the financial challenge of the health challenges that I’m facing today are about my own success today.

Are you successful today? It comes by answering two questions. One is have I trusted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior? And second it answers the question, am I growing? Am I responding to life situations today in a way that are pleasing to the Lord, growing character, revealing my heart, those kinds of things. It's about growth. God is doing some powerful things or wants to do things in our lives. The question is, will we allow Him to do that? His gracious

hand is waiting to guide us and lead us, we just have to be ready and willing to allow Him to do that.

Let's stand and pray together. Young people, after I pray we're going to dismiss you. Okay?

[PRAYER} Heavenly Father, I just ask that you would work in each of our hearts in this moment now as we get ready to sing these songs, or as the young people go out and they share with each other that you would be impressing on our hearts something that we can use now. Lord, help us to be able to address the failures that we've experienced in our lives in a way that puts them in the past and allow us to be successful today and trust you today for the grace that you have for us today. We ask that you'd bless us. We ask for that blessing to come on our lives, but we realize that that means that we fit into your plans and follow your leadership. So Lord, grow us in your grace. We ask in Jesus' name, amen.