

## “Holy Discontent, part 2” // Nehemiah 2:1–12 // Nehemiah # 2<sup>1</sup> // Th 6:30

### Introduction

**Open your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 2!** Last week I was...

**One of the questions we all ask, if we have even the slightest belief in God, is what does God want from me personally**--does he have a special assignment for me and how do I know that I'm fulfilling it?

**How are you supposed to know what God wants from you?** ~~Over the years I've explained that many Christians embrace what I call the Cheerios myth of discerning God's will--the idea that when God has an assignment for you, he conveys it through some mystical manifestation--a miraculous sign like writing it in the clouds or spelling it out in your Cheerios. You're eating your bowl of cereal one morning when they magically spell out, "worship leader" or "missionary." But very few of us--certainly not me--has ever had anything like that. I've told you I've started at my Cheerios for years~~

---

<sup>1</sup> Sources consulted: Eric Mason, *Nehemiah for You* (London, UK: The Good Book Company, 2022); Andy Stanley, *Visioneering* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1999); Kathy Keller, "[Taking Action in Light of God's Word](#)", June 27, 2014, The Gospel Coalition's National Women's Conference; Tim Mackie, "[Books of Ezra-Nehemiah Summary: A Complete Animated Overview](#)", July 17, 2016, The Bible Project; Tim Mackie, "Ezra-Nehemiah", June 2, 2018, Seattle Area Pastors Network Conference; Trevin Wax, "[An Active Christian Live...Where God Is Unnecessary](#)", February 6, 2023, Reconstructing Faith Podcast, Season 3, Episode 4; Dr. Tony Evans, "[Nehemiah - Rebuilding a Broken Culture, Part 1](#)", June 25, 2020, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship; Dr. Tony Evans, "[Nehemiah - Rebuilding a Broken Culture, Part 2](#)", July 3, 2020, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship; Craig Groeschel, "[Do the Work. Make a Difference - The Good Work, Part 2](#)", June 9, 2019, LifeChurch; Skip Heitzig, "[Nehemiah: A Time to Build, Part 2](#)", April 13, 2005, Calvary Church. "[Determining Your Calling](#)," seminar given by J.D. Greear at SEBTS. "[Difficult, Impossible, Done](#)," message on Rev 6-7 given by J.D. Greear at Summit. And others as noted throughout.

and all they've ever spelled out is "ooooooooooooo." So, if the call of God doesn't come like that, how does it come?

Sometimes I've thought: wouldn't it be cool if we received mission assignments from God the way Tom Cruise received them in *Mission Impossible*... (Remember how that worked? Ethan Hunt is out somewhere random when he hears a phone ringing in a phone booth. And by the way, when I say that, I know if you were born after 2005, you have no idea what a phone booth is. Think a square box--like a port-a-potty--but with a phone in it. And about the same number of germs. Am I right?) When Ethan would answer the phone, he'd get instructions for some mission, ending with the words, "As always, should you or any member of your team be caught or killed, the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions... This tape will self-destruct in five seconds. Good luck, Ethan." And then the phone would start to spark and smoke. It would be pretty cool to receive an assignment that way, with your name on it. But that's not how it works.

There was actually a kind of *Mission Impossible* spin-off series a few years ago, however, a TV series called *Chuck*—anybody ever see that? I think it's actually a little closer to the biblical model. In that show, the main character, Chuck Bartowski, receives an encoded email from an old college friend who now works for the CIA. When Chuck opens the email, a series of rapidly flashing images download the CIA's secret database into Chuck's brain--with instructions about missions and targets and the whole lot. And so the whole show is him taking these implanted thoughts and living them out. While God doesn't send us any emails with flashing lights, I think there's some things in that one that are a little closer to the biblical pattern. Let me show you what I mean. Nehemiah 2:

**Vs 1: In the month of Nisan** (which comes right after Toyota and right before Chevrolet--just kidding, NIGH-san, is similar to our March), **in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I**

took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. 2 And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart."

If you were a servant in those days, whatever was going on in your personal life couldn't affect your performance before the king; he didn't want to be bothered by your menial personal problems. Nehemiah had served the king for years, and he'd never let stuff in his personal life affect his mood before the king. But now, deeply troubled by the decaying state of Jerusalem, he can't control himself. He wore his sadness on his face. So the king asked him about it.

