

Faith and Risk

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[0 : 00] Well, we started a series a couple of weeks ago looking at a book in the Old Testament called the Book of Nehemiah. This is about a man named Nehemiah whom God calls to do two things, two great, extraordinary, interrelated tasks.

He finds himself working for the Persian government in living in exile, working for a foreign king, and yet God calls him to return to the city of Jerusalem which lies in ruins, and God calls him to do two things simultaneously, to rebuild the city of God, physically rebuild the city of God, and then to spiritually rebuild the people of God who are unfaithful and scattered.

And we find ourselves in a similar place in the life of our church here in 2024 in D.C. There are a lot of similarities. We are, in fact, about to start to physically renovate a building at 5th and Q Northwest that we hope God willing to move into in about a year's time.

And at the same time, we've recognized that this is a vector point in the life of our church. This is an inflection point. And we have this opportunity over the next year to do the work of spiritual renovation, to seek for God to fill our congregation, to fill us with the Holy Spirit, to clarify our sense of calling as a community, and to prepare us to enter into this building and this next chapter of ministry that God is calling us to as Church of the Advent.

And so we're looking at the book of Nehemiah this fall and seeing what we can learn from it to help us in this journey of spiritual renovation that we are taking part in together.

[1 : 48] And last week, we talked about the fact that Nehemiah, as a leader, was a man of prayer. He had an extraordinarily rich prayer life.

And prayer is something that is going to mark this time over the next year. There's going to be lots of opportunities beyond what we would normally be doing as a community to pray together. If you saw the video that Hillary sent out this past week, we're also going to, for those who would like to participate, be fasting together on Fridays.

So prayer and fasting. There's going to be opportunities to do prayer walks in the Shaw neighborhood. There's going to be opportunities to gather for prayer and worship as a church. And so this is one of the ways we're going to be doing this work of spiritual renewal together.

This week, we want to look at two more qualities that we see in Nehemiah that we can learn from that I think, God willing, should mark our life together from this point moving forward through this season of change.

Nehemiah has two qualities, and you need both. They go together. He has, first of all, the patience to wait, right? He's in a situation where he has to wait for the right opportunity and has the patience to wait for the right opportunity.

[3 : 04] And then he has the courage to act when that opportunity comes. And those two go hand in hand. Anytime we find ourselves seeking to follow God's will for our lives, wanting to live lives of faithfulness, we need to have both the patience to wait when God calls us to wait and the courage to act when God calls us to take action.

So let's open Nehemiah and look at this together, and we're going to ask for God's help. Lord, we thank you for being a God who's already here and speaking to us. Lord, I thank you for the rich time that we had in Sunday school earlier.

Lord, I thank you for the joy it was to be with our high schoolers this morning and just to talk about prayer and to talk about the fact that you're a God who delights in our prayer. And we know that you delight when we ask you to make your word clear and plain and to make your word flesh to us, Lord.

And so we know that you're already answering that prayer even as we ask it. And we pray that in opening your written word, we would actually come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ.

It's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, let's look at Nehemiah's patience. To bring you up to date in the story, Nehemiah first hears about the brokenness of Jerusalem in the month of Kislev. [4 : 22] This is around 445 BC. Nehemiah's living in exile in the Persian government. He's an official in the Persian government. And he hears that the city of Jerusalem lies in ruins, that it's been burned to the ground.

Whatever construction had started earlier, 20 years previously, it had stopped. And so he hears that, and it devastates him.

It breaks his heart. And he's desperate to help. He's desperate to get involved. He wants to do anything he can to help his people. And there is no doubt that when Nehemiah hears this news, he wants to pack his things up that day and leave for Jerusalem as soon as he possibly can.

But that's not an option. In order to do anything, Nehemiah has to get permission from his boss. And his boss is none other than King Artaxerxes.

Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the king. That means it's his job to bring wine to the king when the king wants it and to check the wine to make sure it's not poisoned. Artaxerxes's father had been assassinated.

