

# Nehemiah 2:1-8

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Date: 11 October 2020

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[ 0 : 00 ] Do sit and if you turn to Nehemiah chapter 2. And so I've explained the last couple of weeks the reason why I want us to go through Nehemiah is there's a sense in which Nehemiah is about rebuilding the work of God and rebuilding the church.

And he's a man that stands up to the king and stands for God's people. And we need both of those things. We're in a bit of a time of transition as a church.

That's a good thing, isn't it? To rethink and to rebuild, to refocus. And also we're in a period, I think, where we're just aware of a little bit more pressure in the country and from the state.

And we need to be not fearful and we need to look at people like Nehemiah and Esther and Daniel and be willing to count the cost.

To do it in a godly way and to do it humbly but also to stand for God. So Chris read for us Mark chapter 9. And in that chapter you read in Mark 9 about the father of a seriously disabled child.

[ 1 : 14 ] And the father comes to the Lord Jesus and this dad says, I don't know whether you picked it up, if you can do anything. That's the line, isn't it?

That stands out. If you can do anything, please help us. And we'd love to know the look on Jesus' face, wouldn't we? But Jesus says to that distressed father, in effect, you're asking the wrong question.

You come to me and you say, if you can do anything. And Christ points out, doesn't he, that the point is not, can Jesus do anything?

The point is, can you believe? And that is a great challenge, isn't it? Can we believe? Is God able to change you? Is God able to change your life?

Is God able to make you a different person? The thing that you struggle with, those things that you're frustrated with, is God able to deal with them tonight?

[ 2 : 20 ] Is God able to change our church? Do we believe that he can do that? That's the point.

There's no question, I hope, tonight over God's ability. But there is a huge question, isn't there, over the strength of our faith, certainly of mine.

And in this chapter, what we see wonderfully is this chapter's being preserved to show us a situation that is transformed by God's power. And God's power works through the faith of one individual.

And church history teaches us the colossal difference that one man can make. You go to Elephant and Castle, and you come out of Elephant and Castle, and you see, if you're looking in the right direction, I'm not the grotty shopping center, but you see Metropolitan Tabernacle.

And you see C.H. Spurgeon, this remarkable man who was gifted by God, who at the end of his life, his influence spread through Victorian London. Orphanages, a theological seminary, a church that had planted hundreds of churches.

And church history teaches us the colossal difference that one man or one woman or one child or one young person can make. So we've seen him, we saw chapter 1, Nehemiah, he weeps over the state of Jerusalem, church.

[ 3 : 35 ] He weeps over the ruins. And we see that then Nehemiah prays about the ruins, but he doesn't stop there. Lots of people do stop there. Many people, they feel bad about their personal weaknesses, and the weaknesses of the church, many people even pray about it.

Certainly complain about it. But they don't do very much about it. And Nehemiah, in chapter 2, he comes to the point of action. And I think it's really helpful for you and I just to reflect on how difficult the situation is that Nehemiah is facing.

He wants to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. These walls, they've been ruined for 150 years. They've been lying in a desolate and ruined condition. Nobody's done anything about it.

And the people, the church in Jerusalem, well, they are apathetic and disinterested. And they're surrounded by very strong enemies who do not want the walls to be rebuilt. And the very king himself, Nehemiah's employer, was the one who commanded that the walls should not be rebuilt. We're told that his statement, Ezra 4.21, he issues an order to these men to stop work. So this city will not be rebuilt until I order it so.

[ 4 : 50 ] And so there are huge obstacles that face Nehemiah. And they stand in the way of what Nehemiah wants to do. And maybe it's tonight, isn't it, that actually you face massive obstacles.

You'd love to be a different person, but you're not. You'd love to have a greater love for the Lord Jesus. And you'd love to have a greater love for the world.

And you'd really want to be more prayerful. You'd like to be an enthusiastic evangelist. You'd like to be a better husband or a more patient father.

You'd like to be a more content wife. More loving, more patient. You'd like to be less selfish. And as you think about those things and the obstacles and the habits over the years and the weakness of your personality and the defects in your upbringing and the circumstances which you find yourself in right now, they are huge obstacles.

And we want to see the church growing. We want to see men and women come to faith and be built into the church body and disciplined and come to maturity and nations reached on other churches planted.

