

Series: Invited to Ask

## “The Good Hand of God”

Nehemiah 1:11-2:8

As we open God’s Word, we continue in our series called “Invited to Ask.” Throughout this study we have been learning about the amazing opportunity that we have to go to God in prayer. Of course, there are times that we pray emergency prayers in times of crisis, but prayer shouldn’t be the last resort in our lives. It should be the priority in our lives every single day. There are some people that we want to talk to daily. We want to speak to our spouse or our kids. Perhaps try to touch base with our parents or a friend every day. Being made in the image of God, we have a deep longing for relationships. However, the One person that we should certainly make a priority to talk to daily is God. From the very beginning God walked with Adam in the cool of the day. We see from the example of Jesus that He regularly took intentional time to pray. We learn from the teaching of Jesus that prayer should be a consistent part of our daily life. I wonder what role prayer plays in your life. Is it consistent? Is it a priority? Are you intentional about the time you spend with God in prayer? Are you mindful about the things you say to Him?

Maybe you are someone who once prayed with great passion and fervor. Perhaps there was a time in your life when you prayed with great faith and great urgency, but you no longer do. What is it that hinders us along the way? Why do we seem to start out well, but rarely see it through? For some, we lose interest and get distracted so we just stop praying. Others of us grow spiritually cold if we don’t discipline ourselves to persevere and regularly grow our faith by trusting the promises of God’s Word. I am convinced, though, that one of the primary reasons that we stop praying about something is because we don’t see the prayer answered. Perhaps we ask and ask, but we don’t experience the answer. Perhaps we seek and seek, but the path is still unclear. Maybe we knock and knock, but the door just isn’t opening. What do we do then? This morning I can’t give us all the reasons that God may not appear to answer a given prayer, but I can say that God answers according to His glory and our good. There are many things that we may think would be good that we ask for, but only God in His omniscience knows if it is indeed good. I could pray to win the lottery and vow to give a great percentage to God, but only God knows if that would truly be good for me or not. We know, for example, for the vast majority who win the lottery that in the end it causes more harm than good. Just because God doesn’t answer our prayer in the way that we hope doesn’t mean that God is no longer good or that He is somehow limited in His power or that He hasn’t answered our prayer. Not only does God know WHAT is good for us, but He also knows WHEN it is good for us and HOW His answer will bring Him glory. I like the way the old adage described how God answers prayer. “If the request is wrong, God says no. If the timing is wrong, God says slow. If you are wrong, God says grow. But if the request is right, the timing is right, and you are right, God says go.” Unfortunately, we tend to interpret any response but “yes” as a “no,” but in doing so we ignore what God is doing when He tells us to slow down and grow. It is dangerous for God to put something in our hands without first doing something in our hearts to prepare us for what we’ll receive. **\*\*ILL: Mack receiving a rifle.** Mack wanted to bring it home. His grandfather declared it was his, but we weren’t ready to receive it. Mack wasn’t ready for that

responsibility. After I did some things to teach him and to help him, a year later we got it and brought it home.

This brings us to an important question for today. “Are you prepared to receive the answer to your prayers?” Regardless of God’s answer to your request, are you prepared to receive God’s answer and respond in a way that pleases Him? This morning we pick up from where we left off a few weeks ago with the story of Nehemiah.

## SHOW TEXT

As you recall, Nehemiah was a man of great position and influence. He served as the cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes who ruled from 464-423 B.C. As a cupbearer he was greatly trusted, respected, and valued. In his position, he had to be knowledgeable in court procedures, culturally aware, articulate in advice, and most importantly, trusted by the king. Nehemiah, though, wasn’t a Persian. He was a Jew. The Jewish people had experienced some rough times leading up to this moment. Perhaps you will remember how God chose the Jews to be His people and He greatly blessed them. However, the people turned their back on God and experienced the consequences of their actions. Babylon invaded Jerusalem and overthrew the city. They destroyed the wall, the temple, the houses, and burned the city gates. The Jews were then sent to Babylon where they served as slaves. Then, in God’s providence, God raised up a leader named Cyrus the Great who released the Jews to go back to their homeland to rebuild the city. Over 50,000 Jews returned to their native land. By the time Nehemiah comes on the scene it had been nearly a hundred years since the exiles had returned to their land. By now the people should have rebuilt the temple, the city, and the walls that surrounded it, but that was sadly not the case. When we last looked at Nehemiah 1, we saw that Nehemiah had discovered that the people of God were struggling to survive. Jerusalem still lay in ruins. The temple still lay destroyed. The city walls were in ruins and the people were a great reproach on God. We saw two weeks ago several keys to effective prayer by studying Nehemiah’s example. As soon as he learned of this circumstance, he was burdened and broken over the situation. He wept, mourned, and prayed for God to forgive, heal, provide, and protect. I believe he prayed for God to be glorified and for His people to no longer be a reproach. As we pick up the story from there, I believe God shows us from the Bible five marks of a person who is ready to receive the answer to their prayers.

