

Good morning, and again, a very happy Mother's Day!

Last Sunday Pastor Andrew kicked off a new sermon series on the Old Testament book of Nehemiah—*Re-Visioning: Pursuing God's Purpose with Fresh Eyes*. The series designed to lead us into a season of discerning God's longer-term vision for Cornerstone.

God has been so faithful to give Cornerstone fresh vision at various strategic points throughout our 26-year history as a church.

Back in the 1990's, God gave Pastor Andrew and the original group of 35 people that planted this congregation the vision to become an intercultural church. Coming out of a Chinese church context, this group shared a deep biblical conviction that Jesus died to unite diverse peoples together into the one family of God, and that wherever possible, the local church should reflect that unity-in-diversity— and all the more so in a community as diverse as Markham. If you were part of Cornerstone in those early years, you know that sometimes this intercultural vision seemed like an impossible dream. Sometimes we even experienced resistance from others who didn't understand or appreciate that vision. It certainly didn't happen overnight, but to borrow Nehemiah's words, "the gracious hand of God"<sup>1</sup> was upon us, and now, by God's grace and power alone, people from over 40 different countries of origin are represented in this congregation.

Another time God gave us fresh vision as a church is when he planted the dream in our hearts to build a community centre style facility. The facility wouldn't just be home base for this congregation. It would be our "gift to the greater community" in Jesus' name— a "bridge" that would enable us to connect with and serve our local neighbours in any number of creative ways, affording us untold opportunities to share the love of Jesus with them. We were a small congregation when God entrusted us with the vision to build Cornerstone Centre, and over the years, it sometimes felt times like an impossible dream. It certainly didn't happen overnight— it took some 13 years for this vision to become reality— but to use Nehemiah's words again, "the gracious hand of God" was upon us, and as of this coming September, Cornerstone Centre will have been in operation for 9 years.

In 2019, God gave us fresh vision once again. This time, it came in the form of something we called "Vision 2020." With the dual purpose of making space to develop new kingdom leaders, along with making space to reach people in new context, we sensed God had envisioned us to:

- Plant a new Cornerstone campus in another community
- Launch another worship service
- Develop a leadership institute

The congregation rallied around this "Vision 2020". It was incredibly affirming and exciting. God was on the move!

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah 2:18

But those of you who were with us at the time know what happened next. In March 2020, we had to put Vision 2020 on hold indefinitely, because our full-time focus was required to navigate the church through the pandemic years.

Without a doubt, these last four years have been incredibly challenging, but to use Nehemiah's words once more, "the gracious hand of God" was upon us nonetheless, and Cornerstone grew by at least 400 people in that time span.

And now, we sense that the time has now come for us to seek a fresh iteration of God's longer-term vision for Cornerstone. It might be a re-start of the original Vision 2020, or a revised version of it. Or, it might be a new vision altogether. What is the next "big thing" God has in store for Cornerstone?

We're inviting you to a special Prayer & Re-Envisioning event on Saturday, May 25 so that together we can seek God to reveal fresh answers to that question. A purple handout has been placed on every seat; make sure to use the QR code on that sheet to sign up.

As we pursue God's purpose with fresh eyes, God's word in the book of Nehemiah provides us with a number of highly relevant principles for the journey that lies ahead of us as a church. Today, we're going to touch on four such principles that we find in Nehemiah chapter two.

At the end of the message, I'll sum things up by applying the four principles to Cornerstone as they relate to discerning and living into the longer-term vision God has in mind for us as a church. And throughout the message, I encourage you to pay attention to how God may be speaking into your personal life through these principles as well.

Would you please turn in your Bible— whether in print or digital format— to Nehemiah chapter two?

The first of the four principles for pursuing God's purpose with fresh eyes harkens back to last Sunday's message. It has to do with:

### **1. The priority of prayer.**

Last week, we learned about the background to the book of Nehemiah. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated Judah, where God's people, the Jews, were situated. The holy city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and many Jews were forcibly taken away to Babylon, where they lived in exile.

But then, about 50 years later, Persia conquered Babylon, and Cyrus, the Persian king, allowed many Jews to return to their homeland.

Nehemiah was a Jew who had been born in exile. He hadn't returned to his homeland— yet. Nonetheless, we quickly learn that he was dedicated to God and his people. His brother came from Judah to tell him of the trouble and disgrace that the people of God who lived there were enduring. The walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins, its gates burned, and in those times, the state of a city's walls and gates told the tale of the state of the city's inhabitants. Nehemiah explains that:

When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as word of this crisis reaches Nehemiah's ears, what does he do? He prays. What's your first instinct in a crisis? Is it to panic? Is it to engage in a flurry of anxious activity? God invites you to follow Nehemiah's example, and let your first response be that of prayer.

