

Prayer and Planning

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[0 : 00] Even just hearing this first chapter and a half, we're beginning to understand what makes Nehemiah such a great book. He's a fascinating figure, and we get wonderful personal insights into his life.

And in so many ways, we are seeing the glory and the greatness of our God. It's a wonderful book. It's part the memoirs of Nehemiah himself.

We get that sense that we're reading the private diary of a man of God as he is tasked with rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. So he's going to do that physically, but also morally and spiritually. The name Nehemiah means God will comfort. And God has comforted his people, offering them hope and restoration in giving them this leader, Nehemiah.

So it's part memoirs. It's also part prayer diary. As we spend a few weeks in the book of Nehemiah, many times we will meet this man of God on his knees in prayer, seeking God's glory and the good of his kingdom.

[1 : 13] It's also, I think, these chapters are part of portrait gallery, because we're going to meet various faces of Nehemiah along the way. This man who's been raised up for the task of spiritual reformation, we will see him in various roles with various responsibilities, and all the time under the rule and guidance of God.

Maybe it's helpful to ask, why are we studying it together? So this book, it dates from 445 BC. So it's pretty ancient. And we might find ourselves wondering, why are we studying this ancient book about the rebuilding of an ancient city?

Well, at one level, at the local level, the answer is that since, I guess since January, as church elders, leaders here, we've been praying about, we've been thinking through, we've been reflecting on and working towards a development plan.

Seeking the ongoing renewal of God here within Becclew, seeking a vision for coming years. And there's so many helpful things for us as leaders, but so many things for all of us that we can learn together in this wonderful book.

But more broadly, what will Nehemiah help us to learn together? Let's look out for four things as we go week by week through this book.

[2 : 35] First of all, I think Nehemiah will teach us to pray. And as the church, we always need this. So we hear him worship. We hear him confess sin.

We hear him asking God for help. We hear him pray for the ongoing renewal of the kingdom of God. So the church needs to be a praying people.

The book of Nehemiah also teaches us the importance of contending for the gospel. It reminds us, like so many books of the Bible, that opposition is normal.

We met some opposition at the end of our reading, chapter 2, verse 10. But as we go through the weeks, we'll come to see that the battles that Nehemiah faces, sometimes they're external, sometimes also they're internal.

And the book of Nehemiah reminds us to expect opposition and trouble and to be ready and willing to contend for the cause of the Lord Jesus.

[3 : 37] And as we do so, to put our trust in God himself. To understand that we have a God who is totally committed to his glory and to his people and to the good of his kingdom.

Another thing that becomes apparent as we look at the book of Nehemiah is he teaches us that the preaching of God's word is central to the life of God's people.

The high point of this book is literally a high point. In chapter 8, we are going to meet Ezra. And he's going to proclaim God's word.

And he's going to explain God's word from a high platform. And that in itself reminds us that as the people of God, we always need to be hearing and to be receiving God's word read and preached. And one other thing I think we can be looking out for in the story of Nehemiah, and we'll see it a lot next week. The book teaches us that renewal, the ongoing renewal of God's kingdom, its shared responsibility.

[4 : 44] This is very much an all-hands-on-deck kind of a book. We get to see a lot of Nehemiah, this great servant leader, but we're also going to hear about the responsibility of all God's people.

This is a book where the church is seen as a body working together, struggling together for the glory of God and the progress of the kingdom. So we can watch out for those highlights as we go through the next few weeks.

But here we are, chapter 1, verse 1, to chapter 2, verse 10. Three things for us to see. First of all, the problem facing Nehemiah. Look at the first four verses, and we discover that Nehemiah here in Susa, so he's in Iran at the moment, and he hears a report about the Jewish remnant who've survived the exile.

And what's he told? Those who survived the exile are back in the province. They're in great trouble and disgrace. The wall is broken down, and Jerusalem gates have been burned with fire.

The British prime minister at the outbreak of World War II was a chap called Neville Chamberlain. And Neville Chamberlain had a small pocket diary, which a few years ago went on display to the public.

