Today we are studying the second chapter of the book of Nehemiah. Last week we started this sermons series of “Amazing Things Can Happen.” From chapter one, we learned that amazing things can happen when we pray. In today’s message, the lesson is, “Amazing things can happen when we plan.”

To give us a quick recap of the context of the book of Nehemiah, we explained that the historical context of this story happened in the 5th century B.C. About 100 years before, the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem. The walls and the city were left in rubbles, the Temple was sacked and burned, and many people were taken as slaves. By the time of Nehemiah, the walls and city were still in ruins. A terrible reality of sadness, loss, and anger.

We also learned that Nehemiah was serving a Persian King, Artaxerxes. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians, and Nehemiah was now the cupbearer of the king. He had lived all his life in exile, away from the land of his ancestors. But when he learned the condition of Jerusalem, he wept and prayed, “O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!” Nehemiah was asking God for favor before King Artaxerxes and success in rebuilding his ancestors’ city.

As we study the book of Nehemiah, we will learn powerful principles that will guide us in our lives. The first principle was prayer, the second one is planning. This is Nehemiah chapter 2: 1-8, on Amazing Things Can Happen When We Plan,

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. So the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors’ graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” Then the king said to me, “What do you request?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors’ graves, so that I may rebuild it.” The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date. Then 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 grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, 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 gracious hand of my God was upon me.

It has been four months since Nehemiah learned about Jerusalem’s condition. As he was praying for wisdom and strength on what to do, he was also planning how to execute his request.

Do you remember what I said last Sunday? Of course, you do, “The true measure of our concern is whether we are willing to commit to getting involved in what we are asking.” This means that a powerful prayer is one where what we ask, we are also willing to do. Nehemiah was planning what to do for what he was praying as he was praying. And when the time came, he was ready. This is how it happened.

One day when Nehemiah was bringing the wine to the king, the king noticed sadness on his face and asked him what was troubling him, and Nehemiah replied, “Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors’ graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” This was the moment Nehemiah was waiting for, and he did not waste it. I can imagine he rehearsed this moment many times in his head, waiting for the right time to speak, and finally, it came. And it worked. His answer opened the door to make his request to the king about returning to his homeland to rebuild the city of his ancestors. After he shared his concern, the king asked only two questions to him: “What do you request?” and “How long would you be gone?” If there was a time to be upfront, clear, and confident, this was it. Nehemiah had the answers,

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This is incredible. Nehemiah clearly had a plan and anticipated the king’s questions. He did not vaguely answer the king, saying, “Well, that’s up to God!” Instead, because he had been doing a lot of praying and research already, he knew exactly what to say. For example, he knew that the keeper of the king’s lumberyard was named Asaph. He knew he would need letters of safe passage from the king. He knew what materials would be required and the kind of work to be done.

Can you see what is happening here? Just as we are learning that prayer is powerful, we also learn that being ready with a plan when prayers are answered is as important. We are learning that prayer and planning need to go together. Of course, our plans are not always God’s plans, and often they change. However, that is not an excuse not to plan as we pray seeking direction and wisdom on what God is doing so we can join.

I know that when it comes to praying and planning, many people go to two extremes: pray and leave all the planning and doing to God, or do all the planning without seeking God’s wisdom and direction. I believe both are wrong because God does not call us to be one or the other but to practice both.

For example, when someone is looking for a job, they pray for a job, apply for it, and get ready for the interview. The goal is to get the job, so they plan and get prepared to the best of their abilities to do what it takes. But if they are praying only for the job without applying for one or not presenting themselves well in the interview process, then what are they really praying for? What do they want? You say we want a job but are not doing what it takes to get one.

Here is the point: God calls us to pray as much as God calls us to plan. We start with prayer, but we don’t end there because our faith is not passive. If God has given us gifts and talents, it is to use them alongside prayer.

That is what Nehemiah did. The four months he spent in prayer were not only talking to God and dreaming about rebuilding Jerusalem; he also was proactive in working out a plan for what to do when God answered his request and provided the opportunity. He was ready for whenever God said, “Now, go!”

What does this mean to us?

I believe God always works through a plan and Nehemiah had one. Sometimes (quite often, actually), our plans may change to align with God’s plans, but that is the whole point: we plan to accomplish God’s plans, and we pray for discernment to learn what they are. That is how we accomplish God’s purposes and our calling. It is in the doing as much as in the praying that we learn what we need to do. No one has ever been successful at anything without taking action.

If you recall, in his prayer Nehemiah asked for “favor” and “success.” I know it is harsh to hear what I am about to say, but it is true: most people never succeed in life because they have no plans, no concrete ideas about what to do with themselves. Not only do they not pray, but they also don’t do a thing about anything. They expect things to fall into place or for the stars to align so they can act. (What things? What place? What stars?)

Here is what I know: Nehemiah was successful because he acted on his prayers and adapted his plans as he went along. His plan was not perfect, and even he experienced setbacks along the way (we will see that in the following chapters), but that is part of the process because ultimately, he accomplished his goal, to rebuild the walls of the city.

What is in your heart? What are your dreams? What do you need to plan for right now? Education, retirement, relationships, finances? I am not going to lie to you by telling you you will accomplish everything you want because I don’t know anyone who has. But, you can accomplish a lot, a whole lot, if you pray to God and have a plan.

Let me tell you something else. Your plan will never be perfect; it will probably change more times than you can keep track of it. So, even if you have a great plan and feel confident about what you know, it will change as you go along—and that is ok.

What I am saying here is that if you are waiting for a fail-proof plan, you will never get it. And, one day, you will realize that time slipped away from you and there is not much of it left to do the things God put in your heart to do. That is the real tragedy.

So, when we are praying and planning, we are not planning for the perfect plan. Instead, it is about taking the initiative and first steps to follow the calling God placed in our hearts, not because we have everything we need and have all figured out, but because we know something has to be done because it is the right and just thing to do.

Here is the good news in all of this: There is no perfect plan. There is nothing we can put together on our own that is failure-proofed (yes, that is good news!). But God uses what we have and arranges it to exactly what we need (you see, good news!).

In life, the goal is not perfection but readiness. That is what happened to Nehemiah and what he did. He had a goal he discerned through prayer and never lost sight of it. He did not hesitate to let his gifts and talents come forward as needed. And he was meticulous in his planning. When we pray and plan and use the gifts and talents God gives us, God opens a way and provides.

My friends, amazing things can happen when we pray and plan and are ready to act when God says, “Now, go!”