

Nehemiah's Godly Ambition

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[0:00] Well, good morning, if I haven't already said so to you. For some scheduling reasons, I needed to fill a one week gap in our preaching schedule.

! And so, I would like to speak with you about a topic that has been on my mind on repeat lately. Ambition. Is it okay to be ambitious, to desire to achieve?

The Puritan Thomas Brooks once called ambition, quote, a gilded misery, a secret poison, end quote.

Scripture often agrees, warning against selfish ambition that breeds conceit and disorder and vile practices. Philippians 2.3, James chapter 3.

However, the Apostle Paul states that he was himself ambitious. In Romans chapter 15, verse 20, he declares, I make it my ambition to preach the gospel.

[1:08] So, where's the balance? If ungodly ambition is characterized by conceit, disorder, and vile practices, what characterizes godly ambition?

I want to do my best to answer that question by considering Nehemiah's godly ambition. So, will you join me at the beginning of the book of Nehemiah?

And turn there with me in your Bible, and I'll pray for our time together. Father, we ask this morning as we take up your word and think about this idea of ambition, that we would rightly think about what godly ambition is.

That you'd help us to learn from your word without error. We would rightly apply what it says to us in our lives. That we would honor the Lord Christ in our time together.

We pray this in his name. Amen. I find we, myself included, are often far too ignorant of the books of the Old Testament.

[2:19] I once heard a pastor tell the following story. Quote, A preacher made the mistake of showing two boys the text he would be preaching from that Sunday, the previous Saturday afternoon.

When he turned his back, the boys glued some of the pages of his Bible together. So, on Sunday, when he stood to read, he read, And Noah, when he was 120 years old, took unto himself a wife, who was, then turning the page, 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high, built of gopher wood and pitch within and without.

Puzzled, he paused, read it again, and then looked up at his congregation and said, I have read the Bible through many, many times, but this is the first time I have ever read this.

Yet I believe the Bible to be true from cover to cover, so I accept it as truth that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Perhaps we ought to be a bit more familiar with the text than this.

So, as we peel apart the pages of Nehemiah, let me give you some brief background that will be necessary for our study this morning. The book of Nehemiah takes place near the end of the Old Testament story.

[3:36] It's not ordered that way in our modern Bibles, but that's where it takes place chronologically. More than a century earlier, the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temples, tore down the walls, and carried the people of Judah into exile.

By Nehemiah's day, the Near East power had shifted to the Persians. There are some Israelites still in the land. Some have returned. The temple had been rebuilt.

We read about that in the book of Ezra. But the city still lay exposed. Its walls still broken down. Its gates were burned.

And God's people who were in the land lived in shame and reproach. Around 445 BC, Nehemiah was serving as cupbearer to Artaxerxes, the king of Persia.

When he heard about Jerusalem's condition, he wept, fasted, prayed, and acted. Nehemiah ambitiously sought to remedy a problem.

[4 : 45] We will note in just a moment why this news was so troubling to him as we consider the first and most important characteristic of godly ambition.

And I have five for you this morning from the story of Nehemiah. Now, first and most important foundational godly ambition seeks God's glory.

Look at chapter 1, beginning in verse 1. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakala, something like that.

Now, it happened in the month of Chislev in the 20th year, as I was in Susa, the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.

[5 : 46] The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days.

And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, 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.

Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants. Confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.

But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of the earth, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.

[6 : 56] Now I'm going to pause for a second at the end of verse 9. He says at the beginning of verse 8, remember to God. Of course God remembers, but God is very pleased when we pray to him, his promises.

So what he prays is an amalgamation, but a clear place you can find it is in Leviticus chapter 26. I'll begin reading in 38 and then following.

There God says, and you shall perish among the nations and the land of your enemies shall eat you up. And those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies lands because of their iniquity and also because of the iniquities of their fathers.

They shall rot away like them. But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery and they that they committed against me and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies, if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham.

And I will remember the land. So Nehemiah is biblically informed, right here. He's praying back to God a promise that God had made.

[8 : 18] And then first 10 back in Nehemiah chapter one. They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

Oh, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name. And give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

Referring to the king, Artaxerxes. Now I was cup bearer to the king. Why is Nehemiah distressed by this news that he hears?

Because the people who are in the land and those who have returned to the land, God's people, the remnant there in the province. Are not doing well.

They're in great trouble and shame. Jerusalem is in shambles and cannot provide protection for dwelling and commerce. And therefore, in Nehemiah's correct estimation, God's glory was being profaned.

[9:24] Now, before you think for a moment that the aim of our time is to convince you to build something, let me be clear. That is not what I'm hoping to accomplish this morning.