Then I was very much afraid. (Kings had no patience for servants with problems. He'd either replace you or more likely have you killed for failing at your job.) 3 I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" 4 Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."

6 And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?"

7 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, 8 and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy."

And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

9 Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River (In other words, way out there in the boonies; think 'Alamance Campus') and I gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

10 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. Sanballat and Tobiah... you're gonna want to remember those names. These rascals are gonna feature quite a lot in the coming story. They function as Nehemiah's nemeses throughout the rest of the book.

11 So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Important verse, vs 12: Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one **what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.**

Here's why that verse is important: Unlike other prophets or divinely called leaders in Israel, as far as we can tell, Nehemiah never received a prophetic word or dream or vision from God. The closest we come to that kind of experience is here in vs 12: Nehemiah perceives a divinely-placed burden; a broken heart, for something unfulfilled in God's kingdom--a holy discontent with the situation.

In these 12 verses from Nehemiah 2 I see 5 things necessary for discerning God's call on your life. They are: **1. Burden (that's vs 12).** **2. Opportunity** (that will be **vv 1-2**, and **7-8**), **3. Preparation and Prayer** (that's **vs 4-5**); **4. Boldness** (that's **vs 5-9**); and, **5. Persistence** (that'll be **vs 10**).

Here we go:

### 1. Burden (2:12)

- As I noted: nowhere in the book of Nehemiah do we have an account of God speaking to Nehemiah. Nehemiah recognizes God's call on his life through a divinely placed burden.

- I want to suggest to you that this is the primary way God calls people today. If you're walking with him, he'll put into you a burden, a 'holy discontent', about something in the kingdom of God. He downloads part of his heart into you.
- **No one, you see--and some of you need to hear this--no one can be responsible for everything in the mission of God.** It's just too big.
  - **Early on in my Christian life**, I assumed every assignment in God's kingdom belonged to me. **I'd hear a message about** Christians' responsibility for poverty relief and assume that that was what I should give my life to; then I'd hear one on the need for overseas missions and assume that's what I was called to; then I'd hear one on the need for good discipleship or the need for apologists to defend Christ's name in the public square and I assumed that had to be me. And then I'd hear one on racial reconciliation or the needs of foster kids or restoring prisoners and I'd assume that was my life's work.
  - And, I want to be clear, Christians should care about ALL of those things I just mentioned, but there's just **no way any one person** can take on all of those things as a life calling.
- We often say at The Summit Church, **"Not everything that comes from heaven has your name on it."**
  - It may indeed come from heaven, and so you should care about it and support it, it's just not for you to FOCUS on.
  - **But, HEAR THIS: something does have your name on it.** And you've got to figure out what that is and get after it.
- You say, "Well, J.D. I don't really feel a special burden for anything." That means you've either just started walking with God, or you're not really listening, because he will definitely have something for you.
- God places on the hearts of his people burdens. He opens your eyes to some need and makes you start caring about it. He

downloads part of his heart to you. That's his call for you to get involved.

- That means: when you see something broken in the Kingdom of God, something that needs attention--your first impulse should not be to write a strongly-worded email to your pastor to ask him why the church doesn't care about this need. I'm always open to your feedback, but when people send those kinds of notes to me, I usually ask them, "Have you considered that maybe God put that burden in your heart because he's calling you to do this? A big part of my job is helping you identify what God is calling you to and encourage you in it and to equip you for it, not to do all these things for you."
- Some of the most important ministries in our church started this way. Members of our church have seen needs in our community and started ministries to prisoners and refugees or shut-ins or school-aged kids or ministries on particular campuses or in particular neighborhoods because of a divinely-placed burden.

~~Pastor Rick Warren has a really good way of helping you identify these divinely-placed burdens in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. He encourages Christians to find their "SHAPE."~~ **SHAPE:**

● ~~S: (stands for) Spiritual gifts~~

- ~~The Holy Spirit gives to all believers at least one spiritual gift. A spiritual gift is simply a divine empowerment to carry out part of God's mission. Sometimes these gifts match up with a natural ability; other times they go beyond or work in spite of your natural abilities. For example, I've known people who were really shy but incredibly effective at bringing people to Jesus—it made no sense. The Apostle Paul described himself as someone weak in preaching ability, and yet God appointed him to be the Apostolic founder of the church in the Gentile world. In situations like that, God gets even more~~

glory—because everybody recognizes that what is happening is due to God’s power, not your talent.

