

A GREAT WORK

A GREAT WORK

A CONVERSATION WITH NEHEMIAH FOR PEOPLE
(WHO WANT TO BE) DOING GREAT WORKS

JON SWANSON

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When word came to Sanballat,
Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of
our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not
a gap was left in it—though up to that time I
had not set the doors in the gates— Sanballat
and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let
us meet together in one of the villages on the
plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; so I
sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am
carrying on a great project and cannot go
down. Why should the work stop while I leave
it and go down to you?” Four times they sent
me the same message, and each time I gave
them the same answer.

Nehemiah 6:2-4

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FOREWORD

HOPE SWANSON

With the rise of self-publishing, books that have no business being sold are regularly finding their way onto Amazon.

Someone has a cool life story or wrote a great creative writing sample for a class, and suddenly people are saying “You should write a book.” They don’t really mean it and would never purchase the finished product, but it’s what the writer wants to hear. He or she decides to sit down and type up a manuscript. Because self-publishing doesn’t require anyone’s approval, the writer can put it up for sale and then sink into a depression when it doesn’t sell more than the few pity copies bought by relatives and close friends.

So why are we publishing this? Why is this book more worthy of publication than any of the others?

Unbiased opinion: my dad is a great writer. Seriously, if I didn’t think he was talented, I wouldn’t be spending time doing this. He writes well, he writes good, he writes to teach, and people learn. He has made friends all over the country and world over the past several years as he has written posts on various blogs, spoken at conferences, and tweeted about

the coffee being ready. (You don't have to take my word for it. Check out 300wordsaday.com or follow him on Twitter at @jnswanson to find out for yourself.) And the fact that he spent over a decade studying and teaching communication and rhetoric, and a lifetime working on understanding what it means to follow Christ gives him some credibility. (Not to mention that he's already published three ebooks that have sold pretty well.) It's quality, thoughtful, insightful writing. He did the necessary research. He worked to understand, and it's worth sharing with those who struggle with the Old Testament.

People don't read the Old Testament. Okay, so we read Psalms and Proverbs, parts of Isaiah, parts of the Pentateuch, and other stories that we think are cool (Esther, Ruth, the anointing of David, etc.). But Nehemiah? "Oh, he's the one who built the wall, right? Yeah, I kinda remember reading that story in my Read-the-whole-Bible-in-a-Year plan. I guess it was pretty cool." Dad's book takes us into the story. The subtitle is "A Conversation with Nehemiah for People (who want to be) Doing Great Works." Sometimes Dad might sound a little crazy because he's saying that he's having conversations with Nehemiah, but that's what it's like. You'll get over it. It's a different way of reading the OT. As I read Dad's book I am constantly reminded that Nehemiah was a real guy who actually oversaw the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem, who actually faced opposition, who actually prayed and fasted for four months until the king asked him what was up. Readers will have an understanding of Nehemiah that you just can't

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get from reading a traditional commentary. Unless you actually understand traditional commentaries, in which case I commend you. But read this book. It's worth your time.

It's quality. It's different. It's helpful.

It's worthy of publication.

-Hope Swanson

PREFACE

Conversations with Nehemiah

You want to do something great.

We all want to do great things. We all want to change the world. We all want to do something that matters, to be someone who matters. I do. You do, too.

We don't have to be in charge, we tell ourselves. In fact, we're not sure we could be. But we're tired of just doing stuff for someone else's agenda.

You and I have both read too many management books, leadership books, greatness books. They are full of great ideas, promises, guidelines. But maybe we need to look at the Bible. After all, people who hang around church have heard that the Bible is a place to look for significance. But we don't know where to start.

I'd like to suggest the story of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah is a book in the Old Testament, between Ezra and Esther. It used to be packaged with Ezra. In many big selling Bibles, it's not any more. It hasn't been for many centuries. And Nehemiah is the lead character in that book.

Nehemiah seems like a textbook. I think it is. I think God knows exactly the story he wanted to tell about a life

depending on him and doing a great work. So when we read it, it should come as no surprise that it makes sense.

I've read *Nehemiah* several times during the past four decades. During the summer of 2012, I started reading it differently. I taught it with a couple of small groups. I wrote at 300wordsaday.com about the study I was doing. I decided to write a weekly newsletter about what I was learning. And as I was writing the first issue, I discovered I was having a conversation with *Nehemiah*.

No, really.

And this is a collection of those conversations, occurring over coffee and tea. I know, of course, that coffee was identified as a drink a thousand years or so after *Nehemiah* lived. But for a guy who shows up in 445 BC, he seems to enjoy it. And some of our conversations are filling in things not covered in the book of *Nehemiah* and the rest of the Old Testament. But I have worked to maintain the integrity of the Biblical story.

DOING SOMETHING THAT MATTERS

Nehemiah 1

Thanks for asking me to tell you about Nehemiah.

This isn't where I was going to start. I had a great essay prepared about Nehemiah's planning process. I wanted to talk about his leadership. But something wasn't quite right about it. So I was sitting in my office talking with Nehemiah.