[5 : 31] And certainly Artaxerxes wanted to make sure that the same was not going to happen to him. And so Nehemiah had a very important job, and he was very trusted to be in this position. And so Nehemiah knows he's only going to get one shot at this.

And he has to wait for the right opportunity before he takes action. And that opportunity doesn't come until the month of Nisan. And in the Hebrew calendar, that means that Nehemiah has to wait for four months.

So he hears the news in Kislev, and then he has to wait four months. And just imagine what that must have been like for him. Imagine getting news that is so devastating that it knocks your wind out, you collapse to the ground, and you start weeping.

And imagine that happens to him, and every day he wakes up, and the first thing on his mind is the suffering of his people. He gets dressed, he goes to work, and the opportunity doesn't come.

Day after day, week after week, month after month, he has to simply go to work, wait, go to work, and wait. And it raises this question, why would God make Nehemiah wait?

[6 : 47] Right, because surely God wants his city rebuilt. Surely he wants his people rebuilt. If he's called Nehemiah to do this, surely he wants Nehemiah to go do it.

So why would God say, I'm going to call you to this great and extraordinary task, but we're going to give it a few months before you get started? That's incredibly frustrating. The thing is, we see this kind of thing happening all throughout Scripture.

To many, if not all, the people whom God calls to do various things, they have to wait. Abraham and Sarah spend a lifetime struggling with infertility.

And they've grieved this, and they've moved past it in their lives, and they've accepted the fact that they're not going to have children. And then God comes to them, and he says he's going to bless them with a child. And they're overjoyed.

But then they have to wait 25 more years before that child comes. Right? Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers.

[7 : 47] And you think, well, surely God's going to set him free. Well, Joseph has to wait 13 years before he finally gains a position of influence. Moses feels burdened for the plight of his people who are all living in slavery.

And he impetuously murders an Egyptian who's mistreating one of his people. And you think, now's going to be the time when there's an uprising. And now this is the first strike of rebellion against Egypt.

And surely this is the... No, God makes him wait 40 more years. Where he goes and he gets married and he has a couple of kids and he works as a shepherd for decades.

Moses is 80 years old when he sees the burning bush. He's already lived a lifetime by most of our standards. So the question is, why would God do this?

What possible reason could God have for making us wait on good things that he wants for us? On one level, no one knows or understands God's reasoning fully.

[8 : 54] No one can understand God's ways. They're higher than ours. But we do know this, that waiting teaches us something that is absolutely crucial for anyone seeking to follow God faithfully.

Waiting teaches us this, that God is the one who controls the outcomes in our lives. And our job is to focus on the process.

God is the one who controls the outcomes. And our job is to focus on the process. So on the one hand, we should do everything we can to pursue the things that God is calling us to do.

We should work hard. We should set goals. We should be strategic to the best of our ability.

Absolutely. But on the other hand, even with the best planning, even with the best resources, even with the best strategy, the outcome is never guaranteed.

And the outcome is never going to be a product purely of our strength, our skill, our preparation.

Ultimately, the outcome is the product of God's will.

[10:03] Which means sometimes you can do everything right and you can get the wrong outcome. Sometimes you can do everything wrong and get the right outcome. Because ultimately, the outcome is in God's hands.

You know, Psalm 127.1 says, Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

Right? So the problem, though, is that I think we tend to forget this. If you're anything like me, we tend to almost immediately forget that this is how it works. And the way you know you've forgotten this is if you take a moment to survey the stress and anxiety in your own life.

And think about what are the things that I stress about? What are the things that make me anxious? What are the things that make me feel hopeless? What are the things that keep me awake at night, ruminating at 3 o'clock in the morning?

What are those things that I'm thinking about? Chances are you'll find areas where you have forgotten that this is the case. I mean, how much of our stress and anxiety comes from the fact that we are trying to control outcomes?

[11:10] I mean, how much time and energy do we spend trying to engineer the outcome that we want? Whether it's to get into a really good program or to get a good job, to engineer the outcome, you know, in a family situation, a relational situation.