[5 : 57] Look, the day that Britain entered World War II was the 3rd of September, 1939. And on that day, we have a diary entry from Neville Chamberlain.

Do you know what he wrote? He wrote, war declared. And that was it. This huge moment for the nation, this huge moment for the world, we get the fact, but we don't get any insight into, what did Chamberlain feel at that moment?

What emotions was he going through? Contrast that with verse 4, with Nehemiah's private diary. 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 discovers the trouble facing Jerusalem, facing the people of God, and he is deeply affected.

So let's ask ourselves briefly, why? Why is he affected? What's the problem? Well, at a practical level, as we've just heard, the survivors of the exile, who maybe about 15 years or 20 years ago, at the time of Ezra, had been sent back from Persia to Jerusalem, they're living in times of great trouble.

[7 : 08] There's also the remnant who survived the exile, the weak and the unimportant people, and they are part of this disgrace that's being felt within the city. The city is in ruins.

The walls and the gates are broken down, and they're on fire. There's no security. There's no stability. There's no sense of honor. We will recognize that they are being exposed to their enemies, and they're being exposed to mockery.

So that's what Nehemiah hears about. But in his thinking, he's going deeper, because he understands that beyond the physical, there's also a spiritual problem here.

Nehemiah is someone who has a deep concern for God's people and for God's glory. God's people here are in a low state, a place of weakness.

Remember, Jerusalem is the city that represents the rule of God, the presence of God, the glory of God on this earth. So when it's in ruins, God's reputation stands somewhat in ruins.

[8 : 15] It is significant that God's kingdom is in a weak state. It is a cause of deep distress that while Ezra was sent back with that task of restoring the walls and the temple, that building project has now been halted.

It has stalled because of enemies and because of the royal decree from Persia. So we meet in the first instance, Nehemiah, as a true servant leader of God.

And he is deeply moved by the state of the church. And remember where he is right now. He's not there in Jerusalem among the ruins. He's in Iran.

He's in a palace. He's in a place of honor and comfort and security. And he could easily have said, that's not my problem. But he loves his God and he loves God's church.

He knows that God is glorious and he longs for that glory to be on display in the world. He feels it deep within his guts that God is dishonored.

[9 : 26] And so this sacrificial servant, he weeps and then he works. And as we'll see, the first work he does is to pray. Now right at the outset, I want to ask ourselves a question this morning, perhaps a question to reflect on through the day, through this week.

What is it that I am most passionate about? Now if you're a Christian here today, you know as I know instinctively what the answer should be.

But what is the evidence of our lives? Or to put it slightly differently, how do we feel about the low state of the church in our nation?

As Keith was leading us in prayer. As we think about the situation in our city or in our church, that the progress seems slow, that God's honor is held in low regard.

Do we feel it? Sometimes I think it's all too easy, again, to go back to that idea of idolatry.

Sometimes we can find it really easy to be most passionate about our own comfort, perhaps.

[10 : 45] Or our own success, whether that be in our career or in our studies or even thinking for our children. We might even put our sports team ahead of the glory of God and the advance of His kingdom.

To look at Nehemiah's posture, weeping, fasting, praying, reveals his passion, the glory of God and the cause of the gospel.

He hears the report and it's as if he can sense that the smoking walls and the city in ruins and what that represents about God's honor and that brings him to his knees.

Let me ask each one of us individually and for us as a church about our posture and about our passion.

So we sit here in Edinburgh and it's very different, isn't it? There's no smoking ruins. In fact, we live in a wonderfully beautiful city, a great city. We came back from holiday and the cherry blossoms are there and the meadows, the sun's shut.

[11 : 50] It's a wonderful city. Visitors flock and don't want to leave. But let me ask, can we see beneath the surface? To recognize that for the people who live here, that without Jesus, their lives in this city is spiritual ruin and rubble.

Do we recognize that there are many people around us and they are hurting and they are confused, they're troubled, they're heading for a lost eternity, many of them without even realizing it?

Will we pray? Do we pray? To the God who sees, who knows, who cares. To the God who is powerful and to the God who is passionate about His glory and about salvation.

