

“A Vision For Ministry”

Nehemiah 1–2

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to the first chapter of Nehemiah. We’ve been in Mark for the past several months, and I’ll come back to it later this year. I want to encourage you to find a D-group next week if you are not already in one. We’re beginning a study of the life of Elijah called “Ups and Downs,” and I’m also taking a few weeks to preach on his life. But we’ll come back to Mark. If you are new to Hopewell, today may be a good day for you as you get to hear what we’re about. Today, we’re going to take some time to think about our ministry vision at Hopewell. Now, I know that whenever the pastor announces that he wants to talk about ‘vision’ for the future, people immediately start getting nervous. Some of you are already thinking, ‘How much is this going to cost?’ Or you’re wondering, ‘What are they changing?’ And a few of you are just hoping I don’t say, ‘We’re going to three services.’ Go ahead and be at ease, because we’re not doing any of that...today.

Vision is an interesting word, and most of us don’t think much about our vision until we can’t see. You go to the eye doctor, he puts that machine in front of your face and starts asking, ‘Which is better, one or two? One or two?’ And after about five minutes, I don’t know anymore, I’m just guessing. Sometimes, I think the church can be that way about direction. We know that something needs to become clearer, but we’re not quite sure what we’re supposed to be seeing.

Vision is what brings us together under a common goal and direction. It serves as the lens by which we evaluate whether or not we pursue a thing. If it is not in keeping with the vision that God has given us, it might be a good thing, but it will only keep us from the main thing. Our mission as a church remains the same—“Leading People to Follow Christ.” Vision is the way we go about pursuing that

mission. Vision is an exciting, challenging thing. Vision is all about 'seeing.' It includes a look back, a look around, and a look ahead.

Vision involves a look back. There are times when it is helpful to look backward and remember what God has done. In fact, throughout Scripture, God's people are repeatedly told to 'remember.' Israel was instructed to remember how God had delivered them from Egypt, provided for them in the wilderness, and brought them into the land of promise. The psalmist regularly recalled the mighty acts of God so that one generation might declare His works to another. I think there is something spiritually healthy about remembering because it reminds us that whatever we possess today is ultimately by the grace of God.

And there's a sense in which vision involves looking around. You've got to know where you've been and where you currently are before you can map a direction to where you want to go. When we stop to look around at what God has done and is continuing to do here at Hopewell, it is a humbling thing. I want to give you an idea of where we've been this year (see slides):

Worship...

- Currently averaging just under 2,000 in weekly attendance (3,032 on Easter)
- Our combined giving continues to remain strong as a church
- 79 baptisms this year, 163 other additions

Discipleship...

- Currently averaging 1,150 in D-groups (68% of worship attendance)
- 145 Preschool weekly average
- 132 Adventure Kids weekly average (8/16/26 record of 166)

- 123 Transit students last Sunday!
- 108 completed four sessions of Discover Hopewell this year
- We are in need of more volunteers right now (Tap the QR code for info)

Ministry...

- Total of 3013 players, 657 volunteers in Hopewell Recreation Ministry
- 7 Mission trips with 100 people sent out
- \$531,194.42 in Vision 10-10-10 giving
- Counseling Center continues to see people

Praise God for where we've been and for all that He's done! At the same time, we eventually have to ask about not only what God has done, and is doing, but what He desires to do in the future. Gratitude for yesterday lead to responsibility for tomorrow. And that is where vision for ministry is important. Vision is about a direction that looks forward in faith. It is more than organizational planning. It is the spiritual ability to look honestly at present realities, discern what faithfulness to God requires, and then lead God's people toward that future. Spiritual vision does not begin with human ambition. It begins with conviction. Its not about asking, "What do we want to accomplish?" It is, "What would God have us become, what is obedience requiring of us in this moment?" I know of no passage that illustrates this kind of vision more clearly than the opening chapters of Nehemiah. (Read)

Nehemiah lived during a complicated period in Israel's history. The Babylonian captivity had ended, and groups of Jews had already returned to their homeland. The temple had been rebuilt, but Jerusalem itself was vulnerable because its

walls were still broken down. Nehemiah was hundreds of miles away in Susa, serving as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. It was a position that gave him influence. Some of his fellow Jews arrived from Judah, and Nehemiah asked them about Jerusalem. And their news was devastating, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.” Pay attention there not just to the news, but Nehemiah’s response to it. He could have heard the problem and gone back to his duties. I mean, Jerusalem was hundreds of miles away, its walls had been in shambles for years, and Nehemiah had not caused the problem. However, he says in verse 4, “As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days.”

