

## Walking Clearly Through Planning

Colossians 4:5-6; Nehemiah 1-2:8

**Introduction:** We live in a world with unlimited desires, limited resources of time and money, and yet a limitless God. Erin and I are in that stage of parenting where we have desires for our kids (I've given up desires for myself with 3 girls). We want them to enjoy and learn instruments and the beauty and complexity of music, the discipline and camaraderie of sports, the shaping of church camps, and learning potential of field trips with class mates. This is to say nothing of straightening crooked teeth. The problem is God has only given me two kidneys and I have to stay attached to at least one! What this means for the Bakker family is we have to **evaluate often** our values and desires, and **set a plan in motion** to be able to engage in these activities. Planning does several things for us: 1) Clarifies our goals and values; 2) Helps us say "no" to other good things; 3) Reminds us that we are finite and are not God, and are dependent on Him for all things.

This morning, at the conclusion of the service, we have the privilege of commissioning two men as elders of Grace Rancho. This represents a culmination of countless hours of prayer, of families moving locations, of some heartache and disappointment, of workdays and renovations, of membership classes, of uncertainty, and of sorrows and joys. We have seen multiple churches come together as one, some move back to their childhood home and church, while others decided to switch to a church close to home rather than commute. We've seen the faithful, good hand of God as He worked through His faithful people to do something that most were not sure of and some thought it could not happen. Now, it has become abundantly clear that elders have been revealed (not made), and they will be charged with shepherding, teaching, and leading by example this precious flock of believers in Rancho Cucamonga.

The call of God on this church and ANY church is to honor and glorify Him as He draws those He's called out of the world into a family, His body, who will live lovingly, obediently, and actively in magnifying Christ and making Him known. The task is to **make disciples, to care for those within, to equip for the purpose of ministry, and to send to reach those without.** In fact, Rancho was simply playing these Biblical realities out faithfully, as those here were convinced to go and make disciples in a new place (at least new to them). What has made this revitalization go? They have focused on Biblical teaching, matched with Biblical care, that leads to Biblical training, that leads to Biblical disciple making. Not complicated, but so hard and missed by so many. It is why we are so excited to think about what is next, and as much as Grace Rancho has been revitalized, we pray Grace Simi will deeply embrace the same passion shown by this initial group at Rancho.

Last week we started thinking through **the foundation of prayer from which everything else springs.** It is always convicting but also invigorating to remember that we are commanded to **devote ourselves to prayer**, to wrestle with God, seek His face, and that HE LISTENS to the cries of His people. We pray according to His will, conforming our desires to His, and pray specifically to **declare the mystery of Christ** to those who do not know Him. Often we do not share the gospel, let alone make disciples, because we simply do not pray expectantly that God will save those we know. Even Paul knew he needed the prayer of the church for opportunities and open doors, since prison was NOT the most likely of evangelistic hot spots, yet it was there that he saw much fruit. So this year, we want to **commit to praying for specific individuals that we have some amount of contact with, praying for opportunity and open doors to declare the mystery of Christ.** *More on that in two weeks.*

But prayer should always be accompanied with action, and the best kind of action begins with careful planning and preparation. Things rarely *just happen*, and even when they do, when we are NOT prepared, we miss them. So layering on top of our foundation of prayer is engaging in careful planning,

preparing our hearts, minds, and time frames for when God brings opportunities. When we do this, we are ready to take the step of **risk** that is a full expression of faith.

### Planning for Wise Interaction (Col. 4:5-6)

*Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*

### Evaluating Life Commitments

Paul was not concerned about the bars and doors of his prison cell opening, but he desperately wanted open doors of gospel opportunities. He wanted the church at Colossae to embrace the same reality. **Remember**, the church at Colossae was small and seemingly insignificant. They had no church building, no signage or billboard on the corner, no advertising, no mailers, no 'footprint' in the city, no program, no school or sports program, and no partnerships with other Christian non-profits in the city. *What did they have?* Frankly, the same powerful resource that we have. They had a group of passionate followers of Jesus who had been transformed from darkness to light, who were saved out of gross sin and shame, who's eyes were opened out of legalism and moralism, who were once adulterers, homosexuals, drunkards, liars, and not only were they stuck in their sin, but they loved it. This group that gathered to worship, hear teaching, and care for each other was **unleashed on the city** each week, silently infiltrating the businesses, homes, and community of city God had placed them. This is why Paul added a layer on top of the **foundation of prayer**. They were to **walk wisely, thoughtfully, and graciously toward outsiders**. Walking wisely would bring clarity to what they prayed.