[ 6 : 06 ] And there are massive obstacles in the way that surround us. Apostle John tells us this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.

And what you see in Nehemiah 2, which is really encouraging, is you see faith in action. And I want to describe it. What is Nehemiah's faith like?

I think it is daring faith. It is risky faith. And so faith is essentially daring or risky. And if our church is to be rebuilt, we need young men and women and boys and girls of daring and risky faith.

So three things, three obvious things. First of all, daring faith runs great risks. Daring faith runs great risks. What were the risks that Nehemiah ran?

Who was Nehemiah? Nehemiah was the king's bodyguard. He's the personal bodyguard. He's the top security agent. It was his task to keep the king alive. He was the cupbearer to the king.

[ 7 : 12 ] That's the end of chapter 1, isn't it? And his responsibility was to see that the king wasn't poisoned by his enemies. He had to taste the food and drink the wine, which the king had, drank.

And he had to be totally and completely reliable. And if the king suspected for one second that Nehemiah wasn't happy in his work, he would have him killed. And this happened all the time. Nehemiah's job was not a long-term employment prospect. It was a high-risk occupation. It came with no pension plan. It was something that people didn't hold very long, because, number one, either they were poisoned, or they were killed by their employers.

And so the king has to be sure, doesn't he? He has to be absolutely sure of Nehemiah's loyalty. And so what does Nehemiah do? He deliberately allows the king to see sadness in his face.

Look at what we see there. In chapter 2, verse 1. Nehemiah deliberately goes into the king's presence, Nehemiah's saying, Why is your face sad, seeing that you're not sick?

[ 8 : 30 ] This is nothing but sadness of heart. Nehemiah deliberately goes into the king's presence, and he looks upset and annoyed and discontented and unhappy.

Now, what was that? Look at verse 2. The king immediately picks up on it.

The king does not like seeing his cupbearer coming in and looking sad. He says, Why is your face sad, seeing you are not ill? It must be heart sickness.

And Nehemiah says, doesn't he, at the end of verse 2, that I was very much afraid. No wonder. He shows the king he's not at ease. He shows the king he's unhappy.

And when he's asked about it, he brings up, doesn't he, the rebuilding of the city walls. Verse 3. And I said to the king, Let the king live forever. Why should not my face be sad when the city, the place of my father's graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?

[ 9 : 31 ] And the king would not like to have heard that the city's walls were in ruins. He would not like to hear about the city's walls being rebuilt. The king was very nervous about security and the unity of the empire.

They were afraid of breakaway states. They didn't like parts of their empire breaking away. They didn't like to hear of cities being rebuilt. And the king orders that the city shouldn't be rebuilt.

So here's his top security agent, and he says, I'm unhappy with what you've done. I'm unhappy with the policy of your government. I don't agree with what you've done. In fact, I'm against it.

Nehemiah runs a dreadful risk. It would have taken very little for Art Exerces to have him taken out and impaled and die horribly. He's not foolishly rash, though, so you look at verse 3.

He addresses the king with respect. Let the king live forever. In verse 5, he's polite. If it pleases the king. He's very gracious. It's interesting, he doesn't mention the word Jerusalem.

[10:34] I think that's deliberate. The city where my fathers are buried. He keeps it vague. Jerusalem is not a good word. We don't do Jerusalem.

So he doesn't mention it. And he tries to be tactful here. And I think it's significant that he comes on a domestic occasion. I'm told, verse 6, the queen is sitting beside him. Maybe he thinks Art Exerces will be in a better mood if his wife is sitting beside him.

Maybe he thinks he's less likely to have me killed if his wife is sitting there. It seems to have been an informal domestic occasion. And so while we have to be daring and we have to be bold in serving Christ, we don't have to be stupid.

And we don't need to be tactless. And we don't need to be rash. And we don't need to make trouble for ourselves. The situation is difficult enough as it is. And Nehemiah does his best not to make it more difficult, but he runs the risk of his life to serve God.

And that's the point. And so think about that for a moment. Faith is not a timid thing. Faith is not a cozy thing. And faith is not a safe thing. And if you want to be safe, faith is not the way to live.

[11:50] And so when you believed in Jesus Christ, what happened? What did you do when you believed in Jesus Christ? You staked your eternal destiny on one thing. What happened?