How much do we stress about trying to control other people's opinions of us? How many times do you think through a conversation before you have it? If I just word it this way, if I just say it this way, if I just do this or say that or act this way, then they will think this about me.

How often are we trying to do it? How much time do we spend ruminating or overthinking before making decisions? Thinking that somehow if we can discern that the correct path, the correct maneuvers, that somehow we can guarantee that we will arrive where we want to be.

The Bible is very clear on this. We cannot control that. We cannot control the outcomes. Friends, that is simply above our pay grade. Only God knows and only God can control what is going to happen, which means everything that happens happens according to God's timing and not our timing.

And I struggle with that so much. I struggle with that more than I could probably possibly convey. But here's what I've realized. Until we accept that fact, until you accept that the outcome and the timing is above your pay grade, your life is going to be filled with needless stress and frustration.

[12:52] And there's enough legitimate frustration in life to go around. Why would we invite needless stress and frustration? By thinking we can control these things.

So our role, the thing we're called to, and the thing that you see again and again and again in Scripture, is that we're called to focus on the process and to trust God with the outcome. In other words, instead of focusing on the future that we can't control, we turn our focus to the present. And we ask, as I'm being called to wait in this season of my life, how do I use this time the best possible way I can?

And the good news there is that when God makes us wait, chances are it's because He not only wants to do something through us, but He's actually wanting to do something in us.

So when God makes you wait, it's never because He's too busy and He's saying, take a number, I'll be with you soon. It's because the waiting is a part of what God is wanting to do in your life.

[13:53] And there are things that need to happen that can only happen because you're waiting. Four months of waiting gave Nehemiah time to pray and fast.

Commentators say it's likely that He's praying and fasting that entire time, which prepared Him to become the kind of leader whose life is marked by prayer and fasting, marked by reliance on God.

Twenty-five years of waiting taught Abraham and Sarah how to trust the Lord when it comes to parenting. If you know the story, they make a lot of mistakes. They have to repent. They learn a lot of hard lessons. And they learn how to trust the Lord when it comes to parenting, which prepares them to be the parents of a nation. Thirteen years of servitude taught Joseph humility and compassion.

It gave him insight into what it's like to be the most powerless in a society. Thirteen years of that prepares him to be in a position of power and influence where he knows how to wield and use that power to lift up those who are oppressed, to lift up those who most desperately need mercy, his own family.

[15:09] Who had betrayed him. Right? Forty years of working as a shepherd transformed Moses from this brash, impetuous man into someone who knows how to rely on God's strength instead of his own strength.

It prepares him for that moment where he's standing with his back to the Red Sea, and all is lost, it seems. And he calls out and says, the Lord will fight for you.

Because he's seen that happen again and again and again. It prepared him to be a shepherd for God's people in the wilderness. Right? So when you find yourself focusing on some future outcome, when you find yourself ruminating over how to engineer some future that you want, whatever the case may be, instead of allowing yourself to go down that road of control, accept God's timing. Which leads to endless frustration and stress. Accept God's timing. Wherever you are, you're exactly where God wants you to be.

God has not dropped the ball in your life. God has not given up on your timeline. God has not distracted. That's a very pagan idea of God, by the way.

[16:23] The pagans believe that you needed to get the God's attention, and so you make a lot of noise, you ring bells, you cling gongs, you scream, you yell, you wake the gods up, and you get them to pay attention to you. You offer a few sacrifices, so they'll be inclined to do what you want them to do.

Our God is not like that. Wherever you are in your life, you're exactly where God wants you. And then embrace the process. Focus on how to use the time. Ask God, what do you want to do in me? How does this time of waiting bring your work to fruition in my life? The patience to wait. We see this quality in Nehemiah.

And my prayer is that this would be a quality that marks our community. Now, there's a flip side to this. The courage to act. There are times in our life when God calls us to wait, and there are times in our life when God calls us to take action.

After four months, Nehemiah sees his opportunity. Nisan is the beginning of the new year. There's probably a festival going on to celebrate the new year. That would have included a lot of drinking.