Three things to notice here:

- **There is a way for believers to walk, live, or walk foolishly** - "Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense, but a man of understanding walks straight ahead" (Prov. 15:21) . Believers are not immune to allowing our minds to be consumed with this world, to chase after the security and comfort that can be attained. We can play the comparison game, or the self-justification game, to not *be bad*, staying away from the really bad sins. But we are never called to live nominally, or to simply be a little better than our pagan neighbor. "**Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.**" (Eph. 4:15-16). Foolish living forgets that our time is NOT our own, that Christ owns us, and He never asks us to take the path of least resistance, to aim for the center of the bell shaped curve of life. The days are evil and the playing field is NOT neutral. There is a battle raging for our soul, and our enemy would love us to believe everything is just ok. That is foolish living.
- **There must be thought and evaluation as to how we interact with those outside the church** - But Paul challenged the church to think specifically about their life lived out in front of unbelievers, which would have included their work and community life. Before Paul would even address what words we speak or what message we audibly communicate, it was imperative that the church evaluate the way she lived in the marketplace. This means that the choices we make, based on the values we have, matter. This was NOT a **fearful response** to the world around, but a hopeful, proactive one. How we act at work matters. How we work matters. If we claim to be redeemed followers of Christ and live according to the same values as our unsaved friends, we offer nothing better, nothing transcendent, nothing transformative. When I talk to my neighbors or friends outside of Christ, it actually helps communicate the weight of the gospel when they know my commitment to this church and the people here. We must exercise wisdom every day, not in putting out a vibe of artificial perfection but of gracious redemption, and the joy that follows.

- **There are opportunities that MUST be redeemed** - The phrase "making the most of the time" is descriptive, since it comes from the root "to redeem or buy back" the time. The idea is to gain or reclaim time, and the idea of time here has the idea of "opportunity". In other words, Paul modeled praying for opportunities to speak the mysteries of Christ **with the full understanding that God would actually bring them!** God brings the opportunities and our job is make the most of them. But our problem is that we can easily MISS opportunities right in front of us because we have NOT PLANNED or committed to prayerfully walk wisely. We are too afraid to share with a family member, too ashamed to share at work, too insecure to share with a neighbor. We are like the young athlete who is so afraid to miss that we never take the shot ("You miss 100% of the shots you don't take" - Wayne Gretzky - ----Michael Scott). Our days are short, and though God will lovingly save who He chooses, and Jesus will lost none, that should ONLY serve to enhance our motivation to make the most of every presented opportunity.

*Have you prayed for God to open the door? Are you prepared when He does?*

### **Promoting Genuine Conversation**

Sharing the gospel is a learned activity. What I mean is, the gospel is a set of information that can be approached in a myriad of ways, but there is a core that has to be included. God's glory and holiness, our sinfulness, God's wrath, Jesus work of substitution and atonement, the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation to the Father, and repentance, confession, and following are all parts of the whole gospel. This is one of the reasons our speech is so important.