### **I. Be Willing to Follow God (1:11)**

We pick up this morning right where we left off a few weeks ago at the end of chapter 1. Nehemiah asks God for success in his mission and for compassion from the king. The chapter ends with this simple statement, “Now I was the cupbearer to the king.” This sounds very simple. Nehemiah is simply stating his role in the king’s palace, but please don’t miss everything that this little statement entails. As the cupbearer to the king he was in a very privileged position. He was the most trusted member in the king’s cabinet. People would have given anything to have Nehemiah’s position. They would love to have the king’s ear, the king’s delicacies, and the great respect that this position received. However, because of his deep conviction, Nehemiah comes to a clear conclusion. He is so burdened to see God move on behalf of the Jewish people that he was willing to forfeit his position in order to see God intervene. Nehemiah wasn’t praying according to his

fleshly desires. His fleshly desires would have been for more money, more influence, more appreciation, more notoriety. He doesn't pray according to his will, but according to the will of God. When our willingness aligns with the will of God it is a powerful thing! In this moment, Nehemiah prayed for God to move, but he also put his "yes" on the table and willingly offered himself as part of the answer.

Please understand that I am not saying that we are to seek to answer our own prayers. Only God can answer prayer; however, as we pray, we should be a willing part of God's process of answering the prayer. We see this in **Luke 10:2b-3** as Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech (pray, ask) the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." Jesus says pray for more laborers to go out to gather the harvest. Then the very next verse says, "Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves." In other words, yes we should pray, but we must also be willing to be a part of the solution and join God where He is at work. **A prayer for divine intervention doesn't remove personal responsibility.** Nehemiah was ready for the answer to prayer because he was not just praying for a miracle. He was praying with a surrender and a willingness to do whatever God wanted him to do. He didn't just pray for God to do something amazing. He prayed for God to open the opportunity so that he could join Him. Here is a primary reason that we may not be ready for the answer to our prayers. Instead of praying for an opportunity to do something, we are often content just to pray that God will do something. We too often pray for miracles instead of opportunities. For example, we pray for God to bring a miraculous revival to our country and to others instead of first asking God to revive our own hearts. We pray for God to bless our children and our families, to help them live the right way, but instead we should be growing in Godliness and praying for wisdom in the decisions that we make. We pray for God to change our spouse's heart or attitude, when instead we should probably be praying that God would help us to love our spouse faithfully, sacrificially, and unconditionally. We should be actively seeking ways to serve them and put their needs above our own. We pray for a promotion at work or a better job, but how often do we pray for the Lord to help us be diligent with our current job so that we can prove ourselves worthy of the promotion? We pray for God to save our neighbor, but perhaps we should be praying for God to give us boldness and effectiveness as a witness. We pray for God to provide for the missionary or for the children in that foreign country, but give nothing personally towards meeting that need. We pray for God to change our laws concerning abortion in our country, while we do very little to support those who stand for life and continually vote for candidates that openly endorse it. My point is that it is easy for us to pray, "God please do something over there," and leave ourselves out of the equation. The point is simple – we must be willing to follow God and be a part of His plan. **H.B. Charles** said it well, "If you pray for an opportunity, you have to get up, make a personal commitment, and make yourself available for God to use you as a part of the answer to your own prayers." Nehemiah had no idea what God was about to do with him, but he made himself willing. We aren't ready for God's answer until we first yield ourselves completely to God and say, "Lord I am willing. Have Your way in me. May Your will be done."

## II. Be Waiting on God (2:1)

The next key is the one that is probably most painful for us. It is the horrible 4-letter word “wait.” Remember, Nehemiah has fasted and prayed, and he prayed specifically, “Make Your servant successful today.” Then the text tells us, “It came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes.” When Nehemiah first heard the news of the crisis among the Jews it was the Hebrew month Chislev, which is around mid-November to mid-December. He was burdened and wept and prayed for days. He asked God for an answer that day. However, we now learn that it is the Hebrew month Nisan, which is mid-March to mid-April on our calendar. In other words, FOUR MONTHS had passed from Nehemiah’s first prayer to now. We see here in chapter 2 that Nehemiah is still serving the king, still fulfilling his responsibility, still being faithful in his role. He hasn’t forgotten about the issues he had taken to God in prayer. I believe that the context proves that he was still praying about it. He was still burdened about the need of God’s people and he was still willing to do whatever God wanted him to do. What is he doing? He is waiting. This isn’t a delay or a stall tactic. This is Nehemiah waiting on God to give clarity to His will.