[17:31] So, Nehemiah is probably very busy. In verse 6, we see that when Nehemiah, on this particular occasion, approaches the king, the queen is present. Now, the queen would not have been present at larger formal gatherings.

So, this implies that it's probably a more intimate setting. So, Nehemiah seizes opportunity. There's drinks are flowing. Everybody's in a great mood. The queen is there. It's an intimate setting.

Not many onlookers. So, this is his chance. We need to understand that Nehemiah is taking a major risk here. Who halted construction on Jerusalem 20 years earlier?

Well, it was King Artaxerxes. And so, Nehemiah is essentially going to the king and saying, hey, if you don't mind, could you reverse that decision that you made 20 years earlier?

Change your policy on that? Start up construction again? Oh, and could you let me get out of this job and give me money and resources to go and rebuild a city that actually might represent a threat to your power?

[18:27] Well, it's a huge ask. He's not only risking his career, he's risking his life. And it says up until this point, even though Nehemiah had been grieving, he had not allowed that grief to show, which, by the way, one of the core aspects of patience is self-regulation, right?

Being able to manage your emotions so that they don't want to manage you. He's not allowed that to show. He's been very professional. In his work, he's shown up, he's done his job. But this time, he allows his grief to show.

And the king immediately notices. He immediately tunes in on it. And he's like, Nehemiah, what's wrong? He's like, you don't look sick. Something's wrong. Now, we would be inclined to think, wow,

what a nice king.

You know, he has all these subjects or whatever, and he notices Nehemiah, he cares about him. Maybe. But remember Nehemiah's job. He's the cupbearer. His job is to taste and make sure there's no poison.

So if your cupbearer's walking up and he looks sad, that's not good for you. Right? So the king's like, oh, are you feeling okay? Because he's worried about his own life.

[19 : 41] And Nehemiah, at that moment, is terrified because he realizes that the moment has come. And verse 2 literally says, if you translate it, a terrible fear came over me.

You know those moments where kind of like, it's like you're standing on the high dive and you're getting ready to go off and you just feel that dread set in? You know, that dread sets in. He's like, I'm on the precipice.

The next few seconds are going to determine whether I live or die. But even, here's the key, even in the face of fear, Nehemiah goes forward with his plan. He could have easily said, oh, it's nothing. But he says, why should I not be sad when the home of my people lies in ruins? Right? He shares his personal pain. He doesn't get political. He doesn't say, hey, I want to talk to you about your policies.

He says, I'm heartbroken over the state of my people. The king realizes at this point, Nehemiah's angling for something. And so the king says, okay, what are you requesting? And this is the moment Nehemiah's been waiting for.

[20 : 45] So he fires one final prayer up to God. I love it. Kind of one of those like, you know, signal flare prayers. He's like, you know, help, which is great, right? I mean, there's a place for that kind of prayer.

And then he makes his request. And what we need to see here is this is a beautiful example of courage. It's a beautiful example of courage. You may remember the words from Nelson Mandela, courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.

It's one of those great quotes. Courage is not the absence of fear. It's the triumph over it. Nehemiah is able to triumph over his fear. And the way he's able to do that is because of his faith.

It's because of his faith. You know, he prays to God, which shows us he's relying on God. And it's because of who God is and who he knows God to be that he takes this step forward. And he takes this major risk.

And what we see here is that courage and faith are absolutely essential in the Christian life because following God, friends, means taking risks. It's unavoidable.

[21 : 51] The Christian life is not for the faint of heart. So if you're here and you're not sure what you believe and you're trying to figure out if Christianity is for you, it's just truth in advertising.

It is not for the faint of heart. It is not for the risk averse. It is not meant to be lived on the sidelines. All throughout Scripture, again and again, God calls his people to take extraordinary risks as acts of faith.

That's why John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard Church Movement, famously said, faith is spelled R-I-S-K. I mean, in our modern age, we have come to think of faith primarily as this intellectual assent.