So that's the problem that we see. Second thing we hear is the prayer of Nehemiah. So we said Nehemiah is like a portrait gallery. Nehemiah is a man of many faces.

We will see him often as a leader. Sometimes we'll see him inspecting and exploring. Sometimes we'll see him engaged in buildings. Sometimes we'll see him helping the poor. But it's so significant that our first portrait is of Nehemiah, the man of prayer.

[13 : 23] You search church history and you will discover that those who are most passionate for God's glory, those who are most used in God's kingdom, will be those who are most passionately committed to seeking God's help and seeking God's honor in prayer.

And so we have the privilege this morning of taking a page from Nehemiah's personal prayer diary.

And what do we discover in this page? We discover here is a man of God who knows his God.

And he knows his Bible. And he knows God's promises. And he appreciates that he lives under God's providence. And all of that is here in his prayer.

And so as we spend just a few minutes looking at this prayer, my prayer for us would be that Nehemiah would be teaching us in our day how to pray also.

So we begin there at verse 5 and we come to see that we pray in part to worship our God. We don't rush in with our shopping list.

[14 : 25] We give God glory. Look at how Nehemiah begins. 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.

It's good to remember who we pray to. The God who made everything that we see. The God who is great and awesome but the God who is also loving and keeps his covenant and enters into personal covenant relationship with his people.

And so we see that we have this privilege. We're invited into a personal relationship with the powerful God of the universe. That's a great motivator for prayer, I think. And what we see from Nehemiah's prayer is this reminder that God is both awesome and he's approachable.

That he is both a God to be feared and honored and a God who is faithful. And wonderfully we know through Jesus we're invited to call this God our Father in heaven. To know that as his people we are never denied access. To know that when we pray we come to the one with all resources for whom nothing is impossible.

[15 : 41] So we praise God that we get to pray. We pray to worship. But we also pray to confess our sin. That's there, isn't it?

In verses 6 and 7. I confess the sins we Israelites including myself and my father's family have committed against you. And again, notice this. There is no hint of those guys over there. They're the problem. There's the people over in Jerusalem. It's we. There's that shared sense of guilt over sin.

Nehemiah's family because they're part of that society. He recognized they're part of the problem. And the problem there in verse 7 we have acted very wickedly towards you.

We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. He confesses disobedience. He confesses dishonoring God.

[16 : 41] He understands that by breaking God's law the people of God they're causing damage to God's honor. They're causing damage to the work of God's kingdom.

And so he confesses sin. He's just worshipped and recognized how awesome God is. And when we rightly view God's awesome holiness isn't that so often when we become so aware of our own sin and guilt and awfulness.

That the holiness of God rightly seen so often exposes our own hypocrisy. That huge gap that can exist between here are the truths that I believe but here's the life that I'm practicing.

That's one of the reasons why it's so important for us every week as we worship to confess our sin together. To acknowledge that we are all guilty before God that we all stand in need of His grace and forgiveness and there is grace and forgiveness to be found in the gospel.

So we pray to worship we pray to confess sin and Nehemiah also shows us that we pray to claim God's promises to claim God's promised help. That's there in verses 8 to 10.

[17 : 59] Look at how he begins remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses and then he takes his prayer towards that key text of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 5 where God makes the promise that when His people even if they've walked so far away from His ways if they will return then God will restore God will have compassion God will bring His people back to Himself.

And as Nehemiah prays he remembers Scripture and he knows these are God's own words. This is God's covenant commitment. And so Nehemiah takes God at His word and he claims the promise of God found in the Bible.

And it's the same in verse 10. They are your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

So part of God's covenant faithfulness was in His great act of rescue. We might think of the story of the Exodus or we might think of the return of the exiles. And so Nehemiah puts before God his own covenant commitment and he trusts that God will be faithful to His character and to His word even though His people have been unfaithful.

He trusts in a God who will be faithful to His promise and to His people through thick and thin. Now a couple of observations as we seek with God's help that Nehemiah would encourage us in prayer.

[19 : 42] First is this. Remember the power of praying together. Look at verse 11. We could easily miss this.

Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant. Okay, we get that. And to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.