You said to yourself, that when I stand before God on the day of judgment, I'm not going to depend on anything that I have done. And I'm not going to have anything to offer God.

I'm not going to have anything to plea with Him. I'll have no other excuse. I'll have no other argument. I will depend solely on one thing, on one thing alone.

I'll depend on what Jesus Christ did for me on the cross. No other plea. No plan B. No fallback system.

Nothing. I will depend on Him and Him alone. People might say to you, well, why don't you play safe? Why don't you try and do a few good works as well?

[12:49] And what do we say to that? We say, well, no, I'm not going to depend on my good works. I'm going to stake everything. Everything. My immortal soul, my body, my everlasting happiness, and I'm going to stake it all on Jesus Christ.

And that is a huge transaction. And so when somebody becomes a Christian, they hand over their life to Jesus Christ. And we say, I will do whatever you tell me to do, and I will go wherever you tell me to go, and I'm going to follow you, because that is what saving faith is.

But the point is this, that continuing faith is to be just as daring as saving faith, isn't it? And when we believe in the Lord Jesus, we don't say, well, I've shown daring faith now.

I'm going to settle down. And I'm going to coast for a little while. Noah had to build that great ark, didn't he? Perhaps hundreds of miles from the sea. Abraham had to give up all that he knew to follow God's call.

Moses had to leave the palace of Egypt to follow God. And faith always involves boldness and danger. And unseen elements.

[13:59] And it is a risky endeavor, and it is a daring endeavor. And so faith should cause us to tremble. And it is that same faith that will build and rebuild the church.

And God calls us to daring faith. God calls us to run risks for him. And God calls us to put ourselves in situations where we're vulnerable and in situations where we are uncomfortable and in situations where we make fools of ourselves and sometimes in situations where we may fail.

In situations where we may make mistakes. And if we opt for safety first, we will not progress. And if we opt for security above all else, we will not build the church.

And if we want to stay in our comfort zones, we will not be effective for God. So we think of the shepherd.

We think of the shepherd in Jesus' story who goes to look for the lost sheep. And he has to leave the 99 and go into the wilderness to the mud and the thorns and the briars and the difficult and dirty, dangerous place.

[ 15 : 20 ] And the shepherd goes to find the lost sheep. He cannot just sit in the sheepfold nice and dry and comfortable and hope that lost sheep will somehow just wander into the sheepfold for him to save.

He has to go and find them. Churches can't put up signs saying, is there International Presbyterian Church lost sheep welcome here?

That's not how it works. Churches. And so if we played a word association game, you know that game where I say a word and you think of a word that you're associated with?

If I said Presbyterian, you would all be thinking daring, bold, innovative, wouldn't you? No, you wouldn't.

People think of Presbyterians, they think, oh, what risks they run. Those reformed people, how exposed they make themselves. How innovative they are.

[ 16 : 28 ] Those reformed people, what dangers they encounter. Those reformed people, how vulnerable they make themselves. And so churches like ours can be paralyzed by fear of making mistakes, can't we?

There's a good side to that. We don't want to make mistakes. We don't want to do anything unbiblical. That's a right desire, isn't it?

But it can act like a straitjacket. We might have said, at all costs, we mustn't do anything wrong. At all costs, we mustn't do anything wrong.

What happens is that the last word of that sentence gets dropped off, doesn't it? And so you have churches that at all costs don't do anything. And it is possible, I think, for churches like ours to be paralyzed by fear, a fear of doing wrong.

And we end up doing little, which is far more wrong, far more unbiblical, far, far worse. But we felt safe, secure, and sound, and scriptural.

[ 17 : 37 ] We're doing the right thing. And what we fail to see is that what we're not doing makes us unsound, and unscriptural, and deeply wrong. We have to see, don't we, that the Pharisees in Jesus' day were deeply concerned that they would never do anything unbiblical.

And Jesus says, you strain a gnat, you swallow a camel. And you're so concerned about the minute letter of the law, you're breaking the spirit of the law. And it wasn't true of our forefathers.

It wasn't true of Calvin. It wasn't true of the Westminster Divines. It wasn't certainly true of the 18th century men. Whitfield and of Wesley.

Of Roland. They were daring men and enterprising men. They were men of vision and energy. And we need to feel the shiver of fear.

I do think we've known that a little bit as a church. There have been times when this building, I know we go on about it a little bit too much probably at the moment, but there were times I think when we were aware, can we really cope with this?