Something happened in Nehemiah’s heart that eventually changed the direction of his life. He became unable to accept as normal something that he knew was inconsistent with what ought to be. The ruin of Jerusalem became a burden, the burden drove him to prayer, prayer led to vision, and vision eventually moved him to action. Long before he ever went to work, God had already been doing a work in Nehemiah himself. And so I want to point out a few things to you about a vision for ministry, where it begins and why it is important.

1—Vision BEGINS with a burden (1:1-4)

“As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept...”

The first thing we learn from Nehemiah is that vision generally begins when someone becomes dissatisfied with a condition that others have learned to tolerate. The walls of Jerusalem had not fallen the previous day, and their ruin wasn’t new information to the people living there. They walked past those ruins every day. Children had grown up seeing them. And after enough time passed,

what should have been unacceptable had simply become normal. Jerusalem was the city associated with the purposes of God, the worship of God, and the testimony of God's people among the nations. Its condition was a visible reminder that something was not as it ought to be.

Vision begins when we refuse to become comfortable with realities that should burden the people of God. What are some of those?

- We should be burdened when people around us live and die without Christ.
- We should be burdened when people attend church without becoming mature disciples of Jesus.
- We should be burdened when children and students grow up in our ministries but disconnect from the church as they enter adulthood.
- We should be burdened when marriages collapse and families struggle.

Over the past few months, I have found myself thinking increasingly about four areas in particular. I want us to become a church of deeper **spiritual** life, where people do not merely attend worship but are genuinely growing in their walk with Christ. I want us to become increasingly **mission** focused with renewed urgency about reaching people who are far from God. I want us to be more intentional about the next **generation**, ensuring that children, students, and young adults are not merely ministries we serve but people we are preparing to carry the gospel forward. And I want us to develop a vision for **multiplication**, believing that God has blessed us not simply so that we can gather more people here, but so that we can develop leaders, send people out, and extend the gospel far beyond ourselves. Those four ideas describe the church I believe that we can increasingly become—spiritually vibrant, missionally engaged, generationally

intentional, and multiplication minded. As long as people remain lost, the church has to keep moving in their direction. And so vision begins with a burden. Then notice a second thing:

2—Vision must be BATHED in prayer (1:5-11)

“And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God...”

This second thing about Nehemiah’s vision is just as important as the first. Once he got burdened, he did not immediately begin to build. His first response is prayer. Verse 4 says that he “continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” The prayer recorded here reveals something about the character of Nehemiah as a man. He begins with worship in which he acknowledges the greatness and faithfulness of God. He identifies with the sins of his people rather than merely pointing out their failures. And he remembers the promises of God. Only then does he ask God to grant him favor before the king. Burden gets on its knees!

Nehemiah reminds us that vision must first be surrendered to God.

The most important question is not, “What can we accomplish here at Hopewell?” It is, “What does God want?” Our greatest need isn’t better methods, but deeper dependence upon God. We can lead ministries without the power of God. We can construct buildings without the blessing of God. We can fill up calendars without the presence of God. We can attract crowds without producing disciples. That’s why a vision for ministry must begin with our spiritual health. Before we think about what we want God to do through us, we must think about what God wants to do in us. We’ve stated our mission in a plain and simple way: “Leading People to Follow Christ.” That does not end when someone walks into a worship service. We want to lead people to Jesus, and then we want to help them spend a lifetime following Him. It means we help them understand the Bible, develop a

lifestyle of discipleship, live in biblical community, discover their gifts, serve others, share the gospel, and eventually help someone else follow Jesus. When perhaps is the last time you have personally led another person to Him? I don't say that to make you guilty, but to help you receive a burden.

