

Nehemiah 2:9-20

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[0 : 0 0] So, Nehemiah chapter 2, and verse 18, I think is a summary. Nehemiah 2 verse 18, Nehemiah says, I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also the words that the king had spoken to me, and they said, let us rise up and build.

52 days. Less than two months, Nehemiah did the impossible. He rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. How did he do it?

And of course, he didn't do it by himself. He mobilized the people. But how do you do that? How do you mobilize the people of God? There's a great need for that, isn't there? How do you do that? And in order that we can properly appreciate what Nehemiah achieved, I need to remind you of the immensity of the task that he faced. You know when it's like, you go away, do you remember when you could go away?

First of all, you go away in July and August, you go away for a couple of weeks, and you haven't cut the garden maybe, you haven't cut the lawn maybe for a week before you go away, and then you come back two weeks later, and the garden's gone out of control.

[1 : 1 7] The Lord needs mowing and all sorts of things that need doing. You've only been away for a few weeks. Well, in Nehemiah, you've got a city that's been in ruins for 150 years.

And although, of course, it doesn't compare with our city today, it wasn't a cabbage patch. It was at least 2.5 miles in circumference. It wasn't just a garden fence that had blown down in the wind. It was a great stone wall that had been deliberately and systematically reduced to ruins. There were great boulders that had fallen down. Boulders that had been pushed down into the valleys, surrounding valleys.

It was a massive job that Nehemiah faced. But more important than that was the morale of the people, or the lack of morale. They had a history of defeat and failure.

Nehemiah, you see it had been attempted before, and it had been abandoned. And that's not an easy thing to deal with, is it? When you've got, as the people have got, a history of defeat and failure.

[2 : 1 9] When you've tried something and it's not worked before, so why will it work now? Nehemiah arrived in the 20th year of Artaxerxes. That's about 445 BC.

And the work had begun in the second year of Cyrus. That's 538 BC, so 90 years. 90 years before. And the first contingent of Jews to return after the exile, they tried to rebuild the temple.

It's a much smaller job. It's taken them 15 years. And then they began to rebuild the walls of the city. There were complaints. They reported to the planning department.

To the powers that be. And the work comes to a standstill. That's Ezra chapter 4. And so for the past 13 years, nothing's been attempted. And so when Nehemiah turns up, he's not only faced with a ruined wall, but he's faced with a demoralized workforce.

It can't be done. It's been tried before. It's no use. We can't do it. And yet Nehemiah did it. In less than two months.

[3 : 2 5] 52 days to be exact. And I want to ask tonight, how did he do it? How do you get the people of God motivated and mobilized for the great work of the gospel?

Especially when there's a long history of failure and defeat. And in many ways, we're in such a time now. As the church in this country, we've lived over a long period of decline and barrenness.

And it's very easy, isn't it, for people living through a period like that to lose heart. I think particularly at the moment, there's great concern that there are a lot of churches that will maybe never get out of lockdown.

And are so fragile. And it's so easy, isn't it, to lose heart. And maybe for us to settle things as they are. How do you deal with that? Three points.

And so let's see Nehemiah in secret, in private, and in public. So look at verse 11. Look at verse 11. That's where the work begins. It begins not in a flurry of activity.

[4 : 29] Not in a blaze of publicity. But we read there in verse 11. So I went to Jerusalem. And the cameras were rolling. The media were there with their microphones in my face.

No, I went to Jerusalem. And I was there for three days. Wait, what? What did you do for those three days? Well, I was there for three days.

Three days of secrecy. Three days of silence. What about those three days? Nehemiah, he's come to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. After years of ruin.

He's been sent there by the king. There's no time to lose. We're going to see that. There's so much work to be done. And where does he begin? He begins with three days of inactivity and quiet.

And the temptation of someone of Nehemiah's disposition is to want to get on with things immediately. But he doesn't. For three days, he does nothing.

[5 : 32] He was just there. In verse 11. Do you remember what John Wesley wrote in his diary? I'm paraphrasing. But he wrote this. Busy day today.

Too busy not to pray. Too busy. Too busy not to pray. So many things to get through today. And the busier he was, the more time he needed to spend alone with God.

That's how God's work is done. It really doesn't make any sense to time management experts. But it makes spiritual sense. That's how God's work begins.

God's work is carried forward. And we need to understand that. And there's a reaction against that, isn't there? I think particularly in reformed circles of a quiet time, it's probably not the best expression.