The remainder of chapter one allows us to listen in on Nehemiah's prayer, which he prayed "night and day" on behalf of God's people, according to the text.<sup>3</sup> In his prayers, he praises God for his faithfulness, confesses the sins of God's people, recites God's promises, and pleads for the rescue and restoration of Jerusalem. He also prays that God would grant him success in the presence of the king.

It's at this point that we learn that Nehemiah serves as cupbearer to Artaxerxes, king of Persia.

As cupbearer, Nehemiah would have been in charge of the royal wine cellar, and was responsible to taste the king's wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned. But more than that, a cupbearer was often a king's close companion and confidante. This brings us to the beginning of chapter two, where Nehemiah explains that:

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."

Then I was terrified, but I replied, "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."

The king asked, "Well, how can I help you?"

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."

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.<sup>4</sup>

Nehemiah approaches the king in the month of Nisan, which would have been the equivalent of April-May. From chapter 1, we know that Nehemiah first heard the troubling news about the state of Jerusalem in the month of Kislev, which would have been January. In other words, *Nehemiah had been praying about the situation for around four months before approaching Artaxerxes*. Clearly, prayer was his priority.

And when the time actually came for Nehemiah to make his big ask of the king, what did he do? He prayed yet again! Verse 4 says that, "With a prayer to the God of heaven" he asked the king to send him to Judah to rebuild the city. In addition to more prolonged times of prayer, Nehemiah shows us that we

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<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah 1:4 (NLT)

<sup>3</sup> Nehemiah 1:5-10

<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah 2:1-6 (NLT)

can lift up breath prayers to God at any point in time. What might happen if you made a habit of whispering prayers throughout the day, calling on God for the grace and help you need in any given moment?

As much as the story of Nehemiah shows us that he was a practical man, a man of action, it tells us that he was first and foremost a person of prayer. Prayer was a priority for Nehemiah, and it needs to be for us as well, at all times, and especially as we seek God's longer-term direction for Cornerstone.

Nehemiah's prayers were answered— the king agreed to his request— but both before and after that happened, he had to exercise:

## **2. The patience to wait.**

That's the second principle.

Nehemiah is known as a man of action, but we saw how he waited four months before he finally approached the king. Even though in chapter one he had prayed, God, "Please grant me success *today* by making the king favorable to me," God knew that it wasn't the right day.<sup>5</sup> In fact, well over a hundred days would come and go before the "right day" finally came. Before Nehemiah could become a man of action, he had to persist as a person of prayer, and in prayer, he gained the patience he needed to wait on God's timing.

Later in chapter 2, we see his patience again when he arrives in Jerusalem. For all his drive, Nehemiah waits three days before he takes any kind of action or even mentions the building project to anyone. Here's how he describes it:

So I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later, I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem... After dark I went out through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal's Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates... The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders— the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration.<sup>6</sup>

As a man of action, it would have been tempting for Nehemiah to waste no time and get on with the project. It would have been tempting for him to arrive in Jerusalem and immediately announce his plans to everyone. And make no mistake— when the time was right, Nehemiah both spoke and acted decisively. But his prayerful posture enabled him to patiently wait for the right time to do so.

As long as we're following God's lead, *waiting* time is never *wasted* time.

But the priority of prayer and the patience to wait do not in any way preclude the:

## **3. The importance of planning.**

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<sup>5</sup> Nehemiah 1:11

<sup>6</sup> Nehemiah 2:11-12a, 13, 16 (NLT)

This is the next principle. Let's go back to verse 12, where Nehemiah says:

I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

In his four months of praying and waiting before he approached the king, God's Spirit helped Nehemiah carefully think through plans for the grand reconstruction project. Nehemiah makes it clear that these plans are not his own. They were placed on his heart by God himself— beginning with plans for how to approach King Artaxerxes.

These verses show that Nehemiah had a plan for how to describe the needs of the city. In ancient Persian culture, the dead were revered, and one's family burial place was of tremendous importance. And so, as Old Testament scholar Raymond Brown says, we see that Nehemiah's plan when approaching the king was to speak "first about graves, and then about gates."<sup>8</sup>

If Nehemiah had led with his concern about Jerusalem's severely damaged defences, it might have alarmed the king, who earlier had issued a decree explicitly disallowing the reconstruction of Jerusalem to prevent any possibility of rebellion by its inhabitants.<sup>9</sup> There could be no rebuilding in Jerusalem unless the decree was reversed, and Nehemiah had a God-inspired plan for the best way to speak to the king about it.

