

Would you risk it all on a prayer and a promise?

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[0 : 00] Let's just pray, shall we? Lord God, we thank you so much for redeeming us, for rescuing us, for covering us in your grace, for forgiving our sin, paid for by the blood of Jesus. Lord, we thank you that when you speak, it is truth. When you speak, it is food for our souls. When you speak, it is healing. Father, we ask that you would speak this morning. Would you give us courage, boldness, prayerfulness, a sense of your love and presence, we pray. Amen.

So, do have your Bibles open at Nehemiah, looking at parts of chapter 1 and 2. In 1957, a young Dutch man called Andrew van der Waal sat in an old car on the border to Yugoslavia and prayed. Yugoslavia was controlled by the Soviet Empire at that point. He was waiting for his car to be inspected by the border guards. Christianity was banned in the Soviet Empire and Christians were persecuted. And Andrew's car was full of Bibles. The boot, but also some of them just out in plain view. And so he prayed. He prayed in the middle of that dangerous situation where he was risking torture and arrest. God, I have here Bibles for your children.

When you were alive, you made blind eyes see. So I pray, will you now make open eyes blind? And he did. God did. And he did it again and again and again. So many times that Andrew, Brother Andrew, because that's of course who he is, lost count. Far too many times for it to be possible, for it to be coincidence.

You'll know that he founded a charity, Open Doors, that now serves the persecuted church in over 70 different countries. Why does Brother Andrew repeatedly risk his safety and his life and his comfort and his family and his future and his career, all of that stuff? Why does he repeatedly risk that to deliver Bibles behind the Iron Curtain?

[2 : 27] Well, he told us actually in his autobiography, which you can read. It's called God's Smuggler. It's not difficult to get a hold of. It's a fantastic book. I encourage you to do that. He says, I did that because I believe that God made a promise. God made a promise in Isaiah chapter 55, verse 11, where it says this, So is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. See, Brother Andrew believed that promise.

He cared about God's people and about God's kingdom, and so he took God at his word. He prayerfully, boldly trusted that God would keep his promises.

Now, today we meet another man, like Brother Andrew, called Nehemiah, who prayerfully risked everything for the sake of God's promise. We're not all called to be Brother Andrew. We're not all called to be Nehemiah, but we are all called to be like Jesus. And so, when Nehemiah is like Jesus, we want to be like that, don't we? We're called to be prayerful and bold under God's gracious hand, trusting that God will keep his promises. Right, so if you need to go to sleep, that's it.

You've heard most of the message. You can go to sleep if you really need that. Right? Let's get to know this driven, disciplined, and deeply spiritual man, Nehemiah. First of all, we'll see that Nehemiah was burdened for God's people and God's place, like we said.

So, verse 2, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, God's people, and also about Jerusalem, God's place. See? For us today, of course, God's people is the church, and God's place, well, that's the kingdom that he's building here on earth. That was what was on Nehemiah's heart.

[4 : 31] Here comes the answer, verse 3. They said to me, those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned by fire. What are God's people like? They're disgraced. What's God's place like?

Broken. God's people in Jerusalem have enemies all around them, as we'll discover as we go through Nehemiah, and the worst thing is, of course, not being surrounded by enemies, but the fact that their lives are not reflecting God's hope for the world. That was their purpose, wasn't it? But it's not happening. Isaiah also says that the remnant, the people we've just mentioned here, would lean on God in truth. That's how the remnant are described, and Nehemiah knows that the only thing that's leaning is the wall. And the wall is a picture, of course, because a strong, complete wall means that God's people are protected, and that the gates could be opened, and anybody who wants them in can be welcomed in to safety, to join the kingdom being built inside, to experience the Sabbath rest that God gives within. But it's full of holes. It's broken down. There's no way to stop any of the harmful influences from outside, the ideas, the attacks from coming in. God's glory is in ruins, and his people aren't much better off. It's not hard, is it, to draw parallels between that, where we are today, sometimes even the church. What's Nehemiah going to do? In some ways, you want to ask the question, well, why bother? He's got a very, very nice job. He's miles away from all of the problems. And when you think about God's people and the report he's just received about them, well, they seem like a bit of a ragtag bunch. Are they going to amount to anything? We know from previous

Bible books that the only people left in Jerusalem were those too poor, or too unskilled, to cause anybody any problems. Doesn't sound very promising, does it? Isn't it best to just, you know, look like everybody else and forget about him? No, Nehemiah, verse 4, is distraught.