I will not roll out blueprints at the end of our time together. Under the old covenant, the glory of God was directly tied to the well-being of his people.

Come and see, cries the old covenant. Go and tell, cries the new. However, ambitious people build things.

Families, businesses, communities, cultures, and yes, churches, which do meet in buildings.

Godly ambition does so for the glory of God. This is the great concern of Nehemiah, the heartbreak.

[10:27] Not just that his fellow Israelites are not doing well, but that God's glory is being profaned. Godly ambition seeks to make little of self, to forget self, and to make much of God.

Notice the foundation of Nehemiah's concern, right? He knows his Bible, and he knows the promises that God has made. Promises that he seems to not be keeping.

Nehemiah prays with confidence because he knows that God is a promise-keeping God who is zealous for his glory.

Even as he grieves the condition, he goes to God in prayer because he knows that God cares about his glory. This is the most foundational characteristic of godly ambition.

Nothing else I will say this morning matters if we don't get this one right. If our ambitions don't aim at God's glory, they are misguided and they are trivial.

[11:38] Often, our ambitions mirror the world's aimed at success, security, significance. But scripture calls us to aim higher.

2 Corinthians 5, verse 9. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please God.

As C.S. Lewis once said in your bulletin quote, Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in.

Aim at earth and you will get neither. Ungodly ambition is not too big. It is too small. As concerns ambition, we can err in two ways.

First, which has been mentioned, ambition can be self-serving and not seek God's glory. It can be about our glory. But also, secondly, it could just be altogether lacking.

No ambition whatsoever. However, I think apathy is the opposite of ambition. No concern. May we not be apathetic on the one hand or have selfish ambition on the other, but be energized to see God magnified in everything that we do.

[13:02] Godly ambition, firstly and most importantly, seeks God's glory. Secondly, godly ambition thinks and asks big.

Thinks and asks big. I am saying to you that we ought to be ambitious and that that ambition ought to be aimed at God's glory and therefore it ought to think and ask big.

Now look with me at the beginning of chapter two of Nehemiah. Here we see recorded in the month of Nisan in the 20th 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. It's not supposed to appear sad for the king.

[14:08] He seems to have made every effort not to appear sad before the king. His own record is that he had not been sad in his presence and the king sees through it. And he was afraid for the way his countenance was before the king.

Verse three, I said to the king, let the king live forever. Why should not my face be sad when the city, the place of my father's 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 father's 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 to me, to the governors of the province beyond the river, that they 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.

[15:27] And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of God was upon me. I believe that we are meant to note the date in verse 1, as we were also told the date in chapter 1 and verse

1.

Chislev or Kislev to Nisan. About four months have passed from the time that Nehemiah received the news of Jerusalem's state until we see this encounter in chapter 2.

Four months have gone by since in verse 4 of chapter 1. He says, As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days. Four months worth of days.

And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. The conclusion I believe we ought to draw is that Nehemiah has been troubled all this time.

He has been in mourning and fasting with prayer. The prayer of chapter 1 is an example prayer of the prayers that he prayed. It was the substance of what he was praying across this time.

[16 : 36] And I think that during this time, he has considered a remedy to the problem. He is troubled by this. How might this trouble be solved?

The confidence of Nehemiah's prayers expresses confidence in a God who can accomplish whatever he desires. But Nehemiah's actions evidence that he knows that God doesn't despise the means used to accomplish his will.

Nehemiah thinks big. I'm imagining here, but in this time frame, I think he's going, maybe I should go lead the rebuilding of the wall.

The rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem was a massive task. The wall was 1.7 miles in circumference.

It was 6 1/2 to 12 feet thick, depending on the place of it, and an estimated 20 to 25 feet high. This is a huge, huge project.

[17 : 44] There is no natural reason for Nehemiah to think that he would be the instrument of God's choosing to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. He's not a builder of walls.

That's not what the chapter tells us at all. That's not what he was trained to do. He's a cupbearer. He's been living in captivity. He's the servant to King Artaxerxes.

He selects wine, and he drinks from the king's cup before the king to ensure his wine hadn't been poisoned. This is the role that he played.

He is trusted as the cupbearer. Often throughout history, cupbearers gave counsel to the king because they were always around, because they were giving their life, perhaps for the sake of his. Sometimes the question would be asked, what should I do in such and such circumstance? So he is there. He is trusted. He is in a position to speak to the king, but he is just a cupbearer, a servant.

[18 : 49] Why does it enter his mind that he could have this kind of ambition to go back, to ask that God would restore the wall, and I'm saying perhaps use him to accomplish it?

