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Characteristics of Kingdom Work

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TEXT: Nehemiah 2:1-10 (ESV)

In the month of Nisan, 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. And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. 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?" Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. 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." And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. 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, 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.

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. 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.

I begin today with the question, and I ask if you've ever received news or become aware of news that profoundly affects you, shakes you to your core, or leaves you breathless. We are currently in the month of September, a time when many of us can recall September 11th, 2001, when we first heard about the Twin Towers and the hijacked airplanes. For many, the memory of where they were and the intense emotions associated with that moment remain vivid. Recently, I received a phone call that left me shaken. I am 55 years old, and my brother, who

was only 49, passed away suddenly while sitting in his office chair. I received this news while I was out on a golf course with some friends, and it simply took my breath away. It shook me to my core.

That's what happens to Nehemiah when he's serving as Cupbearer to the King in Susa. And the book begins, It says, "In the month of Kislev in the 20th year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Nehemiah, writing Hananiah, one of my brothers came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant, their people." Nehemiah was a Jewish individual whose family had come from Jerusalem, and now he was living east of there many hundreds of miles in Susa, and his brothers were coming there to visit and probably to do some trade and things like that.

And when his brothers come, it says he questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile. They were kicked out of Jerusalem because of their disobedience to God. And he also asked about the city itself, how the city was doing. And they said to me, he writes, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province in the Jerusalem area, they are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire." Nehemiah has been given information here that shocks him to his core. It takes his breath away and it causes him to seek the face of God. You know, when 911 happened, I was in ministry on a college campus, and I can't even describe how many students showed up at our events not long after the news of 9/11 came out. And that's what happens to Nehemiah. He starts to seek the face of God in a desperate way, like many people did in America here, when we heard the news of what had happened to the Twin Towers and the hijacking of the planes. Nehemiah says it this way, "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." Isn't it interesting that there are many people who sort of downplay the existence of God and don't acknowledge his presence much? But when push comes to shove and we get ourselves in a reality of a situation where we see how vulnerable we are in life and how vulnerable the world is, many more of us seek the face of God.

And that's what Nehemiah experienced: this traumatic news from his homeland, and he sat down and wept. And for days he mourned and fasted and prayed and sought the face of God. And after some time in prayer, he was ready to do something. And we can learn from the scriptures about how God works in the world and how he wants to enlist us in His work, in his redemptive work. And we see this so clearly in Nehemiah. As a matter of fact, the New Testament tells us that all that was written in the past was written to teach us and to encourage

us so that what we read in the past about what happened and God working in the world, you and I might be encouraged and have hope in the present. And we certainly see that when we look at Nehemiah, we see then how he goes about partnering with God in the redemptive work of God in the world. Now, this is an actual physical redemption of a city that Nehemiah is talking about. But of course, when we get to the New Testament, we're talking about the spiritual redemption of human souls through the work of Christ that we're called to be involved in.

And there are so many similarities in the nature of the work we see here from Nehemiah that the work of God in partnering with God in the building of His kingdom in the world first and foremost. It's a prayerful work. It's a prayerful work. What is the first thing Nehemiah did when he heard this news and was given a burden about a brokenness in the world that, of course, God cared about and God is burdening him with it? He weeps. He prays. He fasts. He mourns for days. Prayer. You can read his prayer in Nehemiah chapter one, and his prayer continues throughout all of his work. The work of God in the world is foundationally supported with prayer. This is one of the great aspects of Kingdom Advancement: the work of prayer. Are you praying about the burdens God has put on your heart? Are you seeking his face? You know, every challenge, every bit of brokenness in the world is an opportunity for you and me to seek the face of God and pray. Perhaps there's something in your life right now that you're dealing with that you haven't been praying about, that you should begin seeking God with it and laying it before Him.

The work of God in the world, in us, is first and foremost a prayerful work. But then we see Nehemiah as he continues to pray. He then takes action, and he moves into what I might call a dignified work. You see, before Nehemiah goes before King Artaxerxes, the king that he was serving under with this burden, he ends his lengthy time of prayer with a simple prayer and says, "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of the king." So clearly, he's praying about his actions and what steps to take and for God to give him favor in joining him in this burden he's given to help redeem Jerusalem. Then he begins the work in a dignified way as he goes before the king.

Prayerfully, he says, "In the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought before him," this is Nehemiah being brought wine that he's supposed to be a cupbearer for, to take to the king to test the wine, "I took the wine and gave it to the king." And then he adds this little note, "I had not been sad in his presence." In the presence of the king before, he had managed his emotions in a very dignified way in his service to the king. But at

this point, he could no longer hide his sadness. But he makes note that he had not burdened the king with unnecessary burdens before him personally. But now he was truly sad, and the king took note. The king noticed.

See, all of this is bathed in prayer, and God is opening a door here for Nehemiah to be heard by King Artaxerxes about the burden that God has put upon him. The king asked him, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing," the king says, "but sadness of heart." So God has opened a door for Nehemiah. Bathed in prayer, he begins to seek God's wisdom about steps to take to deal with the burden he's been given about his homeland of Jerusalem. This is the work of God in the world. You see, Jerusalem is the apple of God's eye. This is all a foretaste imagery to teach us about how God works in the world. And this doorway is open, and Nehemiah says this, "I was very much afraid." I mean, he's standing there in the king's presence and he's probably trembling in his boots. He's probably never burdened the king before with anything personal. And he says, "I was very much afraid. But I said to the king, 'May the king live forever?'" He gives respect and reverence to the king in a very dignified way because Nehemiah has been quickened by God in prayer for the dignity of life and the beauty and wonder of this world and the need for redemption.