Let me ask you this morning, “Are you willing to wait on God?” Many of us never do what God wants us to do or experience what He wants us to experience because we are unwilling to wait. We can have the right goals, the right plans, and even the right motives and completely miss God’s plan if we are unwilling to wait. It is easy for us to run ahead of the Lord and do our own thing. It is easy for us to get impatient with God and think we can do it on our own. It is easy to think, “Well, God gave us common sense. We can do whatever.” We must be patient to wait on God. Many have missed God’s will by running ahead to their own thing, but I pray that won’t be us. **Hebrews 6:12** tells us that it is through “faith and patience” that we “inherit the promises” of God. When I think of waiting on God, I am reminded of how difficult this was for the Israelites as they were following Moses. God did amazing things for them, yet time and time again they would get restless and impatient. They would turn to complaining and doing their own thing. In **Exodus 14:13-14** as they are fleeing from Pharaoh, God led them to the Red Sea which seemed impossible. The people were afraid, and they began to panic. They complained against Moses, “Why have you done this to us? Why have you led us out here to die? Didn’t we tell you this was going to happen?” Then Moses said to the people, “Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever. The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent.” When Moses said, “Stand by” the phrase that was used literally means “stand still.” He is saying, “Wait. Don’t rush ahead. Don’t jump to conclusions. Don’t scatter in your own direction. Wait on the Lord. He will move. He will give direction. He will show us what to do.” Notice what David said in **Psalms 40:1-3**, “I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many will see and fear and will trust in the Lord.” Listen to all that God did for David because he waited on the Lord. The prophet Isaiah says, “Amen!” In **Isaiah 40:31** God said, “Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.”

**\*\*ILL:** I imagine that none of us like to wait. I was reminded of this on Tuesday as I was flying to Texas. I could have flown out of Charlottesville but doing so would have required a connection

flight which meant I would be wasting a lot of time in the Atlanta airport. So, I chose to fly out of Dulles so I could take one direct flight. I ended up waiting at the gate or on the runway for over three hours as my flight was delayed and delayed and delayed again. I don't like waiting. However, I wasn't just waiting. I also realized that God was doing something during the waiting that helped me to persevere in the waiting. I will tell you more about that in a moment.

Please understand, it isn't just that we are to wait. We are waiting on the Lord. This is what Nehemiah was doing. He had heard 4 months earlier about the status of the people in Judah and he began to pray. Now, he is still praying and waiting for God to move. He takes his burden to the Lord and he waits. He doesn't storm up to the king's throne and demand a release. He doesn't get a bunch of people together to discuss his next move. He doesn't make hasty decisions on his own. He simply took the issue to the Lord, prayed, kept praying, and waited to see God at work. He is waiting on God to soften the king's heart. He is waiting for an open door. We aren't ready for the answer to our prayers until we are willing to surrender our will to God and then to wait on Him. Friend, never forget that God's will and God's plans are worth the wait. I love the way that **Warren Wiersbe** said it, "When you wait on the Lord in prayer, you are not wasting your time; you are investing it. God is preparing both you and your circumstances so that His purposes will be accomplished."

These first two points are significant. If we are going to be ready for God's answer to prayer, we must be willing and we must be waiting. The words of the old hymn said it well: "Have Thine own way, Lord. Have Thine own way. Thou art the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after Thy will. While I am waiting, yielded and still." We all want God's answer to our prayer, but we aren't ready for that answer until we are first willing and waiting.

### **III. Be Watching for God (2:4-5)**

So, picture the scene. Nehemiah is faithfully serving and faithfully praying, trusting that God will work. He is also doing something else – he is watching and looking for evidence that God is at work. I believe he was watching for God's work from the moment he began to pray. Each day as he stood before the king – serving, listening, discussing – he continually looked for a possible open door. He was watching for how God might work.

