

BaptistWay Bible Series for April 12: Plan carefully and take action

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Intrigue sells. Novels and movies about spies, government secrets, subterfuge, danger, and action and adventure mix and sell very well. Ian Fleming's fictional character, British spy James Bond, has entertained millions in print and film. The Bond movie series alone probably has generated hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for its producers.

Fleming didn't invent the genre and wasn't the last word for them, either. Hundreds more storytellers have explored and exploited the world of spies. Personal favorites include Tom Clancy, Vince Flynn and James Rollins. In Rollins' *Sigma Force* series of novels, he writes about special forces-trained operatives who all have scientific doctorates—tough and smart government agents—who solve both historical and futuristic mysteries.

One of the things that make spy stories fun to read or see are the villains. Bond villains and their campy sidekicks made the movies a hoot to watch. Hugo Drax had Jaws (the henchman with the steel teeth), Max Zorin had May Day (Grace Jones—enough said) and Auric Goldfinger had Oddjob (remember his razor-sharp top hat?). All upped the danger factor. Of course, the fate of a nation—if not the world—always hangs in the balance. Small spy jobs are hardly worth the story for most of us. We want to see someone save the world.

Except for the neat spy gadgets, Nehemiah's second chapter might just read like a spy story. Take a look and you might agree. It has government intrigue, danger, reconnaissance, secret missions—and we'll be introduced

to three villains who will stay with us throughout the rest of the book.

And, like a lot of spy novels, Nehemiah's stakes are high. Like anyone on a mission, he'll have to plan carefully and take action. The fate of the Jewish nation is at risk. But he has an ace in the hole—he's backed by the greatest force in the universe. Sound like an intriguing story plot? Then read on.

The mission begins

Our previous lesson opened the book of Nehemiah and introduced us to the writer. He's an advisor and cupbearer to the king of Persia, Artaxerxes. Nehemiah receives a delegation of Jews that brings bad news. Despite 90 years of reoccupation of Jerusalem following their exile, the Jews still were living in a ruined city, and Jerusalem's walls—representing its defenses and dignity—still down.

The information is so disturbing to Nehemiah—even though he is a man of means and power in Persia—that he reacts with great sadness for his country, weeping and mourning.

But in addition to sadness, he also is moved to action on behalf of God's people, and he begins with prayer to God to act on his convictions and go before one of the most powerful men in the world with a gigantic request.

As we start chapter 2, about four months have elapsed since the Jewish delegation brought Nehemiah news of his homeland. What did he do during this time? Looking at chapters 1 and 2, three characteristics begin to mark Nehemiah: he's brave, he prays and he plans. It is likely Nehemiah used the intervening months praying for God's will and formulating plans for his task of rebuilding the Jerusalem walls.

When the chapter begins, we find Nehemiah doing his job: Serving the king and his queen wine. But there's a difference today. Nehemiah is visibly sad and Artaxerxes sees it. "Why is your face sad though you are not sick?" he

asks. “This is nothing but sadness of heart” (v. 2).

Even though it sounds innocently conversational, it’s a terrific moment of peril for Nehemiah. Display of negative emotions is a breach of Persian court etiquette. Nehemiah risks the death penalty for treason for his behavior in front of the royal couple (Esther 4:2).

His response shows both his respect for the king and his willingness to tell the king the truth, even if it puts him at risk of death. He assures the king of his loyalty with a blessing of eternal life, then tells the king about his months-long burden for his people.

Instead of anger or execution, the king’s response comes in the form of another question: “What would you request?” (v. 4). The question is the answer to Nehemiah’s prayer for an audience and Nehemiah recounts he “prayed to the God of heaven,” either in thanks or for wisdom for his next words. Possibly both. Either way, it showed Nehemiah’s grand allegiance that he would seek God for help before seeking help from the Persian ruler.

His answer to the king shows he had both planned carefully and prayed amply. After he relates his dream—to travel to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls—the king asks him when he will return. Satisfied with his answer, he grants Nehemiah’s request for leave, letters of passage and a grant for materials for rebuilding the gates. In addition to obliging Nehemiah his requests, Artaxerxes sends him with a military detachment to protect him during the 1,100-mile journey from Susa to Jerusalem. It is a testament, Nehemiah notes in verse 8, of God’s hand in the affairs of man.

Opposition and stealth

In verses 10 and 19, we’re introduced to Nehemiah’s opposition, three regional governors. Sanballat is identified as a Horonite (or “worshipper of Horon”), Tobiah is introduced as a governor for the Ammonites, a Samaritan group, and Geshem, a Arab leader. All three have something to

lose—relative political power and position—if the Jews show strength.

It is likely that Nehemiah knows of the opposition or suspects some opposition may occur. Instead of announcing his intentions to Jewish leaders—or anyone—he mounts a secret series of stealthy nighttime reconnaissance missions to gather intelligence about the conditions of the city's walls and gates. Taking alternate routes in and out of the city, he and part of his guard get an accurate gauge of Jerusalem's defenses and the effort it will take to rebuild them.

Most good spy stories center on secrets, but many of those also reveal those secrets to the reader. Nehemiah's story is no different. In verse 17, Nehemiah springs his plans to Jewish leaders, revealing his intent to all. By doing so, he accomplishes three things:

- First, he proposes his plan and optimistically encourages the Jews to renew their efforts to rebuild their city. It is met with an immediate positive response.
- Second, as a layman, he is able to share with the leaders about God's hand in his quest, providing a first-person testimony to God's power and favor.
- Third, by publicizing his plan, he exposes the opposition to the rebuilding of the walls, giving everyone a good idea of who stands in their way and the tactics the opposition will take (including accusing the Jews of treason in verse 19) to prevent their success.

Nehemiah presents a strong front of determination, giving the three governors a stern rebuttal by emphasizing the three and their followers have no claim on the Jews' Promised Land and that "the God of heaven will give us success" (v. 20).

It's a rousing start to what will be a long, arduous work for the Jews. But

it's also a great reminder for us today that progress can be made when a.) action is taken based on b.) careful planning while c.) relying on God's guidance and blessing.

Questions to explore

- *Review how you make decisions and take action on a daily basis: Which of these are you most likely to neglect—relying on God, planning or taking action?*
- Can any God-inspired idea survive when any of the following circumstances is present? a.) We fail to rely on God, b.) we fail to plan or c.) we fail to act.
- Nehemiah showed great courage when he risked his life before King Artaxerxes. How can you show courage when God calls you to act on his behalf?
- Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem represented popular opposition to the Jews. What are some of the circumstances or ideas that represent popular opposition to the modern-day Christian?