As well, Nehemiah had prayed and thought about the rebuilding project long enough to visualize it in some detail. The text goes on describe how he explains his plans to the king, including how long it would take, the authorization papers and protections he would need for the hazardous 800-mile journey to Jerusalem, and precise requirements for the provision of valuable timber to rebuild the gates.<sup>10</sup>

While we must resist the temptation to be self-reliant in our planning, Nehemiah reminds us that prayerful, God-inspired planning is a vital part of any great endeavour for God.

Once in Jerusalem, Nehemiah sets out on a reconnaissance mission. He takes a few people and rides the circuit to inspect the city gates and walls.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, he can assess the extent of the damage up close, and continue to formulate his plans for this grand project. But he conducts this inspection at night, under cover of darkness. Why? This leads to our fourth principle, which has to do with:

#### **4. The inevitability of enemy resistance.**

As Nehemiah is about to arrive in Jerusalem, we read these words in chapter 2:

But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of my arrival, they were very displeased that someone had come to help the people of Israel.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Nehemiah 2:12 (NLT)

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Bible Speaks Today: Message of Nehemiah*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ezra 4:17-23

<sup>10</sup> Nehemiah 2:7-10

<sup>11</sup> Nehemiah 2:11-15

<sup>12</sup> Nehemiah 2:10 (NLT)

Part of the reason Nehemiah conducted a nighttime inspection of the city gates and walls was to avoid potential violence at the hands of these adversaries.

Sanballat and Tobiah were local Samaritan officials who governed the area just outside of Jerusalem. They were enemies of God's people and when they saw Nehemiah, armed with official papers and a military escort from the king himself, they immediately perceived him as a rival and a threat. They were all too eager to frustrate Nehemiah's plans for restoration, and we'll hear a lot more about them as the book of Nehemiah unfolds.

Later in chapter two, as the project to repair the city walls and gates is about to begin, we read:

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously. "What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" they asked. <sup>13</sup>

We see here that the list of adversaries has grown. Geshem the Arab, a powerful local chief, has now been added to the mix.

The presence of these adversaries in the book of Nehemiah points to the principle that when we attempt any great work for God, we are inevitably thrust into an arena of conflict, of enemy resistance. The enemy is always on the alert, ready to undermine or even destroy any undertaking God calls us to for the sake of his restorative mission in Jesus.

Of course, from a New Testament perspective, we understand that our real enemies are not the Sanballats, Tobiahs and Geshems of this world. As Paul tells us in Ephesians:

Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. <sup>14</sup>

Satan's greatest weapon against us is the lie. In John's gospel, Jesus says that the devil is a liar and the father of lies. <sup>15</sup> Lies have always been part of the enemy's demoralizing tactics. We see a form of this in Nehemiah 2, when the enemies scoff at Nehemiah and the people of Israel, saying, "What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" <sup>16</sup>

They were referring back to the king's previous decree against the reconstruction of Jerusalem. But that decree was now overturned, and Nehemiah and the people of Israel knew full well that God had called them to this project. Accordingly, we read these words from Nehemiah:

I replied "The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem." <sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Nehemiah 2:19 (NLT)

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 6:11-12 (NLT)

<sup>15</sup> John 8:44

<sup>16</sup> Nehemiah 2:19

<sup>17</sup> Nehemiah 2:20 (NLT)

With this, God's people summoned their courage, and rallied together as one to begin the restoration project in earnest.

## Conclusion

This morning we've surveyed four principles from Nehemiah chapter two for pursuing God's purpose with fresh eyes: *The priority of prayer, the patience to wait, the importance of planning, and the inevitability of enemy resistance.*

Did any of these principles resonate with you when it comes to your own life and walk with Jesus? How is God been speaking to you personally through these principles?

And how do these principles apply to Cornerstone as we seek God's direction for the longer-term vision of the church? Let's take 5 minutes or so to talk about that.

The title of this message is *Mission Before Comfort*, and today we've seen Nehemiah putting the mission God had given him before his own comfort again and again. God's people in Jerusalem did the same when they committed to the rebuilding project. They put mission before comfort.

Nehemiah took the risk of asking the king for permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem even though the king had previously decreed against its reconstruction. If the king hadn't looked favourably on this ridiculously bold request, Nehemiah would not have lived to tell the tale. No wonder when Nehemiah approached the king to make his big ask, he described himself as being terrified.<sup>18</sup> In following through with what God had asked him to do, Nehemiah put mission before comfort.

He also put mission before comfort by leaving his cushy job as cupbearer, to shoulder the responsibility of a massive rebuilding project.

He put mission before comfort in undertaking the long and dangerous journey from Susa to Jerusalem.