Before our vision is horizontal, it must be vertical. The foundation of everything we do must remain worship, discipleship, and ministry—a people who know God, grow in Christ, and use their lives in His service. This Bible reminds us that:

Psalm 127:1 — “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”

A church's greatest danger is not that it becomes too dependent upon God. No, the danger is that it becomes sufficiently talented, organized, and financed that it learns how to function without consciously depending upon Him. If God leads us into a future of greater fruitfulness, we want it to be obvious that He did it. That way He alone gets the glory! Vision begins with a burden, vision must be bathed in prayer, and then notice a third thing:

3—Vision sees BEYOND what is to what can be (2:1-8)

“Then the king said to me, ‘What are you requesting?’ So I prayed...”

We didn't read it, but chapter 2 tells us that four months later prayer gives way to action. As king's cupbearer, he was in a position of trust. But to approach the king with a personal request was no small matter. When the king sees his face and asks what's wrong, Nehemiah says in verse 2, “Then I was very much afraid.” He explains to the king the condition of Jerusalem, and the king asks, “What are you requesting?” Notice verse 4, “So I prayed to the God of heaven.” It's a silent prayer, but it reveals his dependence upon God. He had been praying

for nearly four months, and now he prays in the moment of opportunity. It shows that prayer and planning are not enemies! When opportunity came, Nehemiah knew what he wanted. He had been thinking about this for a long time. He asks for permission to go, but he also knew what was needed. He prayed as though everything depended upon God, but he prepared to act when God opened the door. Verse 8 says, “And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.” That is an important principle for any God-given vision. It believes God for what He can do, but it also prepares for the opportunities that He provides.

Notice in verse 9 how God opens the door for Nehemiah to travel to Jerusalem. And after he arrives, he doesn’t immediately get everyone together to announce his plans. Instead, he waits three days and then goes out at night to inspect the walls. He already knew that the walls were in rubble. So why inspect them? Because vision is rooted in an accurate understanding of reality. Nehemiah is willing to look carefully at the ruins because its important he understand the real condition of Jerusalem before he can lead in rebuilding it.

When it comes to the local church, we have to ask, “Where are we spiritually healthy, and what are some areas that need work? Where are people growing, and where are they falling through the cracks? Are we making disciples or faking disciples? Are we developing leaders or repeatedly depending upon the same group of people? Are we preparing students for leadership in the church? Are we seeing people saved and baptized?” These are questions of stewardship. A church can have great attendance and still need greater spiritual depth. It can be busy without being on mission. We should be willing to ask hard questions.

Everything that we do should ultimately be evaluated in relation to the mission: Are we leading people to follow Christ? If so, then everything we do should

serve that mission. The mission does not exist to maintain the machinery of the church; the machinery of the church exists to advance the mission! And that distinction matters because churches can gradually become organized around maintaining what they already have. A church is fundamentally a movement of people on mission. So as we think about our future, we must ask not, “How do we maintain everything?” but, “How do we mobilize all that God has given us for the mission He has entrusted to us?”

After Nehemiah has assessed the walls, he finally gathers the leaders together. His words in verse 17 contain an honest assessment and a hopeful invitation—“You see the need. Come on, let us build up the wall of Jerusalem.” He does not minimize the present condition, but neither is he imprisoned by it. He could look at the broken walls and envision restored walls. He could look at discouraged people and envision a mobilized people. He saw what was and could see what—by the grace of God—could be. That’s vision!

When I think about Hopewell’s future, I find myself asking what the Lord might do if we became sold out to Him in these areas He has placed before us. What could happen if spiritual growth became more embedded in the culture of our church? What if more of our people moved beyond attendance into genuine discipleship? What could happen if we recovered a greater sense of urgency about reaching lost people? There are people all around us who are far from Christ. Some have never heard the gospel, others are disconnected from the church. People will never walk through the door unless someone first invites them. We want evangelism to be the culture of Hopewell rather than simply another program at Hopewell.