- This is why I referenced the show *Chuck* at the beginning. One of the ways you can figure out God’s will is by discovering the spiritual gift God has downloaded into you. C.S. Lewis gave an amazing picture of this in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It’s kind of a random scene in the book, but Lewis is using it to illustrate an important spiritual principle: Just before their battle with the White Witch and her minions, “Father Christmas” gives each of the 4 children a mysterious gift. They don’t know it at the time, but these gifts will prove essential in the coming battle. For example, in the heat of that battle, Lucy realizes that her gift, a healing ointment, must have been given to her to bind up the wounded. Peter realizes his sword is meant to lead an assault. The point Lewis was making is we perceive what God wanted *from* us by looking at what God has downloaded *to* us.

- **H: Heart** (What passions really grip you; what breaks your heart; what keeps you up at night.)
- **A: Abilities** (what you’re really good at)
- **P: Personality** (Do you prefer upfront or behind the scenes? Big picture or detail focused; people-oriented or task-oriented? God made you that way on purpose.)
- **E: Experiences:** This refers to distinct ways God has written your particular story: experiences you’ve had; heartaches you’ve gone through; even sins you’ve been forgiven of, help prepare you for your ministry. We saw this at the beginning of 2 Corinthians—in chapter 1 of that book, Paul explained God had allowed him to experience certain kinds of pain so that he could ‘comfort others with the comfort wherewith he himself had been comforted.’ God lets you walk through some valley—the valley of doubt; unmet expectations; unanswered prayers; unfair accusations—so that you can minister to others in similar circumstances.
- There are parents with prodigals who can minister to other parents in the same situation.

- Those who are suffering under despairing health diagnoses need the testimony of those who have walked through similar situations. Or bereavement.
- Maybe you’ve been through a divorce; or abandoned by a spouse; maybe you’ve struggled with an eating disorder; or maybe you lost a child to suicide or drugs. Or maybe you made a tragic mistake like getting an abortion and now you have a message for those who are walking that same bitter path—and you can show them where they can find forgiveness and healing. You can say, “I’ve been down that road! I sought the Lord there, on that road, and he heard, and he answered... that’s why I trust him, and you can, too!”
- As we often say: Your misery becomes your ministry.

**God has downloaded into each believer a *SHAPE*.** And out of that *SHAPE* you discover a calling.

## 2. Opportunity (2:1–2, 7–8)

- Nehemiah not only had a burden for Jerusalem, God gave him an opportunity to do something about it.
- I explained this when we went through chapter 1, but unbeknownst to Nehemiah, God had set this plan for rebuilding into motion long before Nehemiah ever came on the scene. Nearly 100 years before Nehemiah, through Zerubbabel, King Cyrus had authorized this building project and guaranteed funds for it. So, when Nehemiah presented this burden to Artaxerxes, the groundwork was already laid. And when Artaxerxes gave him everything he asked for, Nehemiah recognized, **vs 8**, that **“the good hand of my God was upon me.”**
- Whenever God is calling you to something, he’ll not only put a burden in your heart, he’ll give you opportunity for action.

Let me re-introduce you to one of my **favorite tools** for discerning God’s call on your life—something I’ve pulled together from things I’ve

read over the years.<sup>2</sup> We say: Knowing the will of God is found at the intersection of 3 circles: **Ability, Affinity, Opportunity**

- **Ability** means what you're good at. What natural abilities you have. What have others affirmed and called out in you? If it's a real spiritual ability, others will be able to see it. In fact, other Christians often recognize what God has gifted you at long before you do. In my own life, godly counselors began calling out my preaching and evangelism gifts long before I recognized I had them.)
- **Affinity** means what you're passionate about: what God has given you a particular burden for.
- **Opportunity** means God has given you an open door to do something about it. Sometimes you have a burden and even an ability for some task, but the door is not open, and you have to be patient to wait on God's timing. That's what Nehemiah did. He prayed about this burden for 4 months, never mentioning anything to anybody, waiting on *God* to open the door.
  - You see, when something is of God, you won't have to force the door open.
  - A friend of mine told me once: "Jesus said to one of the churches in Revelation, 'I will open a door before you that no man can shut. That means if a man is able to shut the door, the door wasn't really of God.'"<sup>3</sup> You can trust that if God has put something in your heart and wants you to do something about it, he'll open the door. What he originates, he

