Responding to God's Vision

6/3/2018
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So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. [12]Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. [13]I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.[14]Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. [15]So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. [16]The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. 17 Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.' [18]I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, 'Let us start building!' So they committed themselves to the common good. [19]But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, 'What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?' [20]Then I replied to them, 'The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem. (Nehemiah 2:11-20)

1. Wishes & God's Vision

This time of year, high schools and colleges are having their graduation ceremonies. What do you think are the wishes of parents and grandparents for these new graduates? Their wishes would be a good time in college, a good job, a good spouse, and maybe a happy life. These are the types of things that many people wish for their new graduates as they go into the next season of life.

For Christine and I, we often pray for our children and ask that God give them the vision and the direction for there they need to go in life. This is because we believe that God's vision is the happiest place for them.

2. God's Vision for Nehemiah

Today's scripture, Nehemiah 2:11-20, tells us that Nehemiah pursued God's vision. We do not know much about Nehemiah in relation to his ancestors. He was likely from the tribe of Levi and a priest. How does Nehemiah know God's vision? Nehemiah 2:12 says, "***I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do***

for Jerusalem." Nehemiah tells us that he felt that God had wanted him to rebuild the walls of the Holy City. To understand the background of this story, we need to read Nehemiah chapter one and the first part of chapter two.

At the time, Nehemiah was serving as the cupbearer to the king of Persia, Artaxerxes I at the capital city of Susa. One day, Hanani, one of his brothers, visits Nehemiah from Judah and tells him what has been happening in Jerusalem. Hanani says the captives who have returned are facing all kinds of troubles. They are disgraced, Jerusalem's walls are broken down, and the gates have been burned.

When Nehemiah hears these news, he sits down, weeps, fasts, and prays for many days. One day, the king Artaxerxes notices that Nehemiah looks sad. The king asks him why he looks so sad. Nehemiah tells him that the city of Jerusalem is in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire. The king asks, "what do you want me to do?" After Nehemiah prays to God, he says, "If it's alright with you, please send me back to Judah, so that I can rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried." The king gives Nehemiah permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its fortifications. Letters from the king are also given to Nehemiah to ensure his safe journey and to obtain timber for the gates and walls of Jerusalem.

3. Nehemiah's Plan

The verses 11 and the following tell us what Nehemiah does after he returns to Jerusalem. First, he rests for three days. During the time, Nehemiah is likely resting, praying, and meeting some of the people in Jerusalem. Nehemiah then surveys the walls with the men who are with him. He does so at night, to avoid letting others know what he is going to do. During the night, Nehemiah develops a plan to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

After Nehemiah completes his survey and has a rebuilding plan, he tells the Jews in Jerusalem why he is back from Persia. Nehemiah begins to tell others that his return to Jerusalem is instructed by the Lord who has given him a desire to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Then Nehemiah encourages the Jews and others to join him in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem so that they may no longer suffer disgrace (2:17).

What does the phrase "they suffer disgrace" mean? The Israelites were always proud of their identity as God's chosen people. They believed that God would care for them always and would never leave them. However, when the people were exiled to Babylon and the Jerusalem Temple and the Holy City were destroyed, the Israelites were ridiculed by other nations.

The Gentiles would ask them, where is your God? Many Jews were discouraged, frustrated, and humiliated. In such a circumstance, the Israelites had little evidence to show that God was alive and active in their daily lives.

4. God Kept His Promise

Nehemiah, however, does not lose hope. He trusts the Lord and prays saying, "***O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; [6]let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant"*** (Nehemiah 1:5 & 6). Nehemiah believes that God will keep his promise and hear the prayers of his people. Nehemiah confesses that God redeems his people by his great power and his strong hand (1:10).

Although there are many people who may identify themselves as Christians, fewer of these people actually go to church to worship. Why? Isn't it because they do not experience or believe in God's great power and his strong hand? How often would we say that we experience the power and strength of the Lord in our lives? Do we see the miracles like the ones that we see in the Bible?

Nehemiah chapter two tells us how Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem. The situation is truly a miracle. The king, Artaxerxes, allows Nehemiah to go back to Israel. The king also gives Nehemiah letters for his safety and allocates resources to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. When we read the book of Ezra, we notice that Ezra experienced the same kind of miracle.

Ezra 1:3 & 4 say, "***Any of those among you who are of his people… are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD…; [4]and let all survivors, . . . be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill-offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem***." The Lord led Cyrus king of Persia to allow the Israelites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. The king asked his people to provide the finances, supplies, and gift offerings for God's Temple. The Israelites would not have expected such an overwhelming support from Cyrus king of Persia. It was a miracle that they could not expect.

The return of Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem was unthinkable. How did these miracles happen? It was God's grace. God made them happen. Although the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem was disgraceful to the Jews, God had a vision of restoration. God did not want his people to be scattered among the nations. According to Deuteronomy 30:4 & 5 God made a promise to the Israelites. "***If you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. [5]The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors***." In Nehemiah 1:9, Nehemiah reminds the Lord of the promise when he prays for his nation. The return of Ezra and Nehemiah was the fulfillment of God's promise.

5. We Need to Start

Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem likely seemed to be impossible for Nehemiah and the other Jewish people to expect. But when Nehemiah knew that

rebuilding of the walls was God's vision, he does not doubt that it would be completed. In Nehemiah 2:20 Nehemiah assures his supporters success of his rebuilding plan, "***The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building***." Nehemiah encourages the people to get started rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem because he believes that God would give them success.

6. Conclusion

Nehemiah is not the first return from exile. Zerubbabel led the first return to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. In 458 B.C. Ezra led the second group. Finally, in 445 B.C., Nehemiah returned with the third group of exiles. The walls of Jerusalem were left unrepaired for years after the exiles returned to Jerusalem. When Nehemiah heard this, he prayed and sought God's plan. He later asks for king's permission to go back to Jerusalem and mobilizes the people to begin rebuilding the walls.

According to verses 19 & 20, Nehemiah faced opposition from Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem but he persevered until the rebuilding was complete. The seemingly impossible task was accomplished because God actively participated in this project. Nehemiah confesses that the gracious hand of God was upon him (2:8).

When we read the book of Nehemiah, we tend to focus on the rebuilding project. However, throughout the process of rebuilding the walls, the faith of the exiles is renewed. The Israelites experience that God's vision has been fulfilled through them, the exiles. They see that they are God's instruments and that God is alive and active in the lives of God's people.

7. Application

When I look back on my ministry journey, there are many times when the Lord moved my family and our church in a direction that we couldn't even imagine. Later we found out how God's plan and vision was fulfilled in our lives. Whenever we needed help God provided us partners. I am so grateful that the gracious hand of the Lord has been with us always. These days I feel that the amazing powerful hand of God is with us as we serve Swift Memorial UMC.

God's vision and plan can take us to places we could never imagine. But as followers of Christ, we need to be as obedient as possible to the will of God in our lives, trusting in God's faithfulness and His active leading in our lives. God needs our help for his vision.

God is looking for those who can give themselves without reservation to fulfill God's vision. Have you found God's vision for your life and for our church? Have you committed to God's vision? Let us pray.