What could happen if we became more intentional about the generation coming behind us? I do not want our children simply to have a good children’s ministry

(which we do, by the way). I want them to know Jesus. I don't want our students merely to enjoy student ministry. I want them to develop a faith strong enough to survive adulthood. It is not about people simply finding a place to attend, but finding a place to belong, serve, and take ownership of the mission. It will require us to think carefully about how generations worship together, how older believers can help mentor younger believers, and how our students are given meaningful opportunities to serve. The church isn't something we someday give a younger generation after we are finished with it. We're building that future with them in mind now. (Staff and Personnel, 2027 ministry goals)

The biblical model is not one generation simply replacing another. Rather, it is one generation declaring the works of God to another and inviting them to join the work. It means we think beyond what is to what can be. There's a fourth thing that I want to mention:

4—Vision must BECOME a shared responsibility (2:9-17)

"Then I said to them... 'Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem.'"

One of the most important words in Nehemiah's appeal is easily overlooked. He says in verse 17, "Come, let us build up the wall of Jerusalem." He understands that the work can never be accomplished by one person. The rebuilding of the walls requires the participation of the people, which becomes really obvious in chapter 3. The chapter contains name after name and family after family. Priests worked on one section. Craftsmen worked on another. Merchants built another portion. Some repaired the wall near their homes. Nehemiah apparently hadn't discovered the modern church model where 20% of the people do all the heavy lifting and the other 80% offer their 'helpful' suggestions.

My point is this—everyone had a place to serve on the wall.

That is a great illustration of the local church! The local church is made up men and women who are gifted to serve and advance the mission of Jesus.

One of my hopes for Hopewell is that increasingly every person understand that ministry is not just something performed by pastors. Ephesians 4 says pastors and teachers are given to the church “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” The church is not an audience watching a few gifted people perform. The church is a body in which every member is gifted by God and called to participate. One of the most important questions every member of Hopewell should eventually be able to answer is, “Where’s my place on the wall?” Especially our students. We can’t expect someone to become a mature Christian leader at 35 if we never trusted them with anything meaningful at 18, 22, or 25.

Nehemiah’s vision also reminds us that movement toward a preferred future inevitably introduces change. You cannot rebuild a wall without changing the landscape. You cannot address problems while insisting that everything remain exactly as it has always been. I’ve discovered that churches aren’t necessarily opposed to change. We just prefer change that doesn’t affect anything that we personally like. The challenge is learning to distinguish between what is biblical and nonnegotiable, and what is familiar and therefore simply comfortable (some things frequently change at Hopewell). We easily confuse our methods with our message. There are things at Hopewell that must never change. The authority of the Bible must never change. The gospel of Jesus Christ must never change. Our conviction that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone must never change. Our commitment to worship, discipleship, and ministry must never change. But being firmly rooted doesn’t require us to become organizationally immovable. The methods by which we pursue our vision will sometimes change, the way people communicate changes, technology changes. The gospel does

not change! And faithful churches have always learned how to communicate the gospel in their own generation. Our loyalty belongs not to comfort, but to Jesus Christ, His Word, and His mission.

Most of the time when the church thinks about growth, it means how many more people can be gathered in one location. But the New Testament also gives us another category—**sending**. If the mission of our church is “Leading People to Follow Christ,” the vision of our church is to become a multiplying church where people are being reached with the gospel, growing as disciples of Jesus Christ, and being sent out to impact the world for Him. Reaching, growing, and sending people. Our vision for ministry is (see slide):

We REACH people with the gospel, GROW together as disciples of Jesus, and SEND believers to impact the world.