Our speech should be characterized by **grace** as opposed to brash, gross, dirty, or argumentative talk. It also should be *seasoned with salt*, a phrase the Greeks would have equated with *wit or charm*. It is the kind of speech that seeks to give the right answer at the right time to a person. This kind of speech should be more than sharing the gospel, but should absolutely color how we do. We can interact with unbelievers in our work with thoughtfulness, encouragement, and engagement with what is going on in culture. I think sometimes we so separate or bifurcate sharing the truth of Jesus from the rest of life that we equate sharing the gospel like clubbing someone over the head. Instead we look for genuine engagement by asking questions, caring about the others life, and lovingly sharing truth. This also means that how we use our words will **underline or undermine** what we would share about the gospel. If you talk the same way all cops, coaches, or salesmen talk, we are not using gracious, salty speech. It often takes many interactions with the gospel in order for someone to come to grips with the message, since most people we interact with are NOT coming to us with a blank slate but rather a full basket of ideas and experiences that color how they view God, Jesus, and Christians. We have an opportunity to unpack all those ideas and reload them with the truth, thoughtfully, patiently, intellectually, and Biblically without disengaging from current news and trends.

### **Keeping the Tension**

Our lives are full and time is a limited resource. We have responsibilities to work, to manage our homes, rear children, lead families, and love each other in the church. Often what happens in life is we look for **margin**, seeking someplace to cut out responsibility and time to be able to accomplish all the other tasks and responsibilities we have. But it is clear that to cut out "**making the most of every opportunity**" cannot be one of them. We have been called to make disciples, to care for the body, to train/be trained for ministry, and to be sent out into the harvest. The ONLY WAY, and I mean the only way that we can faithfully do all that God has called us to is to prayerfully plan our lives out, to **see time as a precious commodity the way we view money or our kids**. We have enough time to be faithful. We have the same amount as Paul in a day. The question is: **have we been prayerfully thoughtful, wise, and planned out to not waste any of it.**

It has been apparent to me one of the most observable qualities of our soon to be commissioned elders in front of me. They are character qualified, gifted, and have desire to be elders, which are all Biblical qualifications. But they each had to make plans in their life to free up time to not only care for their families, but to care for others. They have given up overtime, trips, vacations, hobbies, and other good things to redeem the time and buy back opportunities. That is why they are often the first to show up on Sunday morning and the last to leave. Its why their homes are places of hospitality and their phone is always on. Maturity in ministry does not just happen, but there has to be planning with desire and preparation with prayer. *But you may be asking, "how do we get there or where do we begin?"* Let's look at a descriptive story that shows this process.

### **Planning for Prepared Action (Neh. 1-2:8)**

We look back, as we did a couple of years ago, at the life of Nehemiah, known for accomplishing the near impossible: *rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem, which had laid in ruins for decades, against all odds, and did it in 52 days* (Neh. 6:15). But what is so intriguing about Nehemiah is **how he got there**. We are dropped into the mid-life of this extraordinary leader who, at one point, would have seen wall-building as the furthest thing from his mind. He was a Jew living in a foreign land, raised in exile under a foreign government. Yet this obstacle did not hinder him from having an active relationship with his God, nor did it dissuade him from moving up in his government job. In fact, he had risen the ranks of the court of King Artaxerxes, considered one of the most powerful men in the world, a man who would not be trifled with. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the King, meaning the king trusted him with his life. Because of this trusted position, a cupbearer was more like a "chief of staff", one with whom the king would ask questions or gain input. This was not a position for the faint of heart, as Nehemiah knew that any day, the next chicken sandwich could be his last. So, Nehemiah was already a man of integrity, honesty, humility, and courage, which were all preparatory for what God was going to do with and through him to accomplish the impossible.

### **Gaining a Proper Vision**

On a late November day (month of Chislev), while strolling at the winter palace of Susa, Nehemiah received an official delegation that had returned from Jerusalem. The leader was his brother, and his report about the conditions were grave. There was trouble and shame as the Temple had been completed (under the leadership of Ezra), but the walls laid in ruin. The enemies of the land had won the game of politics and had convinced King Artaxerxes (Ezra 4) to declare a cessation of wall building in the land. A place of worship was acceptable, but a defensive stronghold, not so much. This left the returners of the land without centralized strength and unity, and though they were back in the land, they were NOT possessing the land the way they should/could have.

Here is where Nehemiah knew his Bible. He knew **Psalm 137**, which says, *"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill. Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, If I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy."* Each Jew in exile would have known the same verse.