You know, I think that having faith means that I intellectually believe that there is a God or I believe that Jesus was real.

But that's not really faith. That's a precursor to faith. That's the prerequisite of faith. Those are the conditions necessary for faith. Faith doesn't really become faith until you act on it.

[22 : 59] I remember one time about 20 plus years ago, I was on a medical missions trip in Central America on the kind of coast of Nicaragua. And we had a truck that was loaded up with medical supplies.

And we were driving into this village in the middle of nowhere. And they had been waiting for days for this medicine. And the truck got to this ravine. And there had been a lot of rain.

And the bridge had been completely washed out. And there's all this roaring water below. And so at first, we think we're not going to be able to cross. We don't know what we're going to do. There's no other way to get to where this village is.

And yet, the people from the village had come out. And they were busily, hurriedly rebuilding the bridge out of logs. They're kind of building this bridge so that we can drive across it.

And the whole time, we're kind of looking at this ravine. And we're, you know, I don't know how to build a bridge. But I'm just hoping they know how to build a bridge. And they seem to know what they're doing. But they get done. And then they look at us. And they say, OK, come on.

[23 : 56] You can come to the village now. And we're sort of looking at each other. And, you know, OK, we've got to decide. Are we going to cross or not? Right? And I think that that's kind of a helpful image, a helpful metaphor for faith.

Right? They're assuring us that the bridge is going to hold our weight. But the only way to find out if the bridge works is to drive out onto it. That's the only way you know. Right? Right? So, here's the point.

I mean, it's one thing to stand on solid ground and to say, I believe that bridge is going to hold. I intellectually assent. That is a bridge. But it's not until you roll forward.

And it's not until you hear the creaking of the wood under your tires. It's not until you hear the roar of the water beneath you that it becomes faith. Right?

Then you know. And in the same way, it's one thing to live our lives, to live a life that is built entirely around our safety and comfort, and to say, I have faith in God.

[25 : 00] And it's quite another thing to have the courage to step out into the unknown in faith that God is going to hold you up no matter what happens.

That's when it becomes faith. You cannot have a life that is both faith-filled and risk-free.

You have to choose. Faith-filled or risk-free? One of my favorite heroes is a woman named Lilius Trotter.

I talk about her a lot because I love her. And my wife did a film on her, and that was kind of the way we learned about her life. And she lived this wonderful life of a lot of privilege and had the possibility of fame set before her.

And she chose, because she felt called to do so, she chose to leave her life of privilege, to leave her life of fame, and to leave and go as an unmarried woman, to spend the rest of her life as an obscure missionary in Algeria.

[26 : 08] And everybody around her thought it was a crazy decision. And in one of her journals, she wrote, holiness, not safety, is the end of our calling.

Holiness, not safety, is the end of our calling. You cannot have a life that is faith-filled and risk-free. So this raises this question for us.

When is the last time, as I think about my life, as you think about your life, when's the last time you did something that required real courage? It could have been this morning.

It could have been last week. It could have been ten years ago. When's the last time you did something that required real courage, where you had to overcome fear, you had to take a risk, you had to trust that God would hold you up?

How many decisions do we make trying to guarantee that we will never have to do that? Right?

Because if we're never willing to take risks, we're never going to grow in our faith.

[27 : 12] So pulling all of this together, both of these qualities are absolutely essential in the Christian life. The patience to wait and the courage to act. And friends, if you're a part of our church, right, if you're here for the first time, if you don't know, our church is kind of in a season where we're having to learn this right now.

You know, I mentioned the building at the beginning of this time. We started praying for God to give us a permanent home in 2018. And for five-plus years, we worked and we planned and we prepared and we did everything that we knew how to do.

But we had to be patient and we had to trust God with the outcome. We had to trust God's timing. Right? And in the middle of that, we have a global pandemic. Right? We were in the middle at the climax of our capital campaign, two weeks away from the big climax of our campaign, and a global pandemic hits.

And just everything grinds to a halt. We've had to wait year after year after year on God's timing. And we waited and we waited and we waited. And then we found the right building.