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. He wept and he fasted and he mourned and he prayed because, number one, he really loves God, but number two, he really loves God's people. He wants the church to shine with God's glory and be that place of safety and rest, a beacon of hope and beauty in the world.

He really cares about that. Again, if you know your Bible, you'll know Ezra has already made efforts, hasn't he? About 10, 20 years before this to end the exile, but it just seems like a bit of a damp squid, but it hasn't really worked. The temple's been rebuilt, but there's just as much crying about that as there is singing. Jerusalem is definitely not that shining city on a hill that everybody can look to and be glad. And it bothers Nehemiah. And if you look at verses 9 and 10, it's reflected in his prayer as well. He prays, he reminds God, this is your people, this is your place that you said your name would rest on. And those two things, like we said in the introduction, will be Nehemiah's great concern all the way through the book. The first half, God's place. Second half of the book, God's people.

[8 : 08] He wants renewal. He wants physical renewal. He wants spiritual inward renewal for his people. That is his burden. And in that, of course, he is like the Lord Jesus. If you were to flip to Matthew chapter 9, verse 36, Jesus is faced with the crowds, the crowds of Israelites. And what does he say?

I have pity on these people because they are like sheep without a shepherd. And that phrases all the way through the Old Testament. It reflects God's heart for his people. And if you were to read John chapter 2, verses 15 to 17, where Jesus clears the temple with the whip, his disciples remember that it says in the Old Testament about Jesus, zeal for your house will consume me. Jesus cares about God's people and God's place. That's the zeal that took him to the cross. So Nehemiah is reflecting Jesus' heart.

It's a real challenge to us, isn't it? Do we have a heart like Nehemiah? Like Jesus? When I look out in the world, do I see God's precious people and the world that he came to save? Why am I closer to thinking about me and my convenience? Does it bother us that our nation, and sometimes our church, capital C, sometimes our hearts are not what they should be? Or do we think, well, it's all pretty far away from me and there's not much I can do about it and the church will still be there tomorrow? Nehemiah is burdened for God's people. But secondly, Nehemiah is brimming with prayer.

You might recognise this man. In the middle of the American Civil War, not the one that seems to be happening right now, the one before. Abraham Lincoln made a public address in which he said these words, we have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven, but we have forgotten God.

This is exactly what Nehemiah is really saying here, isn't it? God, you promised us everything, you gave us everything and we rejected you. So what does Abraham Lincoln do? In the middle of that

death and disaster and despair, Lincoln calls for a day of national prayer.

[10:28] Now that makes no sense if you don't have any faith. And of course it makes all the sense in the world of God. If you do, if you know God. And that's what Nehemiah does. He's the driven doer, as we'll see as we go through the book. But the first thing he does is wait and pray. How does he pray? Verse 5. Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Well, he prays to a God, doesn't he? Not just any God, not one that he's made up, that he likes the sound of, or some God that everybody, you know, a general God that everybody, every religion knows something about. He prays to a God that he knows. A God who has revealed himself, who he is and who he isn't. He prays to a God who he knows. He starts with what God is like. A great, awesome, covenant-making, promise-keeping God. See, knowing God is the bedrock of prayer.

Theology is the basis for devotion, as somebody once put it. That's why, in community groups starting this term, we're looking at this book by a lady called Jen Wilkin, *None Like Him*, which is all about what God is like. So grab a copy as you go out, one for your family, one for yourself. Rich will be on hand to help you see those. It's all about what God is like.

Why do we need to know that? Because it is the basis. It's the basis for our relationship with him. It is the basis for our prayer life. Nehemiah knows that our God is a covenant-making God. That's the shape of the relationship that God chooses to have with us. He makes promises.

That's his part. And he sets before us new desires. And he says, guys, these new desires, this defines what is right and good. So please pursue these. And that's the covenant.

And covenants, as you'll know, if you know the Bible, are based on sacrifice and blood. In the Old Testament, that's animals, animal sacrifice, animal blood. In the New Testament, it's the final sacrifice of Jesus, his blood, that restores the covenant relationship between us and him, that ends the exile, that brings us back into his presence, the new covenant.

[12:58] So Nehemiah prays on the basis of God's covenant promises and his power. He takes God at his covenant word, just like Brother Andrew did. And he says, God, keep your covenant promises.