And he put mission before comfort in rallying God's people to persist in rebuilding the walls and gates in the face of enemy taunts and threats.

Today, we celebrate Mother's Day, and what do good mothers do for their children? They put mission before comfort— the mission of loving, raising and supporting their children. Few people in this world make greater personal sacrifices than mothers, and so we honour mothers today, along with all the women in our lives who have sacrificially nurtured empowered us. Amen?

Whatever God's longer-term direction for Cornerstone is— whether some form of the original "Vision 2020" or something else altogether— we know it will be connected with God's greater mission to restore this world in Jesus. Indeed, Jerusalem was meant to be a picture of the fact that in Jesus, God would one day restore the whole world and fill the earth with his presence, as his presence had once filled Jerusalem's Temple.

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<sup>18</sup> Nehemiah 2:20 (NLT)

And like it did for Nehemiah, and of course for Jesus himself, to live into our part of God's great mission will involve risk and sacrifice on our part. Make no mistake— God's longer-term vision for this church will involve the call to put his mission before our own comfort and convenience.

We certainly cannot choose mission over comfort in our own strength. In order to choose mission over comfort, we need God's empowerment, and to receive that empowerment, we need to make prayer a priority, like Nehemiah did. As Pastor Andrew shared last week, if prayer isn't absolutely necessary to accomplish our vision, then our goal isn't big enough.

So again, please sign up and join us for the Prayer & Re-Envisioning event on May 25. And make sure to take this purple sheet home with you, because on the back, you'll find a prayer focus for each week leading up to the event. We ask that you all would be praying over each of those.

Prayer is also where we find the patience to wait, as Nehemiah did. Chances are, we will not discern God's longer-term vision for Cornerstone overnight. It will take some time. And when God does make it clear, it will surely take some time for that vision to become reality. Such was the case with the vision God gave us to become an intercultural church. And such was the case with the vision God gave us to build a community centre style facility.

We live in a society of instant gratification, which means waiting is not often something we're comfortable with, is it? Therefore, waiting on God's timing is yet another expression of putting mission before comfort.

Whatever God has in store for us next as a church, we do well to be reminded that the early church was born not in working but in waiting. For almost six weeks the first Christians did exactly what the resurrected Jesus had instructed: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for God the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon you."<sup>19</sup> As we seek to discern God's longer-term direction for Cornerstone with fresh eyes, we must embrace some seasons of patient, prayerful waiting for God to do what only he can do, in his good time. Remember, as long as we're following God's lead, *waiting* time is never *wasted* time.

And as we talked about earlier, the priority of prayer and the patience to wait do not preclude the importance of planning. And such planning must be done prayerfully, so that any plans we come up with will not be of our own contrivance. Rather, we must pray to receive the plans that God himself wants to put on our heart, as was the case with Nehemiah's plans. Pray for the church's leadership as they work alongside the congregation first to receive, and then to plan out the longer-term vision that God has in mind for Cornerstone.

Finally, as we discern and live into God's longer-term vision for Cornerstone, don't be surprised when we experience enemy resistance from the devil and his minions. Did you notice I said "when", not "if"? It's yet another aspect of choosing mission over comfort.

The enemy hates it whenever we attempt any great work for God, because when we do so, the enemy loses influence, and the kingdom of darkness loses ground.

We've experienced enemy resistance time and again as a church over the years, and we can expect to experience it again as we seek to live out God's longer-term vision for Cornerstone. Although it's

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<sup>19</sup> See Acts 1:4, 12-14



inevitable, we needn't fear enemy resistance any more than Nehemiah feared the resistance of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. In the face of enemy resistance, Nehemiah could testify that "the gracious hand of God" was on them, and because of this, he could confidently declare that, "The God of heaven will help us succeed."<sup>20</sup>

As followers of Jesus, we not only know that God will help us succeed, but because of the cross, resurrection and ascension of Christ, the devil is a defeated foe.

And the way we stand firm against the enemy is through— *prayer*. The pinnacle of Paul's teaching in Ephesians 6 on how to stand firm against the spiritual forces of darkness says that we must:

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.<sup>21</sup>

All these principles point back to the priority of prayer, don't they?

Prayer is one of our Core Values as a church, and lately I've been sensing that God is inviting us to turn up the prayer temperature in the life of this church, and in our personal lives as well. I invite you again to join us at the Prayer & Re-Envisioning event. And to take this purple sheet home and pray over the prayer items on the back. As well, stay tuned for more prayer opportunities to come.

With that, let's close this message in prayer...

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<sup>20</sup> Nehemiah 2:18, 20

<sup>21</sup> Ephesians 6:18 (NLT)