But people decry that today. But Nehemiah spent three days in quiet before he got started. I came to Jerusalem. And I spent three days.

[6 : 33] What were those three days for? To enable him to get over jet lag? Probably. Three month journey. He needs rest. He's got the sense to let himself get over the wear and tear. Jesus, you remember, in the Gospels, says in that really strange verse to us, He called to His disciples to come apart and rest for a while.

It's very, very important, isn't it, in the Lord's work to recognize that there is a God-given pattern of work and rest. And we ignore that at our peril.

It's not spiritual to be at full stretch the whole time, not to relax, to never take time off. And Nehemiah was sensible enough to recognize that, that he needed three-day breaks, so he rested. But there's more to it than Aaron asks, and verse 12 helps us there. And so he intimates that in those three days, something's happening spiritually. See what he says? He says, I arose in the night, I and a few men with me, and I told no one what God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.

Something was happening. Something was happening in the silence and the secrecy of those three days. God was putting into his heart something God was speaking to him.

[7 : 49] So we could say, couldn't we, that the motto of Nehemiah's life and ministry is prayer, prayer, and more prayer. He was the sort of man who was kind of an up-and-at-em kind of man.

He wanted to get going. But in chapter 1, he spends four months in prayer before he does anything. And now he's arrived on site, and there's so much work to be done. He spends three whole days listening to God, allowing God to speak to his heart.

And I think that is actually quite an important principle in the Bible. We've seen that in Galatians. We're studying Galatians in house groups. And there's a detail there, isn't there, in chapter 1, that we often forget about the apostle Paul, his ministry.

So in Galatians 1.15, Paul says, That is odd, isn't it?

Before his life's work began, before a ministry which changed the course of history, before he began his massive life's work, he began it with three years in Arabia.

[9 : 12] What was he doing? Well, he says, I wasn't consulting with flesh and blood. Well, who were you consulting with? What was going on during those three years in Arabia? Somebody has said that it's compensation for the three years that he'd never been with Christ, like the other disciples had.

Now Paul has Jesus to himself, so to speak. But he is conferring, he says, not with flesh and blood, not even with the apostles in Jerusalem, but on his own with the risen and ascended Christ in the deserts of Arabia.

God is preparing him for his life's work. And we've got that, most of us have, that Paul was ever in Arabia. That's where he drew his strength from. He could never have been the man he was if it wasn't for those three years.

Three years of quiet, alone with God. And God's speaking to him. And that's what's going on here in verse 11. God deals with this man secretly. Secondly, we see this man in private.

Begins in secret. But now look at him. Three days in secret are followed by a kind of moonlit tour. And Nehemiah, with a couple of friends, does a tour of inspection.

[10:18] Let me read to you from verses 12 and 13. It's vivid language. And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.

There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. And I went out by night, by the valley gate, to the dragon spring and to the dung gate. And I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down.

And its gates that had been destroyed by fire. You see them, don't you? In the night. Nehemiah on horseback. A couple of his friends walking alongside him on foot, kicking their way through the ruins.

Swapping notes, conferring with one another during a tour of inspection. And we're told repeatedly that this was a private occasion. Look at verse 12. I told no one what God had put in my heart to do. Verse 16. The officials did not know where I'd gone or what I was doing. And I'd not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials and the rest who were to do the work. It was a private tour of inspection. He's not yet made his public debut in Jerusalem.

[11:24] And all this is going on no longer in secret but in private. Arnold Toynbee, his historian, his daughter's Polly Toynbee, the journalist.

And Arnold Toynbee said this. He said, apathy can only be overcome by enthusiasm. And enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things.

First, an ideal which takes the imagination by storm. Second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice.

Well, God has already taken, hasn't he, Nehemiah's imagination by storm. That's what's happened in secret. That's what he means when he says God has put something into my heart. God had captured Nehemiah's imagination and had fired him up, giving him a vision for the work.

It's a great thing to be able to talk like that, I think. To have God put something onto your heart for you to do for him. So that you're not doing things just because the elders have told you to do them.

[12:27] Or because it's expected of you. Or it's just the thing that Christians do. But God has put something on your heart to do for him. I think that's a great thing to be able to talk like that. But Nehemiah is not some glassy-eyed idealist.

He has the vision. He has what Toynbee calls the ideal that takes the imagination by storm. But he's got to formulate a plan to carry it out.

And that's what this tour of inspection is all about. That's the meaning of it. Notice in verse 13. I went out by night by the valley gate to the dragon spring to the dung gate.