That's a prayer that overflows his heart. There's more. How does he pray? He prays, well, continually, because between verses four and five, actually four months has elapsed. Starts in the month of Kislev, chapter two. He's in the month of Nisan. That's four months in between there. So for four months, he prays and does nothing else. And he prays on his own. And he prays corporately. Look at verse 11. It mentions the prayer of your servants, plural. So he's got a gang behind him. They're praying too. He prays seriously because he's fasting with it. He prays in confession, doesn't he? Lord, we have not got this right. I have not got this right. He identifies with his people in their sin. Ringing any bells? He prays in preparation and planning, doesn't he? Because when you look at the speech with Artaxerxes, he's clearly thought ahead. He knows what he's going to need. And he prays in the moment. Chapter two, verse four. The king said to me, what is it you want? Then I pray to the God of heaven. Now, I don't think what happened is that he said to Artaxerxes, excuse me a moment, I just need to go to prayer meeting for half an hour. Then I'll be back to answer your question.

I think he prayed an arrow prayer up to God. Just in that moment. It's like a reflex, isn't it? I've been asked the question, now I really need help. What do I do? I pray. When we see all of this, it's hard not to be reminded of Jesus, who prays so much like this in so many different ways, in so many different situations, and who especially identifies with our sin, doesn't he? Even though he doesn't share it, when Nehemiah does. And he has that reflex prayer on the cross in the garden. How do you develop a reflex? One that you don't have already. Well, it's a function of muscle memory, isn't it? You have to use that muscle that way lots of different times, and then it becomes instinct. Do we have that prayer reflex? Are the muscles a bit soggy? Everybody wants to be a leader, don't they? I remember that from my days working in London and at school, actually. Your child can be a leader. You can be a leader. Everybody can be a leader. There's a room full of leaders. Sounds terrible, frankly. Anyway, if you really are interested in being a leader, I think the secret of being a good leader is being a good follower first, especially a follower of the Lord Jesus. But what we get here, in terms of leadership, is this. If you want to be a leader, you need to pray. Nehemiah's going to be a great leader, because, in part, he knows how to pray in church, but actually anywhere, because God doesn't just work in churches, does he? What we see here is that God is at work in the palaces of power, as well. If you want to lead, be brimming with prayer. I wonder, do you feel like this

describes how we pray? Nehemiah's prayer life? Knowing how our God works, what he is like, appealing to him on the basis of his covenant promises, with such faith that he'll come through. Is that how we pray?

[16:31] That's what it looks like, to pray continually, which we're urged to do in the New Testament, isn't it? Nehemiah's brimming with prayer, but Nehemiah, thirdly, is bold in taking risks for God. He prays, and then he acts. He comes before the king. It's obvious there's something on his heart, because it's visible in his face. And what are we told? He's afraid. The Bible doesn't give us plastic heroes, does it? It gives us real human beings, with God's mind behind them. And he's afraid, with good reason, because if you know the history behind this, you'll know that Artaxerxes had already faced three uprisings in the region where Jerusalem is, and he's had to put them down. How's he going to feel about another fortified city there? Please, can I go and build the walls high?

And if you know your Bibles, you know that in Ezra 4, which is worse, they've already made an attempt to build the walls, and this very same king squashed it straight away.

So Nehemiah has good reason to be afraid, doesn't he? But what does he say? Chapter 2, verse 3, I said to the king, may the king live forever. Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire? So bold, isn't it? Why should I not be sad? Verse 4, the king asks, what is it you want? And Nehemiah prays. And you know why he prays, don't you? Because the thing that he's going to ask, effectively, is, what I would like is nothing less than the complete reversal of your previous decision to not allow Jerusalem's walls to be built, by the way, in a way that will probably threaten the security of your empire. Just that. That's before he's even left Susa. He risks everything, doesn't he? If the king doesn't like this, he's lost his job, probably his life. Bold in taking risks for God. What's Nehemiah's secret? Well, we already know it's not that he's fearless. I think Nehemiah's secret is that long before the walls of

Jerusalem were rebuilt, long before he left Susa, long before there was any guarantee of success, or he had the long list of resources, or anything like that, or any rest at all, I think God had rebuilt the walls of his heart. And he was already celebrating rest there, through what God had done in him. I think that's Nehemiah's secret. And that's what God does, isn't it? That's how we can be bold. With the Lord rebuilding our heart from the inside out, giving us rest, giving us power, as we pray to him. That's how we can play a part, like Nehemiah, in ending exile. Isn't that amazing?