[ 18 : 48 ] And we were apprehensive. Some of you were very apprehensive. But daring faith runs great risks. And so what risks might God want you to run?

John Piper's got a little book which I found really, really helpful called Risk is Right. I think he's got it as a PDF. It'll really encourage you to read that. Risk is Right by John Piper.

And what risks might God want our congregation to run? And are we prepared to face up to being criticized by fellow Christians?

Because we will be. Are we prepared for people to say, well, they're not as sound as you might think. They're not as precise. They're not as careful as they should be. What risks do we need to run?

And Nehemiah says, I'm very much afraid. I love it. I'm very much afraid. Verse 2, verse 3, I said to the king. Children, tomorrow when you're in school or when you're speaking with someone, isn't it, and you know you've got to stand for God and you know you need to speak.

[ 19 : 56 ] You remember Nehemiah. What does he do? He says, I was very much afraid. That's not wrong to feel that, children. Not wrong at all. But you remember verse 3, so I said to the king.

You speak. You speak. James Philip has got a beautiful definition of courage. That's what he says. He says, courage is not so much absence of fear, as faithfulness in spite of fear.

Isn't that great? Courage is not so much absence of fear as faithfulness in spite of fear. Courage is somebody who's still terrified but goes on ahead and does it.

They do what they're terrified of doing. That is courage. Daring faith runs great risks. Secondly, daring faith undertakes great tasks. And so, why is Nehemiah making this request to the king?

Well, he's making this request to the king because he's got a vision, hasn't he, of what he must do. He sees the city of Jerusalem rebuilt. He sees those walls in his mind eyes and he's imagined them and he's visualized them and he realizes this is a massive task that's going to demand my life and it'll take probably years off my life.

[ 21 : 21 ] He's going to leave a well-paid, influential job. He's going to leave the luxury of the palace. He's going to leave his friends and his family. He's going to set out on a journey of many hundreds of miles and he's going to give himself to working with difficult people.

He's going to give himself to the thankless task of rebuilding. Look at verse 5. He says, If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in your sight that you send me to Judah to the city of my father's graves that I may rebuild it.

That's the task. Do you see the faith of the man? So that I can rebuild it. That's the faith that God has given him. That's the great task he set himself to undertake. And he's going to take on that task and because he takes that on his whole life will have to change.

And so what does God want you to be? What does God want you to do? And what is your vision for yourself?

I don't think I've ever asked that question before. But what I mean is this. What sort of person do you want to be under God? Let's think five years from now.

[ 22 : 38 ] If God gives you those five years what would you want God to do in your life to make of you? You maybe would love to be a transformed person.

To be a radically different person. What's your vision for maybe your unconverted friend or unconverted family member or your neighbor or the person you're at the school gate with?

I hope in you that there's a longing isn't it for that person to be sitting beside you socially distanced of course to worship God together to be part of a church together to be trusting and following Christ for that person who you've prayed for maybe for years to be a new creature.

And so your vision for this church for our community for the places of this earth where there's no light to the gospel. Something happens here in Nehemiah 2 that couldn't have been expected that couldn't have been forecast that couldn't have been predicted.

But God's purpose it was and it was bound to happen. And I think particularly in the church in this country and in churches like ours in our discouragement we can lose sight of the fact that this is God's world.

[ 24 : 01 ] It is God's world and so we need to remind ourselves at this moment that this country does not belong to Westminster. This country does not belong to the government to the politicians it belongs to Jesus Christ.

It is God's world. And what does God want you to see and if we have the faith to see a great task to be done the conclusion is certain.

It requires great effort. Daring faith undertakes great tasks and great effort. It takes time and trouble and work. And so we need to tell our young people and our children and to model to them that the Christian life is difficult but not impossible.

The Christian life takes effort and commitment but there is great great joy in that commitment and in that difficulty and there is work to be done and there is work to be done that will need to be done when we are old and incapable and we must not stop and you slowly plod on and you do the difficult but not impossible.

don't be soft. It's not somebody else's job. So the children of this church there is work to be done in this church.

[ 25 : 30 ] Don't be self-centered. We have different gifts don't we? Very different gifts but the same commitment. And we mustn't think that the task has been done.