And when we found the right building, all of a sudden, we had to act. And we had to act immediately. And it wasn't the timing we would have chosen. It was in the middle of Holy Week. If you're an Anglican, that's the worst time for anything to happen other than going to church because there's a lot of church that week.

[28 : 30] And... But we had to act. Right? And now we're having to take some real risks together. It is very risky to purchase a building in the heart of the city in 2024.

That's a risky thing to do. It's risky to move out of this beautiful, comfortable building into a space that needs a lot of work. You know, earlier this year, we did a feasibility study.

And part of that was surveying our congregation, so many of you, on people's feelings about this whole venture. And on the one hand, you know, a vast majority of people are excited and supportive.

And there's a lot of great things. But also, we saw there's a lot... There's a significant amount of fear and uncertainty. There's a lot of fear and uncertainty. And I think that means this is a tremendous opportunity for us as a community to grow in our faith by taking risks together and by putting ourselves in a position where we are trusting that as we step in this direction, God is going to hold us up.

We may hear the boards creaking. We may hear the water rushing below. But God is going to hold us up. It puts us in a position where God can delight and astound and surprise us and go far beyond what we can even ask or imagine, as Ephesians 3 says.

[29 : 50] And when it comes to our individual lives, we also need patience and the courage to act, depending on where we find ourselves. I know that some of us, some of you are waiting on things right now.

You know, it could be marriage, could be pregnancy, could be a job opportunity, health issues, resolution of some issue that you feel like you have no control over. We need to be reminded as we wait that we can trust God with the outcome, whatever it may be.

And I encourage you to pray and ask, God, what are you doing in me during this time of waiting?

And then some of us are in a place where, frankly, we need to be taking action.

Maybe you're paralyzed and you can't take a step forward because of fear. Maybe it's a fear of failure. Maybe it's a fear of loss. Maybe it's a fear of rejection.

Maybe it's a fear of harm. And we need to be reminded also that we can trust God to hold us up no matter what happens. We need to be willing to step out in faith. And if you don't know what season you're in, we can pray the serenity prayer.

[30 : 58] If you've ever been in the addiction recovery world, you've heard this. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

And the wisdom to know the difference. And friends, as we close, we as Christians have something Nehemiah never could have dreamed of. And that's the assurance that comes through Jesus Christ.

The assurance that we have through the gospel. Right? That no matter how long we have to wait and how hopeless things may seem, our future is secured and guaranteed in Christ.

We know how the story ends. We know the ultimate outcome is secure. And no matter how much we might be called to risk, it is nothing compared to what Jesus had to risk.

And where we know that our future is secure, He knew that He was...that the bridge was going to collapse. Right? That He was going to go plunging into the darkness.

[31 : 59] And yet, He was willing to do that because of His love. And because He did that, we know that we will never have to face anything like He faced. He has guaranteed that.

So, whatever might happen, in whatever ways we may take risks, we're never going to have to experience what He did. We have that assurance. So, we can wait in the faith that we have in Christ, and we can risk in the faith and trust that we have in Christ.

And it's in His name that we say all of these things. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for Your Son. And we do pray that we as a community would be granted the wisdom that we need to know and to discern when we need to be patient and wait, Lord.

So, curb our tendencies to be impetuous or to try to control things that we can't control. Give us the grace to accept that Your timing is what determines our lives, not our timing.

And Lord, I pray that You would confirm and strengthen in us the work that You're doing through our times of waiting, that we would see fruit as a result of it. And Lord, I pray for those of us who need to take action, who are paralyzed by indecision or fear.

[33 : 16] I pray that You would spur us to take action. I pray that You would call us to be a risk-taking community. I pray that that would be a marker of our faith together, Lord.

And we pray that You would be faithful, that we know that we're not taking reckless, crazy risks. We're taking risks because we trust and believe that You've called us to go where You've called us, Lord.

And we're trusting that You're going to be there for us to hold us up. And we lift all of this up and pray it in the name of Jesus. Amen.