<sup>2</sup> I first saw a version of it in Jim Collins' book *Good to Great*. He uses it to describe how GREAT companies really find their lane. Great companies do business at the intersection of (1) what they're good at (2) what they're passionate about, and (3) what there's a market for. Then I saw Tim Keller apply it to the spiritual realm. And I figured if Tim Keller and Jim Collins are agreed on anything, it has to be settled in heaven.)

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kendrick

orchestrates! Like Nehemiah, you'll sense, **vs 8**, that "the good hand of God is upon you." And if that's not happening, don't push it.

- ~~(BTW, people sometimes ask where I get this diagram: I first saw a version of it in Jim Collins' book *Good to Great*. He uses it to describe how GREAT companies really find their lane. Great companies do business at the intersection of (1) what they're good at (2) what they're passionate about, and (3) what there's a market for. Then I saw Tim Keller apply it to the spiritual realm.<sup>4</sup> And I figured if Tim Keller and Jim Collins are agreed on anything, it has to be settled in heaven.)~~

**Look for God's calling at the intersection of these 3 circles: affinity, ability, opportunity.**

- If any one of those 3 is missing, God likely is not in it. I know people who are **passionate** about leading worship, but they **can't sing (no ability)**, and so when they say to me, "Pastor, God's given me a song for the congregation," I use my position to deny them **opportunity**, which means they can conclude, at least for right now, leading worship at the Summit is not God's will for them.
- The place to find God's will for you: **affinity, ability, opportunity.**
- **This Venn diagram is more reliable, in my opinion, than spiritual gift tests, for what it's worth.** If you're unfamiliar, spiritual gift tests are basically like personality tests where you answer a bunch of multiple choice questions and it spits out what your spiritual gifts are. Those can have a little value, but admittedly, I might be **jaded** against them because Veronica and I took one after we got married and her #1 spiritual gift came back as celibacy. And I was

<sup>4</sup> <https://x.com/timkellernyc/status/1468597238444314624?lang=en>: "The way to find your calling is to look at-- your ability, affinity, and opportunity. What are you good at (that others affirm)? What do you enjoy doing? What doors are open to you?" (Dec 8, 2021)

like, “What does that mean?” True story. So, I might be jaded, but even so, I think this is a more helpful and more full-orbed biblical paradigm for discerning God’s call on you.

Now, let me make one important observation before I move on to #3: I’ve alluded to this already, but let me make it explicit: This whole process of discernment is to be communal, meaning that you should be seeking wise, godly counsel as you discern this. This is not you and a prayer journal and one night alone in a cabin in the woods with a Bethel Worship album on repeat and then you conclude that whatever wild hair idea you have in your heart has the authority of God behind it. Please spare us that. God wants us to submit our discernment to others in the church and let them advise us on it. Proverbs says:

“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” Proverbs 12:15

“Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.” Proverbs 15:22

Please, for the love of all that is good and holy, put away this idea that because you had some warm-fuzzy feeling you now have the authority of God in all that you do. **Even the Apostle Paul didn’t operate that way.** When Paul got called into ministry, **Acts 13:2** says “...the Holy Spirit said (to the church), ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul for the work to which I have called them.’” The Holy Spirit said it to the church, not just to Paul and Barnabas. Even Paul’s calling came, in part, from people on the outside, not just hunches on the inside.

So, get wise counsel about your passions, and then submit your burdens to God and wait for a door of opportunity--an open door that no man can shut--a place where you sense “the good hand of God is upon you.”

