

Commitment and Prayer in the Purpose of God

From the sermon series: The Mystery of God's Sovereign Grace

Text: Nehemiah 1:11; Nehemiah 2:5

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

History is the arena of human decision and action. We speak of some persons as history-makers; their leadership, decisions, actions have moved the course of history along and shaped the future.

Who are the candidates for such designation? Each would have a different list.

Every period of history would suggest different names. But, whoever is mentioned, we know intuitively that we are speaking of persons who grasped the situation, responded with a plan and acted decisively. The persons themselves were conscious of facing options, making decisions, and acting, sometimes with tremendous struggle – yet acting and thereby determining the course of human events.

For example, early in the Second World War, the British secured a machine that gave them access to the German code machine called Heydrich-Enigma. British intelligence was thus able to gain access to Hitler's plans before they were executed. In November 1940, a message was decoded which indicated that the city of Coventry in England was to be bombed. Hitler was determined to devastate non-military targets in an attempt to crush civilian resistance. Within minutes of the order issued, Churchill had it in his hands. If he evacuated the city, he would reveal his knowledge of the German code; if he did not, thousands of civilians would be killed, or suffer. He kept the knowledge to himself. On November 14, the Germans struck. The raid was so devastating that Berlin boasted that every town in England would be "Coventryized." The sacrifice of Coventry guarded the secret of access to the German intelligence, which, it is claimed not without warrant, was what turned the tide of the war in Europe. Perhaps more than what happened on the battlefield, it was the secret war of intelligence that tipped the scale of victory for the Allies.

But think of the terror of decision that rested on Churchill. He had to decide; he had to act; and he did - in great anguish.

But in this series of messages we have been pointing to another level of intention and action, a transcendent dimension - indeed, the involvement of the sovereign, gracious God.

To speak of God in connection with history and human willing, deciding and acting is in no way to take away from the genuineness of the human agent.

Queen Esther risked her life in pleading with the King on behalf of the Jewish people.

Joseph utilized his every human gift and endowment in administering the Egyptian economy in preparation for the period of famine.

Churchill's act was Churchill's act.

But, human history is not one-dimensional. There is a sovereign and gracious God Who is working His purposes out in and through, in spite of us at times, and sometimes against the will and decision and action of the human agent.

Esther's foster father, Mordecai, said,

If you remain silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance for the Jews will appear from another quarter. Esther 4:14

Joseph said to his fearful, pleading brothers:

Do not be afraid... You planned to do me harm; but God planned to bring good out of it... Genesis 50:19-20

Such a conviction is at the heart of biblical faith. The events of history move along a dual track. The purpose of the eternal God is being effected and will finally be realized in and through the decisions and actions of human history.

This series title begins with the word "Mystery." Again it must be emphasized: what we are attempting to point to is a mystery; it is not open to human observation, nor is it susceptible to human verification; it is an affirmation of faith; it reflects a fundamental trust in God, in God's sovereignty, in God's gracious purpose to redeem that will not fail.

That purpose is revealed in God's election of Israel; it is revealed most fully in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; it is witnessed to in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament; it has always been at the heart of the faith of the people of God. Theologians have argued and debated the question of the will and purpose of God and the relationship of God's will to human will and action. Abstractly one can only affirm the sovereignty of God's purpose at the expense of human freedom or, conversely, affirm the genuineness of human freedom at the expense of God's sovereignty.

The Bible is not an abstract book of theology; it is the story of God's saving purposing intertwining with human willing and acting – human willing sometimes in revolt and rebellion, sometimes in obedience and commitment, but always genuinely human willing and acting. The Bible is a story - a narrative made up of many stories of happenings over wide centuries. The stories reveal what human reason and the canons of logic can never clarify - We purpose, plan and act; God purposes, plans and acts, and the latter is effected through the former.

If there is this two-level development operative throughout history's course, where is the connection? Let me suggest that the connection lies in the prayer and commitment of the person who is available to God.

It must be recognized that God's will and purpose meets resistance and opposition, sometimes outright rebellion. I must clarify further that everything that happens in history is not the will of God. There is so much so obviously contrary to that will. Therefore, I have said several times that God's purpose is effected through us, in spite of us, without us, against us.

All that is true. Still, God's purpose marches on. He will create a new heaven and a new earth. He will redeem His people. He will save!

But let us focus in this message on how God's purpose is effected through the human agent who is available to God to be the instrument of His purpose. And my contention in this message is that it is prayer that links heaven and earth; it is prayer that creates the opening for the thread of God's purpose to be woven into the tapestry of our lives.

Perhaps you will respond that I have taken on a large enough task to relate the Divine and human will, the plan of God and human planning without now bringing in the mystery of prayer. One mystery is quite enough; why confuse matters further?

I respond that it is not my purpose to dissolve the mystery - as if I could; rather, it is to point to the mystery. And further, to point to the mystery not by reasoned argument, but rather by using the biblical method - telling a story.

The story today centers in Nehemiah. It is told in the Old Testament book that bears his name. Nehemiah was a layman. In the period after the Exile, he became the Governor of Jerusalem and with single-minded determination led the inhabitants of Jerusalem in a great effort that rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and restored good order and spiritual vitality to the people.