What are we being told? Nehemiah is praying with other people. There are others who are committed day by day maybe even hour by hour to God's kingdom to God's glory to God's will. And there's a power in that. There's a goodness to that. As a local church we must do the Lord's work and we must do it in the Lord's way.

And how do we do the work of God together? Fundamentally as we pray. We must be praying together.

[20 : 48] Plans, strategies absolutely are so important and we'll see it but without prayer we're missing the key component. Now the great example I think in the Bible of the church of God praying together is the book of Acts.

It has been said that the early church in the chapters of Acts it sounds just like an extended prayer meeting. Whatever is going on, whatever God is working, whatever need is required, the people are praying.

So if we're here today and we feel perhaps sad or dissatisfied or discouraged about what's going on in the world or about the state of the church in Scotland or if you're concerned for your local church here, if there are people on your heart and you're hungry for them to know life with God, to know the love of God, this is where we start and we never shift from this, we must devote ourselves to praying together.

There is power in that and just as a sidebar, just to remind us, we pray as a church every Sunday at 5pm through there and we pray on a Wednesday at lunchtime online and we pray on Wednesdays. Matters. So remember the power of praying together. Secondly, to find encouragement from Nehemiah, remember who we pray to.

[22 : 26] Remember that we pray to a powerful loving father who loves to hear his children pray. This is one father and you will never find a do not disturb on his office door.

Our father in heaven will never shush us because he's busy doing something else. Remember that we are praying to a God who is far more committed to his glory and to his kingdom than you and I will ever be.

He has redeemed us by way of sending his son Jesus to die on the cross for us and then he's raised them up on the third day. He will not let that be for nothing.

He is committed to building his church. And remember that we pray to the great God who has made great promises. We get so many promises and we know that we hold on to them lightly.

We receive so many offers, so many emails and we wonder is this a scam, this sounds too good to be true. That is never the case with God's promises in his word and by faith we are invited to claim them.

[23 : 37] So we need to know God's word and to pray God's word as we claim those promises and as we come to know the God of glory who will build his church, who must be faithful to his covenant, for whom nothing is impossible, then we have the motivation to pray and to keep praying.

So that's the second thing. So we've seen the problem, we've heard the prayer, now we recognize in those first verses of chapter 2 the planning of Nehemiah. It was a president of the United States, Benjamin Franklin, who was credited with saying, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

If you spend any time in business or management circles, you will know all about, I am sure, planning and development and it makes sense, it makes sense at a personal level. We have to plan for our meals, we have to plan as pupils, and as students if we're revising for exams, we have to plan our time to make room for exercise perhaps or family devotions, and we need to plan for life within a local church.

Nehemiah is both a great man of prayer and a great planner too. And one aspect of planning that I want us to really see from Nehemiah is that it's one thing to make a plan, maybe that's quite easy. What we see from Nehemiah is the courage required to carry out a plan. Think about that at sort of a personal level. You know, you want to apply for a new job, that requires a certain amount of courage, because on the one hand you may be rejected, but on the other hand you may be successful and you have to meet a whole new load of people, learn a whole new load of skills.

[25 : 29] Maybe you have the good desire to get married, and again that's going to take courage, it's going to take courage to ask someone out, because again you may meet with rejection. Or you want a friend to know Jesus, there's courage involved in that too, to invite them along to church or to open the Bible with them or to talk to them about your faith, because again there is the prospect that that relationship changes and a person might not show any interest.

the Nehemiah we meet in chapter 1 and chapter 2 is an example to us both of careful planning but also of courageous faith as he puts plans into action.

But let's first of all really quickly see the careful planning. Now I'm going to presume that most of us are not familiar with the Jewish calendar system, so we might not notice, I wouldn't have noticed, that the difference between chapter 1 verse 1, the date there, and chapter 2 verse 1 is four months. For four months Nehemiah has been praying for God's glory and God's kingdom, but Nehemiah at the same time has also been planning. And so as we open this page of his diary we see the advanced planning that has gone into this.

So as he stands before the king and as the king asks him the question, Nehemiah, what is it that you want? You clearly have something on your mind.