It's because of his confidence in this God, right, who upholds his own glory, and we cannot know exactly what's going on in the mind of Nehemiah, right?

Again, I think it's imagination here, but I do think it's reasonable to think that he, being troubled by the news, being persistent in prayer, is convinced in that process that given the opportunity that he should act.

I believe that he asks big things of God, and then, when the time is right, big things of the king. He asks massive things of this king.

The king says to him in verse two, 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 mentioned already, this was not okay to be in front of the king forlorn.

[19 : 59] So what does he do? He responds, the city is destroyed. Why should I not be sad? And the king asks him, what are you requesting?

And notice what he does in verse four, so I prayed to the God of heaven. I just imagine as he goes, Lord, help me. I'm about to open my mouth, and I'm going to ask for something big of this king, a thing that the king could have lopped his head off for.

If it pleases the king, verse five, if your servant has found favor in your sight, let me go. Let me go rebuild the wall.

And not only does he request to be freed from his duty to the king, but also for an armed guard and a blank check to gain the resources that he needs for the project.

It is a huge ask. That's ambitious. Charles Spurgeon once said, this is the quote on the children's bulletin section of your bulletin.

[21 : 00] A little drawing that's there. He once said, prayer pulls the rope below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell for they pray so languidly.

Others give but an occasional pluck at the rope. But he who wins heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously with all his might.

Do we think and ask big? Are we ambitious for the glory of God in all the areas of our life?

Let's not just ask that God would save our children. I hope we do. But that he would save them and that he would shape them into mighty citizens of the kingdom of heaven for his glory.

Let's not just ask that God would bless the work of our hands, but that he would bless abundantly our labors that we should spend and be spent for his glory.

[22 : 06] Let's not just ask that God would give our church influence in our homes and in our neighborhoods, but that he would give us a little feeble group of people that he would use us to have a measurable influence for generations and to the very ends of the earth.

Let's be ambitious for his glory. Think and ask big. Godly ambition seeks God's glory. Godly ambition thinks and asks big.

And thirdly, godly ambition plans diligently. Notice verses 11 through 16 of chapter two. So I went up to Jerusalem and was there three days.

Then I arose in the night and a few men with me and I told no one like God to put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the valley gate to the dragon spring and to the dung gate and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.

Then I went on to the fountain gate and to the king's pool but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall and I turned back and entered by the valley gate and so returned.

[23 : 25] And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Notice the repetition in verses 12 and 13 and 15.

Then I arose in the night. I went out by night. Then I went up in the night. I take this to mean that the three days mentioned in verse 11 was the time it took for him to inspect the wall.

It would not take three nights to travel 1.7 miles around the circumference of the dilapidated wall.

So what is he doing? I believe he is making diligent plans.

He's looking at each section. He's plotting out a course of action. Now let me say again, God who created the world ex nihilo from nothing does not despise means.

He uses his people to accomplish his purposes. So once we have ascertained a path, godly ambition plans diligently.

[24 : 35] Sees a destination and makes a plan to reach that destination. I have found that I accomplished nothing meaningful without planning to do so.

I never bumble my way through the right thing. We do well not to ask, what do I feel like doing? But rather, what am I supposed to do?

We will not be able to answer that question without a plan. Whatever the ambition may be, how will you accomplish that godly ambition?

What is the path to get there? Men, I know that right now you feel like you're surviving with littles in your home. Those days are coming to a completion sooner than you think.

What is the plan to raise up your children in the fear and instruction of the Lord? I never do well when I'm bumbling my way through it. Plan, follow through.

[25 : 38] How do you intend to accomplish the goals at your job? Witnessing to your neighbors. Any of these things require diligent planning. So godly ambition seeks God's glory, thinks and asks big, plans diligently.

Fourthly, godly ambition works hard. Nehemiah chapter 2, verse 17 and 18. Then I said to them, following his inspection and his diligent planning, you see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned?

Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good and also of the words that the king had spoken to me.

And they said, let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. Now, I don't know exactly what that phrase means.

There may be somebody who knows their Hebrew better than I do. It doesn't seem to me like they go to work up some calluses on their hands, but they're making a decision. They're strengthening

their hands.

[26:56] They're getting ready. There's a big work ahead of us. We will be ready for that work to be accomplished. And then Nehemiah chapter 3, which is a summary of the builders and their accomplishments.

You get this list of all of these different people, a bunch of different names that are very difficult to pronounce. I'm just going to read a few of them for you. Here's what they accomplished. Here's the work that they set themselves to beginning in verse 15 of chapter 3.

And Shalom, the son of Kol Hosei, ruler of the district of Mizpah, repaired the fountain gate. He rebuilt it and covered it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars.