In 587 the Babylonian Empire under the famous Nebuchadnezzar finally destroyed the city of Jerusalem, taking people into exile for a second time and this time burning the city, destroying the Temple and the walls, leaving the city in shambles. In the rise and fall of Empires, Babylon arose to dominance. The

Persian King, Cyrus, overcame Babylon in 539. This was an important development because the Persians proved a benevolent power supportive of the religions of the empire. Cyrus promulgated an edict that the Jews in exile could return to Jerusalem. The prophet, Second Isaiah, saw Cyrus as an instrument in the hand of God - even called him a shepherd of Israel.

He is my shepherd and shall fulfill my purposes. (Isaiah 44:28a)

And again:

Thus says the Lord to his anointed (messiah), to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped... (45:1)

Some Jews, fired by the vision of the dawning Kingdom portrayed by Second Isaiah, returned to Jerusalem but not all, by far, for many of the exiles had prospered well in Babylon. Cyrus issued another decree that the house of God in Jerusalem should be rebuilt and the Temple vessels returned.

Between 538 and 522 B.C., when Darius came to the Persian throne, a good number of Jews returned to Jerusalem. Fired by a vision for the restoration of the former glory of Jerusalem, the returned exiles found it was no easy matter to rehabilitate the city. The population was mixed, the Samaritans to the North having filtered down and intermarried. The returnees were a threat to what had become the new order, dismal though it was. There is always resistance to disturbing the status quo, even when it is nothing to speak of.

But the work began. In the second year of their return, the foundation of the second Temple was laid. But soon opposition arose. The Samaritan governor refused permission for the work to continue. Friction developed between the people who had remained whom the exiles considered impure because of their mixed marriage and unauthorized worship practices, and the returned exiles who had a great zeal to set up a new community uncompromised by the lax practices of the past.

The work of rebuilding remained in abeyance from the time of its cessation until the second year of Darius - the year 520 B.C. Then the prophets Haggai and Zechariah carried on a crusade, which stirred the people to action anew. Opposition surfaced again, but a new decree from Darius set the work in motion again and he even gave royal support and financing.

In 515 B.C., the second Temple was completed. But something must have happened to dampen the ardor of the returned community because not much further progress was made in rebuilding the city. The community was poor; leadership seemed to be lacking and there was not the will or vitality to move forward. Poverty of means and poverty of spirit seemed to characterize the Jerusalem community.

That brings the story up to the time of Nehemiah. Nehemiah had done well in exile. He had risen to prominence in the Persian court, being the cupbearer of the King, a position of great trust. He tasted the wine before the King to ensure that some palace plotter had not poisoned it. He was located in the empirical city of Susa and was visited by his brother, Hanani, who came from Jerusalem. Nehemiah asked his brother about the state of affairs in Jerusalem and was told about the sorry estate of the people and the city itself. He heard a report of the trouble and reproach that had fallen on the people of God, how the walls were still broken down and the gate yet in ruins. Hearing the report, Nehemiah says,

I sat down and wept.

Then he prayed, confessing the sin of the people, acknowledging their shortcomings and unfaithfulness and that their miserable condition was brought on by themselves. Yet he reminded God of His covenant faithfulness and then prayed,

Grant me good success this day, and put it into this man's heart (the King's heart) to show me kindness.

One day, appearing before the King, his unhappiness and distress must have been obvious and the King asked him what was wrong. He shared his grief at the terrible conditions in Jerusalem and the King responded, "What are you asking of me?"

This was the moment, the opening Nehemiah had been looking for. Nehemiah says,

I prayed to the God of heaven, and then I answered...send me to Judah, to the city...so that I may rebuild it.

The King responds favorably. He sends not only Nehemiah, but also a royal escort and the authority to do what was on his heart. This was probably in the year 445 B.C.

The story reads like a thriller. In spite of opposition, threat and peril, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls, installed gates and restored the security and dignity of the city, and in chapter 6:15 we read the task was accomplished in 52 days. That seems almost impossible. The historian Josephus says it took two years and four months. No matter. A monumental accomplishment was achieved.

And he did more than build the walls. He became governor and brought renewal to the whole community life and worship.

Nehemiah offered superb leadership. He had great strength of character and clarity of vision. His soul was fired by a religious passion for the wellbeing of the people of God and he threw himself into the task with vigor modeling out in his

own person, his attitude and action, his total commitment to the purpose of God, which fired his soul.

Nehemiah was a person of deep religious commitment and faith. His first act upon hearing of the disgrace into which Jerusalem had fallen, was to pray. He prayed for success. He prayed before answering the King. He prayed when the opposition threatened to shut down the work (4:4-5), and in a beautiful balance of prayer and action, we read,

So we prayed to our God, and posted a guard day and night against them. (4:9)

Ejaculatory prayer punctuates the narrative (5:19, 6:9, 14, 13:14, 31). It is obvious that he was a truly devout person totally caught up in executing the mission he sensed was his and totally dependent for success on the power of God. One commentary summarizes this man thus:

He combined in his person the qualities of firmness, love of and zeal for God, land, and people, and a fierce dedication to the proposition that his was the only way to achieve immediate ends to which he committed himself ... (Ezra-Nehemiah, Anchor Bible, p. LXXXIII)

The story of Nehemiah is a thrilling tale of a person captivated by a vision, driven by a burning passion, totally committed to the purpose of God. Nehemiah was available to God to be an instrument of his purpose and totally dependent upon God to bring success to his careful planning and energetic action. Nehemiah is a model of how prayer links heaven and earth, Divine purpose and human agent in the carrying out of the sovereign, gracious purpose of God to establish His Kingdom.