I've been doing that a lot lately. I read and think and try to understand what he was doing. It's a result of how I teach when I teach from the Bible. I want to see "Bible people" as real people in real contexts. Even if they actually were living about 445 BC.

And in the process of thinking, I started talking to Nehemiah. I asked, "Why did you go so over the top emotionally when you heard from your brother Hanani?"

Because Nehemiah had. Gone over the top that is. His brother came from Jerusalem to Susa, about 900 miles,

about the distance from Fort Wayne, Indiana to Alva, Oklahoma (or Dallas to Chicago). When his brother told Nehemiah that Jerusalem was in ruins and the gates were burned, Nehemiah sat down and wept. Then he spent days mourning and fasting and praying.

“Jerusalem,” Nehemiah said to me. “He was talking about *Jerusalem*.”

“I know,” I said, “But weeping and fasting and praying and looking awful? The walls had been down for nearly a century and a half. This was not new news.”

He put down his coffee cup. Neither of us is used to him drinking coffee. Seeing this courtly leader holding a chipped coffee mug instead of a gold wine goblet is odd. And he doesn’t know you hold a mug to think.

“You need to understand how I grew up,” he said. “You know how you heard stories from your mom about how your great-grandfather left Sweden and left his wife and son for a decade while he went to Wisconsin to make a new life? You remember how she wanted you to have a sense of the sacrifice?”

I nodded.

“When I was three or four, sometimes in the evening my mother looked west. I thought she was looking at the sunset until one night I heard her humming. I listened. I heard her start singing:

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.*

There on the poplars we hung our harps,

*for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?'*

"It was so melancholy. As a little one I couldn't handle the pain in her voice. I walked away.

"When I got older, she started to teach it to me. It's what you call Psalm 137. And I understood why she waited. The end of it talks about Edom and Babylon. In one of those sections you never read, the song talks about tossing infants...never mind.

"And of course, this wasn't about her own life, exactly. She had learned the song from her father who learned it from his father. But it was his father who had lived it. Who had watched the siege of Jerusalem. Who had watched the temple burn. Who had seen the infants killed."

He stopped. I waited. I had not expected this. *Nehemiah* was a book to me. Something I would read five chapters of in a day while reading through the Bible in a year. But sitting across from me was a real person. With a history. With a story.

"Growing up, many of us sang the songs of exile. We listened to the stories of the prophets who warned the people of the danger of ignoring God, of becoming gods themselves. We knew the exile was a result of not paying atten-

1. *Psalm 137:1-4*

tion to the warnings. And we learned the pilgrimage songs, the songs of ascent.² Songs about the annual journeys to Jerusalem, to the city of David and the city of God. To the Temple. Even though no one knew exactly when we'd need them again, we learned them.

“And then the exile was over. We could go back.

“The first groups were hopeful. They were going to the homeland no one knew. A generation went. Work started on rebuilding. And then there was another wave. We had watched the Persians conquer the Babylonians. There were stories about starting and stopping, stories about the temple.

“Eventually, my brother went to Judah. I had a good job in the palace, but I was so proud of my little brother, so thrilled to have a connection. And we waited to hear about the great work, the restoration of the city.

“One day my brother showed up unexpectedly. But that's how everyone showed up back then. Unannounced. I was so excited to hear the news of the rebuilding, of the homeland. Lots of my people were comfortable in Babylon, but those of us who cared about returning to our homeland were hopeful.

“And when I heard from Hanani that nothing had changed, I was devastated. The breath went out of me. Do you know what it is like to spend your whole life and your parents' whole lives and your grandparents' whole lives

2. Psalms 120-134 are subtitled "Song of Ascent". Eugene Peterson talks about them as pilgrimage songs in *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, a book that changed my life years ago (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980).

retelling stories of what went wrong and what would be made right, lamenting the downfall, praying for the return? And then to hear that the people who went back, who could do something, were in despair? That after two generations and more, the walls were still in ruins, the gates still gaping and charred?

“It was more than I could handle. The city was in ruins. Someone needed to decide to rebuild. And somehow, unlikely as it was, I knew it might be me. I knew that I was going to have to give my one and only life to do something. To make a change. To take everything that I knew and throw it into this.”

Nehemiah slowly slipped back into his chair. I realized that he had fallen on his knees while he was talking.

I sat still. I thought of my own life, of the stories I learned about things that matter.

He smiled. “I get carried away. Sorry.”

He leaned back in the chair and looked around my office. At the books. At the coffee mugs. At the pictures of family.

“You know, sometimes I wonder,” he said. “If I knew that it would take the rest of my life, that I would spend a decade and more at the edges of the empire, would I have started this work? If I had known that I would fear and work and argue and defend. That I would give up all that was here in Susa for all that wasn’t there in Jerusalem. That I would work all that time and still wonder whether anyone’s life was really different, would I have done it again?”

His eyes stopped wandering. He leaned forward and looked at me. He said, “If you had something that mattered

that much, wouldn't you start working on it, no matter what?"

I closed my eyes and leaned back in the chair. I was too emotional to answer. When I looked up, he was gone. But his question is still in my heart.

"If you had something that mattered that much, wouldn't you start working on it, no matter what?"