**\*\*ILL:** When you have prayed over situations and there are delays, I encourage you to look for how God is at work. I am not suggesting that every delay is by God's design, but I have learned that usually when there are delays there is something else that God is wanting to accomplish first. So, we must be willing to watch for God. I saw this personally on Tuesday. To be perfectly clear, I was very frustrated with my delays in travel on Tuesday, but when I start off my day I usually pray and ask the Lord to guide my steps in who I will meet along the way. This is especially true when I travel. And, as I boarded the plane on Tuesday, I was seated next to a young man. We had exchanged names and general "hellos" and then went on to whatever we were doing. Our plane left the gate, we got in line with the other planes, we got to the runway, and suddenly we stopped. The pilot then informed us that there was a minor maintenance issue that required us to go back to the gate. They told us it would only take 30 minutes so they allowed us to get up if we desired, but they encouraged us to stay on the plane. I thought, "Well, I'm just going to stay here." I offered

the man next to me to get out, but we both had made the same decision. Half of the people left the plane, leaving us there to talk. It seemed strange, but I felt that the Lord might be working in this delay. So, we began a deeper conversation. I learned that he is a young dad who has had a recent move and transition in his life. I learned that he is a born-again believer. Being from upstate New York, his mannerisms and expressions reminded me of some of our families here. I felt like I was talking to Jason Hewitt's little brother. 😊 As we talked, in my spirit I began to pray, "Lord, help me encourage him." It wasn't long before I discovered that he used to lead worship and was very involved in ministry, but due to various transitions in life, he wasn't really active any longer. Eventually the part was repaired and they released us from the gate. We backed away from the gate and stopped again. The part that was causing the issue was malfunctioning again. Because we were only feet from the gate, they did the repair work while everyone now stayed on the plane. We sat there for an hour. Then they determined that they would take us back to the gate and let us off. When all was said and done, we had waited for 3 ½ hours and I knew I would now be late for my meeting. While I didn't enjoy the waiting, I can honestly say that I saw God working and moving. I could've been huffy and puffy, or I could've looked for how God was at work. I'm thankful in this particular incident I chose the latter.

The truth is that many of us, me included, sometimes miss what God is doing because we are too busy, too distracted, or too bent out of shape to notice how God is working. It was easy for me to notice it in that moment because literally God put the person right beside me and literally gave me little option of anywhere else to be. I couldn't miss this. But, how often do I miss it normally? How often do we miss His activity because we aren't watching? David continually watched for God. He said in **Psalm 5:2-3**, "Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God, for to You I pray. In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice; In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch." This would be a good way for us to pray every day as well.

This particular day was just a normal day for Nehemiah. As a cupbearer, he had a to be a very calm man. In that culture, everyone served at the will of the king. Rulers in that day were sheltered from anything that would bring them unhappiness. As a result, regardless of what was going on in your personal life, you had to put on a smile and be uplifting to the king. Nehemiah had managed to keep his emotions in check for four months, but on this day the state of his heart showed on his face. As Nehemiah served the king, the king noticed something. He asked, "Nehemiah, why is your face so sad when you are not sick?" Then instantly the king discerned, "This is nothing but sadness of heart." If a close cabinet member of the king appeared saddened or in deep thought, in ancient cultures, the king would assume you were up to no good and would have you interrogated or possibly killed. They would assume the worst of you. Sad servants raised serious suspicions. In this case, the king immediately determines that Nehemiah is sad. Still, Nehemiah was afraid. He knew this wasn't good. He answered honestly and wisely. He said, "Why should I not be sad when the place of my fathers' tombs is in ruins?" Nehemiah was honest because he was referring to the suffering condition of Judah, but Nehemiah was also wise because he didn't mention Judah by name and because he referred specifically to something that would receive the respect and affection of the Persian king. The Persians were deeply mystical about those who died. So, Nehemiah referred to the burial place of his ancestors knowing that it might grant favor from the king. Suddenly the king said, "Nehemiah, what can I do for you?" Nehemiah didn't know exactly what

he was looking for. He had been praying and watching for months, and in this moment he knows that God is up to something. Normally at this point, he would be tried or sentenced to death, but this is not the case. In fact, the king has shown him kindness and concern. The king has literally asked, "What can I do for you?" Nehemiah's spiritual radar tells him that God is doing something. So, what does he do? Verse 4 he tells us, "So I prayed to the God of heaven." This isn't a long prayer. This isn't even public professions. Privately within his spirit he discerns that God is moving, so he prays, "God this is it. Please help me. Please guide me."

We aren't ready for God's answer to our prayers until we are first willing to follow, waiting and watching for His movement. Nehemiah didn't need a miracle, thunder and lightning, or some other supernatural sign to know that God was working. He saw the movement of God through the words of the king. I believe wholeheartedly that if we, too, watch for how God is at work we will be surprised how we see Him move.