*Burden; Opportunity; #3...*

### 3. Preparation and Prayer (2:4–5)

- Nehemiah may have been waiting for God to open the door, but he wasn’t idle. Did you notice, vs 4, the moment the king asked, Nehemiah was READY with an answer. He wasn’t like, “Oh, gosh, I wasn’t expecting this.” No, when the king asked, Nehemiah rattled off what he needed like he’d been thinking about it for months, because that’s exactly what he’d been doing.
- While waiting on God to open the door, he’d been preparing. Being patient in waiting on God to open the door doesn’t mean being idle in preparation.
  - When I sensed God first calling me into ministry, nobody wanted me to preach anywhere. I had no invitations. But I read every book on ministry I could get my hands on, and every time I listened to a sermon I’d rewrite in my notes how I would preach that passage one day. And I would preach anywhere and everywhere someone would listen--I preached in rest homes, rescue missions, prisons, sometimes to audiences of 2 and 3 people--that’s not a joke. It was awkward. I’m up there getting after it in front of an audience of 2. The point is I wasn’t idle. I was waiting on God but busy preparing.
  - Patience in waiting doesn’t mean idleness in preparation.
- The second thing Nehemiah did in his time of waiting is devote himself to prayer. **We learned in Nehemiah 1:4 that he prayed between the months of Chislev (November) and Nisan (March)**, which means he prayed for nearly 4 months before saying a word about this burden to anybody.
- And then, **vs 4**: When the king finally asked Nehemiah what he wanted to do, Nehemiah said, **“And so I prayed...”** He’d spent 4 months on his face talking to God about this, and when the moment of opportunity finally came, he one more time, very quickly, breathed out a prayer to God.

- In Nehemiah, every pivotal moment hinges on prayer. And, be encouraged, these prayers were not long, flowery, theologically rich prayers. This one in vs 4 is a breath-prayer. Nehemiah didn't have time to run to a prayer room, light some candles and pull out a theology book. He simply prayed, "God, this is your work, not mine. So make these your words, not mine. You open this door; I can't do it."
- When you have a burden for something, where do you turn? Many of us get out our notebooks and our calculators and try to figure out how to get things done. That's never how great, miraculous works of God get started. They start with people turning to God in prayer and waiting on him to do something.
- **Think about what the apostles did after being given the Great Commission.** *The Great Commission*: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." This was said to a bunch of blue collar fishermen, most of whom had never left Israel. I would argue "Never has a more important assignment been given to a less qualified group of people." So, what did they do? I can tell you what most of us would have done: we'd have pulled together a committee--a task force--gotten out a whiteboard and said: "OK, we've got to raise some money. Peter, you do that. And we've got to plan some conferences--John, that's on you. And we're gonna need some apologetics materials. Thomas, why don't you pull those together." But they didn't do any of that, did they? No, Jesus told them: "Go and do nothing but pray and wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon you." Can't you hear some of their objections? Peter's like, "Do nothing? You want us to start a movement--we've got to plan and fundraise and get others trained." But Jesus said, "No, do nothing--nothing--until my Holy Spirit moves you out, because until that happens, nothing you do will make any difference anyway. This thing--evangelizing the world--is not something you can just go and do. I have to do it through you. So, pray and wait for me to open the door." And so that's what they did. They prayed for 10 days, and then the Holy Spirit came on them, and Peter stood up, Acts 2, and preached for about 10 minutes and 3000 people got saved. I've told you nowadays we PLAN for 10 days, pray for 10 minutes and 3 people get saved.
- The pattern in Scripture; the pattern in Nehemiah, is to take the burden to God and wait for him to open the door! Nehemiah said, "I didn't force this door open; I didn't try to manipulate others into making it happen. I only talked to God, and waited on him to open the door." I'm not saying you never talk to anybody about what God puts in your heart, I'm asking you whether you're depending on God to make it happen or if you think you have to open the door.
- I read a biography in college that really impacted me, the biography of George Mueller. George Mueller was a 19th century pastor who ran a huge orphanage in England with over 300 kids. Mueller was famous for only ever taking his ministry needs to God. To the point I think he overdid it, but I think God used his example to make a point.
  - He tells several stories like this, but this is the one I most remember: One morning they had run out of supplies at the orphanage and they literally had no breakfast food—he's got 300 hungry orphans to feed and no bread or milk. The workers said, 'What do we do? We don't have anything to serve the kids.' He said, 'Set the tables in faith, and let's pray.' So they set out 300 cups and forks, and they all sat down and George Mueller stood up and thanked God for the provision, the provision that wasn't there. Well, just at that moment the baker knocked on the door and said, 'Last night we overcooked. I have 300 servings of bread here. Could you use them?' At almost the same time the local milk delivery wagon broke down right in front of their orphanage, and the milk wagon guy walked up to their front door and said, "All this milk is going to spoil. Could you use it?" George Mueller has a ton of stories like this in his autobiography--you should read it.
- When you have a God-sized dream, a divinely-placed burden, before you take it anywhere else, take it to God in prayer. Through

prayer, God opens impossible doors. Through prayer he moves King Artaxerxes to supply incredible provisions!

