

Does Trusting God Mean Turning to Prayer, Taking "Practical" Action, or Both? (Nehemiah 1-3)

Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king. This means not only that he had immediate access to the king as the one who tested and served his beverages, but also that Nehemiah was a trusted advisor and high-ranking Persian official. He would use his professional experience and position to great advantage as he embarked upon the work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem.

When the king granted him permission to oversee the rebuilding project, Nehemiah asked for letters to the governors through whose territory he would pass on his trip to Jerusalem. Apparently, Nehemiah did not believe that trusting God meant he should not seek royal protection for his journey.

The text of Nehemiah does not suggest there was anything wrong with Nehemiah's decision to seek and accept the king's protection. In fact, it claims that God's blessing accounted for this bit of royal assistance. It is striking to note how different Nehemiah's approach to this issue was from Ezra's.

Whereas Ezra believed that trusting God meant he should not ask for royal protection, Nehemiah saw the offer of such protection as evidence of God's gracious hand of blessing. This disagreement demonstrates how easy it is for godly people to come to different conclusions about what it means to trust God in their work. Perhaps each was simply doing what he was most familiar with. Ezra was a priest, familiar with the habitation of the Lord's presence. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king, familiar with the exercise of royal power. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were seeking to be faithful in their labors. Both were godly, prayerful leaders. But they understood trusting God for protection differently.

Christians sometimes seem to act as if there were a rigid wall between actively pursuing our own agenda and passively waiting for God to act. This is a false duality. If you are unemployed, God wants you to have a job. Yet you have to write a resume, conduct a search, apply for positions, interview, and get rejected dozens of times before finding that job. Nehemiah and company's arduous work warns us that trusting God does not equate with sitting on our hands waiting for magical solutions for our difficulties.