#### IV. **Be Working with God (2:6-8)**

Please understand that faithful praying doesn't mean that we are to pray and then be negligent doing nothing. It doesn't mean that we pray and sit back and leave everything up to Him. Some will say, "Just let go and let God." I understand that this is good in the sense of trusting God, but trusting God doesn't negate personal responsibility. You can ask God to provide you a home, but one isn't likely to fall from heaven. You will have to search and look. **Matthew Henry** said it this way, "He (Nehemiah) did not sit still and say, 'Let God now do His own work, for I have no more to do,' but set himself to forecast what he could do towards it. Our prayers must be seconded with our serious endeavors, else we mock God."

True prayer means that we take the matter to God and ask, but we are to also seek for His clear direction and work accordingly. This is a part of us partnering with Him in the process. **\*\*ILL:** Let me illustrate that with my delayed flight. The first 2 hours of my delay it was obvious that God wanted this young man and I to talk about the things we discussed, but by the time they announced that we were heading back to the gate to let us get off the plane, I was concerned. I prayed, "God I need to make that meeting." So, while in the plane I called the travel agent and asked if there was another flight that could get me there. She informed me there was another flight leaving in 25 minutes. I was hopeful. So, I got off the plane, but suddenly realized I had a problem. Right before I boarded the plane, they made me check in my carry-on because the overhead compartments were too full. So, I couldn't get on another plane until I had that bag. The flight crew said they would have it to me shortly. I waited 5 minutes, 10 minutes. I went to the check-in desk and gave them my baggage claim ticket and said, "I need this as soon as possible." All the while I am praying and hoping to make it on another plane. Fifteen minutes later they arrive with my bag. The other plane had already left. At this point my options are getting very limited and I am wondering if I am going to make it to Texas. The man at the front desk said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we will update our flight status in 30 minutes." I have to be honest, I wasn't ecstatic. I had been praying and planning, but it was obvious things weren't going so well. In the midst of all that, I was hungry. I hadn't eaten anything but a protein bar hours earlier. So, I know this is strange and fairly uncommon, but I looked at my new friend and said, "Hey man, I'm going to go around the corner to eat lunch. Want to join me?" So, we ate a sandwich, hung out, and talked further about his

family and God's working in his life. We ate and came back to the gate to discover everyone was gone. The guy at the desk said, "We've been waiting on you. We are ready to take off." We rushed to get on the plane and within a matter of minutes we were above the clouds. Once we leveled off, I grabbed one of my books out of my bag. I began to read. Anyone want to guess what the first chapter was about? It was about "Waiting on God." I began to laugh to myself, "God I don't like it, but I get it."

In that illustration, I was waiting and I was watching, but I also took responsibility to plan and try to consider what options were available to me. Nehemiah seems to have done the same thing. When the king asked what could be done for him, he didn't say, "Well let me get back to you later on this." Nehemiah was ready. Why? Because he had already been praying and planning. Nehemiah didn't know every detail that he would need, but he had certainly thought and prayed through a lot. He asked to go to Judah. He gave the king a definite timeline. He requested letters to give to the governors along his route. He requested a letter to get lumber from the king's forest. He even knew the name of the man in charge of the king's lumber. He asked for provision of the things that he would need to get the job done. All of this was being done as he prayed. Some would say, "Isn't his planning a lack of prayer?" And, I would say, "Absolutely not!" Faith in God doesn't mean there is disorder and no planning. It is because Nehemiah believed that God would answer that he planned and prepared for the opportunity that God would one day provide. Yes, we should plan and prepare. It is a part of working with God. However, we must remember that it is God's plans that will stand, and we must pray that His will would be done. While travelling this week, I did pray and I did plan, but in the end I realized that my plans weren't the ones that God wanted me to pursue. So, when my plan was out the window, I realized that God had another route. I stayed where I was. I built a relationship with my brother in Christ. And, I even ended up getting to where I was going. Was I a little late? Yes. Had I missed dinner? Yes. But, was I in God's will and a part of His work? Yes, absolutely! To be ready for God's answer to our prayer we must be willing, waiting, watching, and working.

#### **V. Be Worshipful of God (2:8b)**

Nehemiah was quick to acknowledge what was going on in this moment. He praised God for His amazing work and provision. He knew that this miraculous provision wasn't because of his effort, his management, his boldness, his speaking ability, his influence, or anything else he brought to the table. Had he worked? Yes. Had he planned? Yes. Had he prayed? Yes. But here is the key. It was the power of God, the grace of God, and the favor of God that was at work. Nehemiah isn't saying, "Look at what I did." He is saying, "By God's grace, look at what He did." Friend, I believe that God delights in answering prayers that will result in Him being praised and glorified.