- **My friend Charlie Dates** told me the story of a bar owner in Mt. Vernon, TX, who was trying to build a risqué bar right next to a church there. Well, the church thought the new bar would really cause problems for their community, so they prayed publicly against the bar and held a prayer meeting that God would frustrate the bar owner's plans. Well, that same night lightning struck the new bar building and caused a ton of damage. The bar owner sued the church, claiming that the church had destroyed the bar through its prayers. The church's lawyer responded that they couldn't be held responsible for that. True story: the Texas judge appointed to decide the case said in his opening remarks that he wasn't yet sure how he was going to rule, but one thing was clear: the bar owner believed in the power of prayer and the church didn't. Let's be a church that does more than simply give lip service to prayer; let's actually believe in it.

So, while you are waiting on God to open the door, give yourself to preparation and prayer. And then, when God does open the door, respond, #4, with

#### 4. Boldness (2:5–9)

- As I've pointed out, **Vs 5**, when King Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah what he needed, Nehemiah asked for the moon. He asks for permission to quit his job, to go home to Jerusalem, for a license to build guaranteed by royal seal, and for carte blanche access to timber in the royal forest. That's quite a request for a slave!
- Vs 6, the king agreed and even went *beyond* what Nehemiah had asked. He not only gave Nehemiah all that he'd asked for, he sent along some of his army for protection, vs 9, which Nehemiah hadn't even asked for.
- **#3, prayer, and #4, boldness**, always go together. Wherever there has been labor in prayer, you'll find audacity in attempts. And

that's because prayer takes your eyes off of what you can do and puts them on what God wants to do.

- When I was writing this message, I originally thought about giving you a little sermonette here about the need to be bold in your requests and some examples of what that might look like, but instead I sensed God saying that our greater need is to give ourselves in prayer. Because, see, if we were more mighty in prayer, instinctively we'd be more bold in our requests.
- **The South Korean church**, which has experienced revival over the last 100 years in ways that very few places in Christian history, is known for its fervency of prayer. I've been in prayer meetings with some of them--a leader gives a direction for prayer and says 'let's pray,' and everybody starts praying out loud simultaneously. Steven Chan, a South Korean pastor, says, *Jesus said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer. Not a house where we get a lot of ministry done."*
- Because we're weak in prayer, we're weak in our dreams. Apart from prayer, our plans take center stage and we lose perspective on what God wants to do.
- ~~My friend Vance Pittman says that the tragedy of the American church is that we use corporate prayer now primarily as moments to change the set. The pastor says, "Let's pray," and that's so the band can move on and they can get set up for the next thing. Vance says, "The early church was known for prayer and the Word. Our churches are known for preaching and music." In the book of Acts, prayer is mentioned 26 times in 28 chapters. It's what the church did, they prayed.~~

What does God want you to do? Spend time with him and ask for it according to his power.

- **This is how you explain the history of our church, Summit!**
  - Our **Summit en Español** campus began as lay people praying about the local Hispanic community and then inviting Spanish speakers to church. Translated through headphones; I talk way

too fast for that. The same is true about our **Mandarin service** at Chapel Hill.

- An Egyptian member here, **John Messiah**, recognized that the Triangle was filled with international people from Muslim countries. So he said, “What if we were to invite them to a dinner, serve *halal* food, and share the gospel with them?” Now, that multicultural fellowship has literally hundreds of people attending.
- **We want to plant 1,000 churches by 2050**; we want to be a movement of 100,000 college students going to the nations; we want our church to be 25K people big by 2035. These are visions we believe God has given us in prayer, and we are boldly asking for them.
- **What’s he putting in your heart? It might be personal things for your family or your kids. That’s where it starts! Maybe you’d say**, for example,
  - “God is leading our family to be completely debt free, except for our mortgage, within 2 years, so we can be freer for generosity.” That’s a great place to start.
  - I’ve heard someone say this: “God is leading me to have a personal conversation about Jesus with each student in my class before I graduate.”
  - I heard one say, “God is calling me to invest a million dollars into his kingdom by the time I’m 50.”
  - For some of you young adults maybe the dream is moving together into an apartment complex to share the gospel there one apartment at a time.
  - I’ve asked God that every kid of every staff member grows up to love and follow Jesus.
- This week, I asked several of our leaders for examples from their lives, and here are some of the ones they shared:
  - God is calling me to surrender my previous plans for next steps and become part of a new church plant.