In other words, what if Hopewell increasingly became known as a church that develops and deploys its people? What if we identified those God is calling into ministry and deliberately invested in them? I’m talking about developing future pastors, missionaries, worship leaders, ministry leaders, and church planters. What if we helped strengthen other churches rather than viewing every other church as competition? What if God leads us to participate in church planting, church revitalization, or replanting? What if part of our legacy was not only the number of people who came to Hopewell, but the number of people and ministries that went out from Hopewell? That is multiplication.

The question, therefore, is not merely, “How large can Hopewell become?” No, I think a better question is, “How much kingdom impact can God produce through Hopewell?” And by God’s grace, that is the kind of future I want us to envision together. Vision involves shared responsibility. One last thing I’ll mention:

5—Vision BELIEVES God for what only He can do (2:18-20)

“And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good...”

When Nehemiah finally presents his vision to the people, he tells them something important. Verse 18 says, “And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good.” God was the One who had given him the burden. God was the One who had opened the heart of the king. God was the One who had given resources. God was the One who had protected him on the journey. Everything Nehemiah did rested upon the conviction that the hand of God was upon the work. And that is where our confidence must be as well. Our confidence cannot be in the size of our church, the strength of our finances, the quality of our facilities, the abilities of our staff, or the effectiveness of our strategy. We should steward all of those things well, but none of them can produce spiritual life. Think about how:

- Only God can save a sinner!
- Only God can build a church!
- Only God can transform a family!
- Only God can call a missionary!
- Only God can produce genuine spiritual maturity!

Only God can take ordinary means and give it eternal significance. Nehemiah did not say, “We will succeed because we are capable.” He said essentially, “We will move forward because we believe God is in this thing!”

And that must be the spirit in which we think about where God is leading us. I do not know what the future holds. Vision is about direction, not outcome. But I

want to be crystal clear about the direction—we want to grow deeper spiritually, go farther missionally, become more intentional generationally, and think more in terms of multiplication. All of it flows out of the same mission: “Leading People to Follow Christ.”

Nehemiah looked at Jerusalem and saw both reality and possibility. He did not deny the broken walls, but he also refused to believe that those walls had to remain broken. He looked at the people and said, “Come on, let’s build up the wall.” Their response is one of the greatest responses to God-given vision anywhere in Scripture, “Let us rise up and build.” And that is the response I pray we will have as a church! Eventually, should Jesus tarry His coming, there will come a day when another generation will take our place. Another generation will occupy these seats. Another group of pastors will lead. They will inherit whatever we leave them, good or bad. I hope we leave them good facilities and financial strength and healthy ministries. But those things aren’t enough. I want to leave a legacy that loves Jesus deeply and believes the Bible completely. A church that sends people into the harvest. Most important, I want them to inherit a church that is willing to follow God wherever He leads, that by God’s grace, we are a spiritually growing church, a more missional church, a more generationally intentional church, and a multiplying church. And we can’t accomplish that in our own strength, nor should we try. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”

Beyond simply being a blueprint for vision, Nehemiah points us to place our faith in Jesus Christ. He too left a place of privilege, identifies Himself with the ruined condition of his people, and gives Himself for their restoration. And He sees the brokenness while in Heaven’s court. Rather than remaining distant, He allowed my condition to become His burden. He identifies Himself with my sin. He left

the glory of Heaven, entered our fallen world, identified with sinners without Himself becoming sinful, and accomplished the restoration that we could never accomplish for ourselves. Nehemiah risked his position before an earthly king for the sake of his people, but Jesus willingly humbled Himself “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). Nehemiah can rebuild a wall, but he cannot renew the heart. Jesus came as the One who doesn’t just repair what sin has damaged externally, but the One who makes sinners new by giving them a new heart. Friends, through His death and resurrection, Jesus is building something Nehemiah foreshadowed but could never accomplish. He promised in Matthew 16:18, “I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

And by His grace, you and I get to be a part of it as believers. Jesus has made it all possible through His redemptive work. And that’s what we remember as we come to this Lord’s Supper table. If you have never by faith trusted in Jesus to save you, to forgive you of your sins, to give you His life and fill you with hope, purpose, and vision—come to Him in faith today!