[19:26] At some point, I think, in every relationship, probably every relationship that we have, there will come a point, no matter how great the power imbalance between you and the person that you have that relationship with, that we're going to have to put that relationship on the line for God's kingdom, the way that Nehemiah did with Artaxerxes. Just think about that.

Some of you are already doing it, just by being in this room. You know you're going to go home, and at some point, you'll probably cop flack for coming. You're like Nehemiah. You're like Jesus. God is so pleased with us when we're willing to do that. Maybe being bold looks small. Maybe it looks like sitting next to your 10-year-old in the church service, and helping them engage with the sermon, when you'd rather be listening to it yourself, and having somebody else look after them. Maybe being bold looks big, because if we get there, and we plant a church together, here at Bethel, maybe it's you that would be willing to move house, to move out of the comfort here, to build the walls of Jerusalem somewhere else.

I just want to give you a minute to reflect. Ask the Holy Spirit, what might he want you to put on the line for his kingdom?

[20:54] And as you reflect on that, there is a promise that Jesus has given us to go with that, in Mark chapter 10, telling us that no matter what we've given up for him, in the right way for his kingdom, we will receive that back many times.

So just take 30 seconds and reflect on that question with me. So Nehemiah was burdened for God's people, brimming with prayer, bold in taking risks for God.

But ultimately and most importantly, he was under God's gracious hand. Wasn't he? Chapter 2, verse 8. And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. Who's the main actor in the story? Who's the main mover? Is it Nehemiah? Prayerful, driven, brave, humble. Is it the magnanimous, somewhat unpredictable Xerxes, Sartexerxes, who likes to cut a sensitive figure in front of his wife, be nice to his attendants sometimes?

It's God, isn't it? God is the main mover in this whole story. If he had not changed the king's heart, Nehemiah would still be in Susa, the Jerusalem walls would still be broken down.

[22 : 39] God's people would be just as poorly off as they were before. But for God's action. The Bible's very clear. It's not us. Even if we are burdened for his people, even if we are brimming with prayer, even if we are bold in taking risks, it is not us, but it is God's gracious hand at work in history, carrying out his purposes, keeping his promises.

Often invisible, as he was in this story, except if you have the eyes of faith. That's the only way. Did you notice that God not only graciously gives Nehemiah everything he asks for, but, little detail at the end, he also gets given an escort, which he hadn't asked for.

An escort which will keep him safe as he travels through hostile territory. An escort which will signal, visibly, the king's approval of his mission as well. Didn't even ask for it. God gave it to him through that king.

He will give us more than we could ask or imagine, as the New Testament puts it. It's God who's built up the walls of Nehemiah's heart. It is God who will build up the walls of our hearts, rebuild his church.

He will move the hearts of presidents and prime ministers to get that done. That is his work. Our part is just invite him into the ruins. Ask him to rebuild us.

[24 : 03] Trusting the gracious hand of God who himself, like Nehemiah, left the comfort of heaven. To identify with our sin on the cross.

And as we do that, then we can follow in the way of Jesus, modelled here by Nehemiah. Denying ourselves. Taking up our cross. Because we love God.

Because we love his people. I wonder what part he's calling you to play in that project. Perhaps, I'll finish with this.

Perhaps you feel about as far away from God this morning. About as far away from being like Nehemiah as you possibly could be. Let's look at chapter 1, verse 9. Here's what the Lord says. If you return to me and obey my commands. Forgive a little alteration here. Then even if your exile is to the furthest horizon, I will gather you from there and bring you to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my name.

[25 : 10] That's what God says about his people. Of course, that's talking about Jesus. Because Jesus is the dwelling place of God's name.

It's God, not Nehemiah, not you, not me, anyone else. He has the power to gather you from the furthest horizon and bring you back to the place inside the walls where you have safety, peace and rest with him.

And no king or empire or any other power can stop that from happening once God has decided to do that. Let's follow him prayerfully and boldly.

Amen. Let me just pray. Lord God, we thank you for Nehemiah, a human being with faults and fears. We thank you for the way that you had worked in his life and his heart, given him a passion for your people, your place and your name.

We thank you for the way that you had rebuilt his heart. We pray that you would rebuild ours. We pray that you would give us that passion, prayerfulness, boldness, willingness to take risks for you.

[26 : 20] As we look to Jesus, we thank you that your Holy Spirit can give us the power where we feel we have none. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.