And so again the example of the building project. This building project it's a tool isn't it? That's what it is. It's a great tool we're thankful for it. It's a tool.

It's not the work. It's the beginning. And so the work and the task are enormously demanding. Daring faith undertakes great tasks.

It would be a tragedy. It would be an absolute tragedy if we just settled down. And we just plowed on. And we just accepted the status quo with no vision.

Nothing could be worse. Thirdly lastly daring faith makes great requests. Daring faith makes great requests. Nehemiah talks with Art of Xerxes and fair play to Nehemiah.

[ 26 : 36 ] Look at him. He believes if you're going to ask ask big, he's literally in for a penny and in for a pound isn't he?

You can see him. Look at verse five. He goes to his employee and he says can I have an indefinite leave of absence from my work? And the answer is okay I'll give you indefinite absence from your work.

And you say to Nehemiah you say well done be quiet get out of there as fast as you can. You've had your answer. That's good enough isn't it?

But no look at verse seven. Verse seven he says if it pleases the king let letters be given to me to the governors of the province beyond the river that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah.

Then he says in verse eight he goes on and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest that he may give me timber to make beams to the gates of the fortress of the temple and for the wall of the city for the house that I will occupy.

[ 27 : 40 ] And so one writer says he is sent he is safe and he is supplied. That's a better outline than I've got. He is safe he is sent and he supplied.

He asked to be sent he asked to be safe and he asked to be supplied. Nehemiah's got some nerve isn't it? It's a bit like do you remember the chapter of Abraham praying for Sodom?

First time you read it you can't believe it isn't it? He says well if there were fifty righteous people would it be destroyed? What about forty-five? What about forty? He keeps going what about twenty supposing there were ten lord?

And Nehemiah does the same thing he keeps on and on and on and on until his requests are granted in full. And why does he ask so much? Because he wants the job to be finished. He's not playing games and it's not an idle dream.

And Nehemiah is dead earnest and he knows it is necessary to see the project finished. And he's satisfied with nothing less. And so he says I'll ask for everything I need.

[ 28 : 53 ] And so I wonder for us as a church what are our expectations? And I wonder for myself what am I asking God for? What are my expectations for my life?

And for our church here and the wider church what am I praying for at the moment? What did you ask God for this morning? God for me to preach well whatever that means.

Please help him not to be boring. I don't know what you prayed. What have our prayer requests been this week? Small or large? Have they been non-existent?

True faith always has great expectations. expectations. And so I believe as I hope you believe that God is going to take me to heaven.

And God is going to give me a perfectly glorified soul and body and I will live there forever with the people I love the most in the world. And that is our expectations.

[ 30 : 04 ] And so here is a man who makes huge requests and yet they're all answered aren't they? And William Carey was right wasn't he? Expect great things from God and then attempt great things from God because God is not poor and God is not weak and God is not limited and God is not unloving and so you can trust him tonight and so you are coming to a king large petitions with you bring.

Large petitions. Or do we bring little routine petitions? Tiny little limited petitions? Half hearted petitions.

Here is a man who keeps asking and asking and asking because he is a vision of what he wants to see done. And so may God give us the faith to see that we may be changed.

That we may be a changed people and made different and our congregation may be transformed and people might come in and be born again and daughter congregations would be planted.

Daring faith makes great requests so Nehemiah is our example. It's partly why he's given to us in scripture. That we will weep as he did and we will pray as he did and we will run risks and labour to the point of exhaustion.

[ 31 : 35 ] And if we ask in faith I believe we can see amazing answers as Nehemiah did. But notice in all of this, let's finish with this, Nehemiah gives glory to where it belongs.

Look at what he says in verse 8. He recognises at the end of verse 8 the king granted me what I asked for the good hand of my God was upon me.

And so Nehemiah doesn't say look at my faith and look at my effort and look at my hard work.

He says it all depended on God's blessing. And so there is, isn't there, no place for arrogance. No place for assuming. Please don't think that I'm advocating that if we do A and B and C then the blessing will be automatic.

It isn't. Many people have been far more faithful than we have. And they've seen little apparent blessing. And yet when we've said that, God works through means.

[ 32 : 53 ] And so this is the sort of person God uses. faith. And may God build many such men and women and boys and girls of faith.

Daring faith. In our congregation and in our church and in all the churches here. Amen. Let's pray. Thank you.