And he built the wall of the pool of Shalah, of the king's garden, as far as the stairs that go down from the city of David. After him, Nehemiah, the son of Azbuk, ruler of half the district of Beth-zur, repaired to a point opposite the tombs of David, as far as the artificial pool and as far as the house of the mighty men.

And it goes on and it goes on for the entirety of the chapter. This is many hands at hard work, resetting massive stones and beams.

[28:15] You have heard it said, many hands make light work. We like to adapt that saying to say, many hands make ambitious work possible. We would do well not to underestimate the difficulty of this task that they set themselves to.

These men, though, had godly ambition. They saw God's favor on Nehemiah. They said, surely the Lord is with us in this work and so we will work hard.

We're going to wait around for the stones to levitate themselves and the wall to appear. They went to work. They were seeking God's glory, thought of a task worth accomplishing, right?

So they strengthened their hands for the good work. They had Nehemiah's plans and his oversight and they took up their part of the work.

Not one man built the entire wall. They shared in this large task. In total, it only took them 52 days to rebuild the wall.

[29:30] What a work that was. What might be accomplished if you strengthened your hands for a good work?

what might you see get done? What might we be able to build? Godly ambition seeks God's glory, thinks and asks big, plans diligently, works hard, and lastly, expects opposition.

Expects opposition. There's a common sentiment in today's church that seems averse to opposition. It seems to be framed up theologically like God couldn't possibly ask us to do anything hard.

If we encounter some difficulty, perhaps we have strayed from God's will, goes the thinking. Just because something is difficult doesn't make it right. But I can attest that everything good that I've ever seen accomplished was accomplished with difficulty.

there were oppositions. There were things that could have shut the whole work down if people weren't willing to push through. Beloved, you sit in a congregation this morning that would not exist if countless people, including you, didn't work hard in the face of opposition.

[31:02] Nehemiah faced opposition. They expected it and they put themselves to the work all the same. This opposition is introduced to us in chapter two.

The weight of this opposition verses nine and ten. He says, 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 Sambalot, the Horonite, and Tobiah, the Ammonite servant, heard this.

And these guys, Sambalot and Tobiah are trouble and trouble and trouble. It displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

A Horonite and an Ammonite that were profiting off the land were troubled that someone came to seek the welfare of the people to whom the land belonged. After the plan is made, and the decision to rebuild has been established.

[32:07] They've strengthened their hands for the good work. Verse 19 tells us, but when Sambalot, the Horonite, and Tobiah, the Ammonite, servant, and Geshem, the Arab, heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, what is this thing that you were doing?

Are you rebelling against the king? Then I replied to them, the God of heaven will make us prosper and we, his servants, will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.

Right? Bold, bold words. Then chapter three gives us the record of work going on, that this large task being accomplished, but chapter four tells us more about the opposition.

I'm going to read it to you in large part. Verse one, now when Sambalot heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged and he jeered at the Jews and he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, what are these feeble Jews doing?

Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish and burned ones at that?

[33:23] Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him and he said, yes, what they are building? If a fox goes up on out, he will break down their stone wall. And then in response here, oh, our God, for we are despised, turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives.

Do not cover their guilt and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. Verse six, so we built the wall and all the wall was joined together to half its height for the people had a mind to work.

I love that phrase. But when Sambalat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry and they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. In Judah, it was said, the strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble.

By ourselves, we will not be able to rebuild the wall. And our enemy said, they will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work. At that time, the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us, ten times, you must return to us.

[34:53] So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans with their swords, their spears, and their bows. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.

When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail.

And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.

And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me, and I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, the work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall far from one another.

In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there, our God will fight for us. So we labored at the work, and half of them held spears from the break of dawn till the stars came out.

[36:01] I also said to the people at that time, let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day. So neither I, nor my brothers, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes, each kept his weapon at his right hand.

Godly ambition expects opposition and, we will do well to see, responds appropriately and presses on.

They didn't stop the work, but for a moment. They heard an attack was coming, they all got ready for the attack, and the text tells us, and they returned to work.

They expected it, and they just pressed on. So be ambitious. Don't be apathetic, but have godly ambitions.

Pray that God would work in your godly ambitions for your home, your work, your community, your culture, and for our church. I hope that you will find yourself reflecting on lessons from Nehemiah's godly ambition.

[37:16] Godly ambition seeks God's glory, thinks and asks big, plans diligently, works hard, and expects opposition. I will close with the doxology from this morning's call to worship.

This is from Ephesians 3, verse 20 and 21. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

Amen. Let's pray together.