And I inspected the walls of Jerusalem. They were broken down. Its gates had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the fountain gate to the king's pool. There was no room for the animal under me to pass.

And then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall. And I turned back and entered the valley gate and so returned. The words literally there are, he looks into something very carefully.

[13:28] It's a medical word for probing a wound. He looks to see the extent of the damage. And so what's Nehemiah doing here? In private with just a few friends, he's looking at the extent of the damage.

He takes advice from his colleagues. He makes notes. That's just plain wise, isn't it? You might say that's just common sense, but it's wisdom. God has put something into his heart.

It's right to seek advice. It's right to talk with trusted friends. It's right to look at it in private before you go public. Solomon says it's in the multitude of counselors there is safety.

The church suffers from mavericks often. Mavericks who believe that God has put something into their hearts to do. You read the history of the church and time after time, God's people have been led on a wild goose chase by wild-eyed fanatics who never consulted with fellow Christians up some blind alley.

And yet, Nehemiah is wise, isn't he? God is dealing with him in secret. And God deals with him in private. And so lastly, Nehemiah is ready to go public.

[14:42] Verse 17. Then I said to them. He's talking about the town council. He's talking about the officials, the nobles, the priests, the Jews, and the people.

And there's two ways in these verses, in verses 17 to 19, where Nehemiah kind of shows his public persona. There's two themes here.

There's the theme of building and battling. That's the theme we're going to see for the rest of Nehemiah. Building and battling. Mobilizing the people and marmalizing the enemy.

It's terrible. But building and battling. And look at how effectively he mobilizes the people. For 90 years, the people have been saying, We can't do it. We can't do it.

We've tried. We've failed. It cannot be done. It's no use. And along comes Nehemiah. And there in verse 18, you find them saying, Don't you?

[15:41] It is remarkable. At the end of that verse, you can even hear them. And they said, Let us rise up and build. And they did as well. Because we're told that they set their hands to do the good work.

They rolled up their sleeves. They're not just talking about it. They're going to do it. And they're going to get on with the work. And so how does Nehemiah manage to accomplish that? Nobody else has been able to do that. How does he do that?

Well, you notice verse 18, that phrase again. I told them that the hand of my God, that had been upon me for my good. And also the words that the king had spoken to me.

And so they said, Rise up and build. Do you see what he's doing? He's updating them. He's telling them where things are at spiritually. He keeps them informed. He spells out the reasons why they're doing things.

Look at the first half of verse 18. I told them that the good hand of my God had been upon me for good. And also of the words that the king had spoken to me.

[16:49] And they say, The king, what do you mean? Artaxerxes I. The king of the Medes and the Persians. Him, he has spoken to you.

You mean he has changed his mind about the building project. It's a miracle. Yes, it is a miracle. And so they say, Let's get up and build while the going is good. And you notice in verse 17, he identifies with them in the work that he expects them to do.

He doesn't say to them, You've got yourself into a real mess here. What are you going to do about it? Notice what he says in verse 17. He says, You see the trouble that we are in?

How Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. What are we going to do about it?

That's what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, isn't it? Do you remember how God reveals himself to Moses in the book of Exodus in the burning bush?

[17:54] Let me remind you how God revealed himself to his people. They'd been in slavery in Egypt. They were in slavery in Egypt. And God reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush. And he says, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

And I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt. And I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings. And I have come down to deliver them. Isn't that marvelous?

I've seen their oppression. I've heard their cry. I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them. And that's what God has done for us in Christ.

He has seen the mess that we've got ourselves into because of sin. He's seen the ruin of our lives. And God doesn't stand on the sidelines shouting encouragement and giving you advice.

It's a fine mess you've got yourselves into, he says. No, he doesn't. He doesn't say, well, let me draw your attention to my law given on Mount Sinai. There's a lot of advice in there. No. He's seen the mess we've got ourselves into.

[19:01] He hears our groaning. He sees the oppression. He knows that what we have to suffer because of our foolishness. And what has he done? He said, well, what are we going to do about this?

Let's put this right. And he comes down and he delivers us. That is who Jesus Christ is. Jesus is God with us, isn't he? He is Emmanuel.

And that's the motivation for living the Christian life this week. That's where we get our motivation for the fight against sin. That's where you get the motivation to attempt to rebuild the ruin of your life.

Where do you get the motivation? Well, from the fact that God is with us. That he's come down to help us. And that is the approach Nehemiah takes. What are we going to do about this?