He's being motivated and inspired by it. And he knows he needs to appeal to a worldly authority. See, Nehemiah is clearly serving two kings here. He's got the earthly king, King Artaxerxes, he's serving, but on a higher plane, he is serving the God of Israel, the God of all creation, the king of all kings. And he's praying to that king as he makes an appeal to this worldly king. So he's very much afraid. But he says to the king, "May the king live forever? Why should my face not look sad here?" He gets vulnerable before the king. "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?" He shares his heart.

Here's a key aspect of our leadership in the world. A lot of times, God's favor doesn't come to us when we're strong, but when we're weak. See, when we're humble. And now Nehemiah is humbling himself before this earthly king and being vulnerable and telling him what's happened in his heart and why he's sad, "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?" Now it's hanging in the balance. Will the king respond in a positive way? This whole moment has been bathed in prayer, the foundation of prayer in the work of the kingdom.

The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Oh, the door has opened for Nehemiah. The prayer has gone before him. God has opened this door to talk with King Artaxerxes about his situation. He's involved in this dignified work. And there Nehemiah sits. It's just one of these moments you probably would never forget in life. You know, these moments where so much hangs in the balance and the king says, "What is it you want from me?" And now Nehemiah has to decide, am I going to be courageous and speak up and talk to the king, or am I going to shrink back and say, "No, it's not too big of a deal. I don't want to bother you with this, king." But he shows courage.

So often when you and I are in the world and we want to do what's right before God, we need to be bathed in prayer and be prayerful in what we're doing. We need to approach our work in a very respectful and dignified way. But sooner or later, there are going to come those moments where you and I have to show courage, where we have to step out of our comfort zone, as Nehemiah is doing here, and we have to seize the moment at hand and take the opportunity that God is laying before us. Just in honor of our nation in America, here in the 9/11 that we celebrate in September.

I want to share with you one of these moments from a gentleman named Todd Beamer, who was on Flight 93 on September 11th back then. And he's talking to his wife, and they knew the plane had been hijacked. They were hearing the other planes were being crashed. And he says to his wife on the phone, "We're not going to make it out of here." He says, "Listen to me." His wife's name is Lisa. "I want you to hear this. I have talked with the others. We've decided we would not be pawns in these hijackers' suicidal plot." And then Lisa responds, "Todd, what are you going to do?" And Todd says, "We've hatched a plan. Four of us are going to rush the hijacker with the bomb, and we'll take him out. We'll break into the cockpit. A stewardess is getting some boiling water to throw on the hijackers at the controls. We'll get them. We'll take them out." Then he asks, "Will you do one last thing for me?" And he says this to his wife, Lisa. And Lisa says, "Yes, what is it?" And Todd says, "Would you pray with me?" And then they prayed: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And he finished the Lord's Prayer. And then those famous words: "Let's roll."

Nehemiah standing before the king. And the king has asked him what he wants, and he has to decide, am I going to take action now? Am I going to move with the king? Am I going to go forward? And of course, he says, "Then I prayed to the God of heaven." In these moments, you'll never see an atheist in a foxhole or under pressure like this. Nehemiah said he was very

much afraid. He prayed to the God of heaven and answered the king. He said, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city of Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it." Then the king, sitting with the queen beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take and when will you get back?" And if it pleased the king to send me, it did. So I set a time, and he asked further of the king to actually give him permission to pass through the land and letters to do it safely and rights to some forest and wood in the area so he could rebuild the walls in the city. The king granted all this, and Nehemiah said he granted all this to me because of God's hand being upon me and His favor being upon me.

Nehemiah set out on some 750 to 950 mile journey, taking some 70 to 100 days. He left the palace, he left the comfort of his land there, his position, his cupbearer status in that city. And he headed all the way to the broken-down city of Jerusalem. He got involved in the hard work of rebuilding the apple of God's eye, the city of Jerusalem, the Israelite people's home. Friends, this is characteristic of God. He calls us into arenas where we're burdened, where we want to seek his face, where we want to pray, and then we'll be moved to be involved in some redemptive work with him. As we do that redemptive work, we do it in a dignified manner, in a way that honors God. And sooner or later, it requires courage and self-sacrifice. It's a life-altering work. Friends, this has not changed for thousands and thousands of years. We live in a broken world, and to be a part of God's redemptive plan, we have to be spiritually in touch with him through prayer. We have to carry ourselves in a manner that's honorable and right before him, to live our lives in a manner worthy of our calling, in a dignified way. And then we have to show courage.

We have to be self-sacrificing. We have to be willing to let go of the creature comforts sometimes of this world and get our hands dirty in the work of the Kingdom of God. And I hope this has encouraged you today. Characteristics of work in the Kingdom. God is so good. May you be encouraged to serve him more fully with your lives based on the inspiration, the model of Nehemiah. Let's pray together. Father, thank you for this time and thank you for your word, which teaches us without error what to believe and how to live. The Old Testament was written to give us hope, to encourage us, to inspire us. We thank you for it. We thank you for Nehemiah's example and his courage and his tenacity and his sacrificial service to you, and how that has taught so many of us about leadership over the years. May we continue to learn what you've revealed to us and what you want to teach us by your Spirit in serving you in this world by faith. Thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus, the penalty he paid on the cross for our sins, that we could be right with you and have peace with you. And then

learn to grow in our faith and service to you through faith in Him. We pray this in his matchless name, the name of Jesus. Amen.