Reflecting on that story there are several important lessons to be learned about our theme: first, it must be obvious that the ministry of Nehemiah could only flow from a vision of the plan and purpose of God. Nehemiah was a Jew of the Exilic community long separated from Jerusalem if, in fact, he had ever been there, but he was not separated from the vision that has always characterized Israel at its best: its calling to be the concrete demonstration of God's Kingdom within history, its calling to be a light to the nations, a model of human society living under the gracious rule of its redeeming God.

Nehemiah was a son of the covenant. He trusted the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He believed that God had a special destiny for this people and that in Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed.

That's the reason for his deep anguish when he heard of the despair and disgrace in which Jerusalem was lying. It was that deep sense of calling to the redeeming purpose of God that created the grief of his soul at hearing that Jerusalem - City of God - was in such a state of destitution.

The point I want to stress is that it was precisely that vision of what God was about in the world that created in Nehemiah first the anguish, but then the burning desire to do something about the tragedy of this people chosen to be the instrument of God's saving purpose. Rather than sitting on his hands, shrugging his shoulders, letting things go on from bad to worse, the vision of the Kingdom drove him to respond, to make himself available to God as an instrument for the effecting of His purpose.

Nothing of significance happens apart from a vision, a dream. There are many dreams; there are many good and worthy dreams - some are purely personal, some may be essentially selfish, some may embrace loved family, some may involve a community or larger segment of society, some the nation.

But there is one dream that transcends them all, that takes us out of ourselves and saves us from boredom and meaninglessness - it is the dream of God's saving reign; it is to be caught up in that great purpose of the sovereign and gracious God to bring health, healing and salvation to the whole earth for all earth's children.

From whence does it come? How is one captivated by such a vision?

It cannot be self-generated; we cannot whip ourselves into a froth and manufacture passion out of our own soul. But we can open our minds, our inspirations to the vision of the Kingdom and just maybe God will put it in our hearts to yield ourselves to be the instrument of His purpose.

That brings me to a second observation - such a vision lodged in our hearts will drive us to prayer. That seems as natural as breathing. Who has ever caught a glimpse of the cosmic sweep of God's purpose and then set out in his own strength to bring it about?

Nehemiah did not rush headlong into frantic action. He heard the report and he wept. He was overcome with deep anguish. Before he made his report to the King for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild it, there elapsed a period of four months. It was a time for prayer, meditation and waiting upon the Lord. If it was to be God's mission, it could only be nurtured in communion with God and God must take the initiative, create the opening. And God did!

Prayer - communion with God must be the normal, intuitive response of one who senses the vision and begins to feel the calling. Only then will the situation ripen and clarity be achieved. It is God Who must open the doors for service for the one who would be available to Him.

Nehemiah's deep concern was registered on his face. The King sensed something going on in the life of his servant. His question provided the opening and Nehemiah's preparation in prayer readied him to take the opportunity to make his request. That must always be the process by which we move from vision to

action. Prayer links heaven and earth and puts God's servant in the way of serving.

But, thirdly, Nehemiah moved on then to exercise his best administrative gifts. He was accompanied by a royal escort, supplied with royal undergirding and he came to Jerusalem. But not with fanfare. He came and remained silent and hidden for three days while he took the situation in. He toured the ruins in the dark of night getting the feel of the situation. He planned his course wisely and carefully and only then called the citizenry together and unfolded his plan.

In all of this, of course, he did not cease to pray; but he did not pray and then leave matters to happen as they might. He was praying as he planned and planning as he prayed.

And finally he committed himself totally and without reservation to the effecting of the planning, poignantly aware that his was the decision to become involved, to make himself available, to be at God's disposal. He could have shrugged it off. What he was committing to was to be the instrument to effect God's plan, a plan that would finally prevail through him or without him.

Did that recognition cut the nerve of his commitment? Did that knowledge sap his creative energy? No! On the contrary, God's plan became the foundation of his planning; God's sovereign purpose became the engine that drove his best efforts and galvanized his creative imagination. Finally, he could be totally committed and totally relaxed.

His was the task; he chose it. But all is grace; all is of God.

And if that collides in our rational faculties, it nonetheless rests easily in our depths because intuitively we know we are free and responsible – history-makers; but we "know" as well that all is of God, Whose sovereign, gracious purpose will prevail.

Heaven and earth are wonderfully linked in prayer and commitment as one opens one's life to become the instrument of God's purpose. And one day the tapestry of history will include the tapestry of our personal histories, and woven through it all will be the thread of the purpose of God and that thread will spell "Grace."

Amen.