The difference for Nehemiah: **he believed it, and acted on it.**

**His big action step?** (If you get this one wrong, you have not been listening) He **wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed**. He sought the Lord's face. He did not pray to build a wall! He prayed because he did not know what to do, and the task seemed far too great for him. What was he supposed to do about Jerusalem?! He had never been there, and he was simply a cupbearer. But Nehemiah knew the secret to gaining clarity of vision. He prayed with a **high view of God** ("*the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love*), **confession of sin** (corporate, familial, and personal - 1:6) and prayed the **promises of God** ("*Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses*" 1:8-10), including an almost word for word rendering of **Deuteronomy 9:29**. He prayed relentlessly, for **4-5 months**, since the chapter 2:1 takes place in **April**. He prayed for **success**, but not personal success, but that God's name

would be praised: *O 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 man.*" (1:11)

He knew that no self-sufficient man prays. "The self-sufficient do not pray; they merely talk to themselves. The self-satisfied will not pray; they have no knowledge of need. The self-righteous cannot pray; they have no basis on which to approach God."<sup>1</sup> But he also knew that planning had to accompany faithful prayer.

### Waiting but Not Sitting Around

Prayer requires waiting on the Lord. Waiting teaches us to trust Him rather than ourselves, seeing His timing as better than ours. But if we're honest, we hate waiting rooms. The idea of doing nothing other than people watching and counting the squares in the carpet don't feel very productive. But Nehemiah prayed AND planned. He began to research how long a trip to Jerusalem would take. He looked into the political and social issues of the land of Jerusalem and reviewed the king's declarations in the royal log. He began to consider what it would cost in terms of finances, manpower, and political will. He did all of this while seeking God's face and NOT knowing *how it would all work, or if it would work at all.*

I wonder if this is where it breaks down for us. We pray, see nothing happen, and stop. Nehemiah prayed and planned, and even when God opened the door and answered his prayers, he was caught off guard. But if we truly believed God would answer our prayer, wouldn't we want to prepare ourselves for the answer? If we are going to reach our neighbor with the gospel, wouldn't we also free up time to be with them? If we pray for our community, wouldn't we also research ways to serve and bless in ways that is truly needed? If we pray for the nations, wouldn't we also learn about our missionaries and look for ways to partner? If we pray to reach the city of Simi Valley with the gospel, would we not also know who is moving here more and more, like our Spanish speaking friends? Waiting on the Lord does not mean sitting around, but preparing ourselves for what God will do.

### Willing to Risk When Opportunity Comes

Well, you may or may not know the next part of the story, but the day came when the king asked the question, noticing that Nehemiah was looking sad (NOT a good look for the guy checking for poison in the king's food). "**What are you requesting?**" Opportunity. Door open. Answered prayer. But also the culmination of planning. Nehemiah walked through **fear** (2:2), continued in prayer (2:4), and with **full risk, asked for the audacious: release me for a year** (turned into 12 - it was a government operation after all), asked the King to reverse a previous policy, and asked the King to help fund and protect a defensive stronghold to be built within Artaxerxes kingdom. The king's response? "**The king granted me what I asked, FOR THE GOOD HAND OF MY GOD WAS UPON ME**" (2:8).

God has promised to build His church and even the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). Jesus will save all that the Father has given to Him, and He will not lose one (John 6:39). The One who has all authority in heaven and earth will be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20). This compels us to pray more fervently for God to accomplish all that He has planned and to use us in whatever way He wants to do it. We plan and prepare in ways that we believe **God will actually use US in His harvest, not just someone else.** And we prepare our minds and hearts to **RISK** for the all-satisfying Savior with whom we can never lose, even as we lose our lives in this world.

<sup>1</sup> Cyril J. Barber, "Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership" p. 22-23.

I want us all to begin to think of **WHO** we are going to pray for this year. Not a long list (although you can --- you overachievers ---- you know who you are), but a consistent one. We could have hundreds of people prayed for everyday, seeking Gods' face and begging Him to save! We can do this individually together, encouraging each other to keep going, to trust and plan, preparing ourselves for what God will do. And what He does may be radically different than what we thought, and that means it will always be better.