- God has been calling me to start a G4 group for families and friends who have incarcerated loved ones because I have that same experience.
- God has been calling me to share the gospel at my cancer treatment center. I spend a couple days a week getting treatment and building relationships with mostly stage 4 cancer patients. Every time before I go I pray for God to give me opportunities to share the gospel and he does.

OK, last one, and I’ll just mention this one:

### 5. Persistence (2:10)

- In vs 10, Nehemiah brings up Sanballat and Tobias, the two rascals who are going to make things really difficult for Nehemiah.
- *Why is there always a Sanballat and Tobias?* I’ve often asked this. Why couldn’t God just take them out? I don’t know, but be clear, church: the presence of a Sanballat and Tobias doesn’t mean that God’s not in something. They prove that he is.
- The Apostle Paul once said, “...a wide door for effective ministry has opened for me—yet many oppose me.” (1 Cor 16:9). “A wide door for effective ministry has opened for me **YET** many oppose me.” The presence of difficulties doesn’t prove that God’s **NOT** in something; it proves that he is.
- God leaves trouble in our path to keep our dependence on him.
- The path between your burden and its fulfillment lies through opposition. The question is whether you are going to quit.
- Even in the secular sphere, a lot of our society’s greatest accomplishments happen through perseverance! For example,
  - The [NYT tells the story](#) of a 69-year-old South Korean woman, Cha Sa-Soon, who was determined to get her driver’s license. The only problem is that she couldn’t seem to pass the license exam. Apparently it’s much harder over there. But she wouldn’t give up: she took the test repeatedly over several years. Finally, and this is not a joke (I link to the article in my notes)--on her 960th try, she passed. The NYT article

concluded by saying, a sentiment I think we can all agree with, “Perhaps Ms. Cha should content herself with simply getting the license and not endangering others on the road by actually driving.”

Even in the natural world, persistence through difficulty is what enables you to accomplish the impossible. That’s certainly true in the spiritual world. Persistence is how God tests whether we actually trust him.

We’ll explore this more in later messages, but for now I just wanted to introduce the concept to you, since Nehemiah brings it up, and I want to encourage those of you already experiencing difficulty to keep going. “A great door has been opened to you, YET there are many obstacles.” As the great missionary Hudson Taylor said, “There are three stages to every great work of God: first it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done.”

## CONCLUSION

I want to end this message by actually bringing up a Summit member who sent me a note this past week with the subject title, “Nehemiah ruined my life.” I wanted you to hear his story, because I think God may do something similar with many of you over the next few weeks.

But before I bring him up, however, one word of caution: Do not interpret Nehemiah as some kind of rah-rah pep talk about fulfilling your own dreams. This is not a Disney story; it’s not about you self-actualizing or finding your inner child and manifesting. This is a book about Kingdom dreams; Jesus-dreams.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem was not about Nehemiah’s desire to build a cool city for himself or exploring his inner architect or even restoring his homeland for nostalgic reasons. No, Nehemiah knew that God had promised to bring salvation to the world through Jerusalem--out of

Jerusalem, God had promised, would come the promised Messiah, who would bring redemption and forgiveness of sins to the whole world. Nehemiah’s dreams were about JESUS and his salvation extending to the ends of the earth. That’s the kind of dreams we’re talking about. A dream that God sent his own Son for, and a dream he invites you to pursue alongside him.

OK, Summit, put your hands together and welcome to our stage **STEVE NOBLE (4 mins)**.

- Tell the church the story you told me in your note.
- What are you doing now with this?
- Steve, last question: Why would you leave something comfortable for something risky like that, and what encouragement would you give to people to do the same?