Come on, let's build. He is evil. Nehemiah, I think, is one of those rare leaders who's able to appeal to something deep inside the people.

[20 : 03] You know, Winston Churchill, isn't it? He says that speech in Parliament, I have nothing to offer but blood, sweat, and tears. And yet somehow, in that way, he was able to appeal to something deep inside the British people during the Second World War.

And he inspired them. He rallied them. And Nehemiah is able to do the same. Look at verse 17.

You see the trouble we're in. How Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.

Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them at the hand of my God that it had been upon me for good. And also the words that the king had spoken to me.

And they said, let us rise up and build. There are no gimmicks. There are no free trips. There are no carrots. There is no kind of positive speech.

He says, we're in a mess. The walls are down. We're a reproach. Come on, let's build. I've got nothing to offer you but blood and sweat and tears. And they said, but with you, Nehemiah, come on, let's rise up and build.

[21 : 05] It's an incredible achievement. What a leader this man was. And so he builds. And then there's criticism, isn't there?

There always is criticism. Every decent leader has critics. And in fact, you're not much of a leader if you're not facing criticism. And anybody who's doing anything is going to be criticized.

And in fact, I'd say the way to not be criticized is just not to do anything. And I think that's true generally. It's certainly generally true in the church that if leaders don't do anything, you'll have a pretty content, happy church.

But if you seek to do something. Verse 19, they were there in verse 10. In verse 10, they're just upset, aren't they, and disturbed. At verse 10, they can't believe that somebody has come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.

And in verse 19, it begins to break out and show itself more openly. And in verse 19, when Sambalat, the Horonite, and Tobiah, the Ammonite servant, and Geshem, the Arab, heard of it, they jeered at us.

[22 : 11] And they despised us. A strong word, isn't it? And they said, what is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king? We'll tell on you. We'll tell on you.

This isn't allowed. It's been tried before, you know. And when the king gets to hear about this, you'll be in trouble. We'll tell. Don't underestimate that kind of opposition.

Thomas Watson, the Puritanist, has got a great quote in his little book, his book, *The Beatitudes*.

And he says this, It is better to be felled by a lion than to be stung to death by wasps.

It's great, isn't it? It's better to be felled by a lion than to be stung to death by wasps. And if you're going to be persecuted, I'd rather have my head chopped off than stung to death by constant criticism and character assassination.

I don't say that lightly. And so don't believe it when people say sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me. You know, don't you, and I know, that there is terrific power to hurt in the tongue and in people's words.

[23 : 18] There is terrific power in negative criticism and in threats and in insults and in scorn and in ridicule. And you know that.

You have done something and you've had 20 people say they really appreciated it. And one person has been critical of it. And the only thing that you can remember is what the critical person said.

And if you've never been criticized or opposed or threatened, then the likelihood is you're not doing very much. Because all of God's people, whether you're a leader or not, when you're trying to do God's work sooner or later, you'll come up against this opposition.

And so the question is, how do you handle that? How do we handle that? How do we handle that?

Then I replied to them, the God of heaven will make us prosper. Do you see what he's doing? What is he doing? They're false allegations, aren't they?

[24 : 44] They're the fiery darts of the devil. And they rain down on him through the criticism of Sambalat and Tobiah. And the devil is getting at him. And the accusations are aimed at him.

And under this assault, these fiery darts that are raining down on him, what does he do? Well, do you remember the armor of the Lord? He picks up the shield of faith. And so I answered them. And then I replied to them, the God of heaven will make us prosper.

And we, his servants, will arise and build. But you, you have no portion or right or claim to Jerusalem. You don't even belong.

You have no portion or right or claim to Jerusalem. And that's the Christian life. And that's certainly church life. Church life is not only a building site.

It's a battlefield. And so is the Christian life. And you would think, I think, that the Christian life is to be lived in kind of some holiday camp by the things people believe and say and behave and write.

[25 : 48] But the Christian life and church life is always a building site and a battleground. And that is where the work is to be done. And it will always be like that.

And that is where you and I are to live out our Christian lives. And that is where you and I are to serve the Lord. And you might long for peace, but it's not peacetime.

And you might long for the building project to be finished, but it's not. Because it's building and battling. And that is Christian ministry. And that is the Christian life.

And it calls for resilience. And they did it out of pride and patriotism for an earthly Jerusalem. But we battle. And we build.

With a sense of longing. And belonging. To a heavenly Jerusalem. And the building of God's church. Let's pray.