A LONG TIME PRAYING

Nehemiah 1

People ask me to pray *about* things all the time. And I have written a lot about prayer. But I don't very often listen to someone praying and then say "How did you do that?" It feels strange.

The last time Nehemiah and I were talking, I realized that he was the perfect person to ask. Prayer often shows up in the book of *Nehemiah*, from the middle of the first chapter to the very last sentence.

I looked at him. "So, your brother comes, you pray, ask God for favor, and the next day at work, the King asks you what's wrong. That's amazing!"

He coughed discretely. "You did say that you read my book, didn't you? Do you have a copy here somewhere?" He looked around.

I turned the screen toward him, browser open to an

online Bible. He ignored it. It was pretty clear that he wanted *me* to read.

“Oh, right. It says that you wept and mourned *for days*. I bet you were pretty hungry after that week. How do you pray that long?”

He coughed again. The polite habits of a wine steward last for millennia I guess. “Do you have a calendar?” he asked. I pointed to the one on the wall.

“That’s yours. Where’s mine?”

I looked at him.

“I don’t want to point out the obvious,” he said, “but the book is pretty clear about my brother coming in Chislev and the King talking to me in Nisan. You probably should look at a calendar with months rather than days, and one with my months rather than yours.”

I looked it up. Four months. That’s how long from Chislev to Nisan. The period of prayer Nehemiah describes is like starting a period of fasting and mourning and praying in late October and staying with it until the end of February.

I asked him how it was possible to pray the same thing for four months. And how he could not eat for all that time.

“I know, right? I’m working in the palace, great meals. Even after Daniel’s healthy eating experiment, there was plenty of food we could eat.¹ But I knew that fasting was something done in times of serious approach to God. And I was serious.

1. Nehemiah was talking about a vegetable and water eating plan Daniel used at the beginning of the exile that Nehemiah came at the end of. You can read about it in Daniel 1.

“In my grief, I started looking at the prophets, the people who had written about the exile. And I found words from Isaiah that gave me hope, words from a hundred years before me. Isaiah wrote, ‘Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations. You will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.’²

“That was exactly what I wanted to do. But what would it take? I read the context of the prophecy, what comes immediately before the promise.

“Isaiah talked about the kind of fasting that God wanted.³ It’s fasting that shares meals with people who need the food rather than just not eating. It’s a life of justice, of being a leader who cares for people, of looking for underdogs and helping them. It’s a life of spending yourself on behalf of the hungry.

“It changed everything I thought about how to pray and how to follow God and how to lead. I spent four months letting that work into my life.

- Every day I said, ‘God you are the faithful one, the committed one. Please listen to me.’
- Every day I said, ‘We have sinned. Generations of us, yes, but my family too. And *I* have sinned, God.’ That reminder was important to me as I was learning about sharing and justice and compassion. I learned to look at my own behavior.

2. Isaiah 58:12.

3. Isaiah 58:5-14.

- Every day I reminded God about the stories of repentance from Moses and from Isaiah. And when I did that, I was reminding myself.⁴
- And every day I wanted to be ready for serving the King.”

I held up my hand. “When you say “King”, do you mean your king, Artaxerxes, or your King, God?”

“Yes.”

I thought about Nehemiah’s words. Four months, every day, morning and evening. Four months learning to give up deserved meals to share with others. Four months of learning to discern misappropriated power. Four months of developing integrity of heart and mind. Four months of going to work while still going to God. Four months of asking God to give him favor in the King’s eyes.

“Are you saying,” I asked, “That every morning and every evening, your prayer was simply acknowledging sin, asking God to listen to you, and asking for a good reputation with your boss?”

He nodded. “It’s simple to say. It’s harder to do than you would think.”

Finally, I looked at him and said, “You spent more time fasting and praying than you did rebuilding the walls. So which part was the great work?”

“Precisely,” he replied. With a nod, he walked out.

I looked at Nehemiah’s prayer.⁵ Morning and evening,

4. There is more about this heritage of prayer in the next chapter.

5. Nehemiah 1:5-12.

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I've been looking at it. And at my heart. And thinking that four months may not be long enough.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Swanson is passionate about helping people emotionally understand God's work.

He is a husband, father, and associate pastor living in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He has worked in higher education in Texas and Indiana. He and Nancy have been married more than thirty years and have two children, Andrew (married with Allie) and Hope. Jon is ordained by the Missionary Church and has a PhD in communication studies (UT-Austin). He writes regularly at <http://300wordsaday.com>.

Since 2000, Jon has worked as an associate pastor at two churches. He has produced videos, talked with people needing financial help, married and buried people, and helped other people understand how to accomplish their work.

Since 1995, he has taught in many settings. He taught communication and management courses for college credit. He has taught many Sunday school classes and small groups and preached. Rather than teaching from study guides, he walks people through books of the Bible, including extensive studies of Malachi, Nehemiah, Philippians, Psalms, Colossians, the Sermon on the Mount, and 1 John. During the past two years, he has taught an online course for pas-

tors studying church administration and is developing two more.

Jon is the author of three ebooks: *Lent for non-Lent People*, *Learning a New Routine*, and *Anticipation: an Advent Reader*.