[27 : 01] We hear again Nehemiah praying to the God of heaven, that's his instinct, but then we see him put his plans into place. So it begins with Nehemiah requesting that he be sent to Jerusalem to head up this rebuilding project and he already has in mind how long he thinks that's going to take.

And so he makes that request. And then if you look at verse 7, he asks for some letters. He wants letters to guarantee him safe conduct as he journeys through the kingdom. He wants to go with official royal permission. And then look at verse 8, he's really pushing things now. He asks for another letter, this time a letter for the man in charge of the royal forest. He wants a work order to be sent so the king will provide the timber and the building materials at the king's own expense. And then in verse 9 and 10, we see the planning involved in that Nehemiah wants to go with an army. He wants to make a clear signal to the enemies of God. He is coming at the king's command and that God is with him in all of this.

[28 : 20] So there is careful planning, but there is also courageous faith going on. This week I came across a definition of courage by a guy called Joseph Piper.

A helpful definition. I think courage is the act of risking suffering for the sake of the good. Risking suffering for the sake of the good.

Again, think about it. If we believe an action will bring God glory. If we think that applying for that job will bring God glory or seeking that new relationship or talking to a friend about Jesus, then we risk suffering, someone saying no perhaps, for the sake of the greater good, that God would be glorified.

Nehemiah shows us the life of faith is a life of courage that's committed to the glory of God and is willing to suffer. And it all starts with his willingness to go.

So again, just to remember, he's not in Jerusalem. He's living in a very affluent, very comfortable, very secure city here in Susa in the heart of the Persian empire. But he is willing to leave behind the comfort of the palace for the sake of the greater good, God's kingdom.

[29 : 33] He runs so many risks as he presents his plan to the king. To leave his important job behind, to ask for a huge amount of resources from the king, even to look sad in the king's presence.

But he risks it for the sake of the good. We know Nehemiah is a man of faith. He understands, for example, chapter 2, verse 8, the gracious hand of his God was with him in granting him success. We hear it in his prayers. prayers. And he is willing to pray and to plan and to act, not knowing how things are going to turn out.

But he knows God is on the throne, not at the end of the day, this man, Arctic Xerxes. And so he acts with courageous faith.

And I wonder if there is a pattern there for us to follow. To be ready to pray, to be ready to make plans, and then to have the courage to put plans into action for the glory of God, even when we don't know how things will turn out.

[30 : 57] You'll think about that in our own context here. We never know when we pray. Will God use us to be the answer to those prayers?

We don't know. Will God be pleased to use us individually or collectively to advance the gospel in some way? We don't know in God's wisdom will Becloud be used for future generations to reach this city with the good news of Jesus.

But we seek to act in courageous faith. We pray, we plan, and we act on the plan. So as a church, we've been encouraged to pray for ten people who don't know and love Jesus.

Part of that praying may likely involve us then having to act, to be ready to love them, to serve them, to speak to them, to ask their questions and to seek to answer them.

Many of us, we pray for new families in this local community to have the chance to hear about Jesus and to hear about Jesus through us and through our church.

[32 : 11] So we pray about that, but we also need to ask God to guide us and to plan and to think how best can we reach out and welcome people in. We perhaps find ourselves praying about a new generation of leaders within the church.

That's a good prayer. But at the same time, we have to make plans today to train, to mentor, to disciple those God has brought to us and will bring to us in the future.

And so the life of planning and praying and courageous faith involves us praying, your kingdom come, your will be done, and it involves us asking and making plans.

What can I do? What can we do for the sake of God's kingdom, for the sake of Jesus today, this week, this year? And being ready to act with courage, to risk suffering for the sake of God's glory and the spiritual good of others.

And so as we begin to look at the life of Nehemiah, the servant leader, there's a lot that we can learn, but especially as we look beyond to the greatest of all servant leaders, to the Lord Jesus Christ, the sacrificial servant, the one who is willing to leave behind the comfort of his palace, to leave behind the glory of heaven, to come into this world, to carry out God's great plan of salvation. [33 : 47] And remember Jesus, the servant leader, he too would weep over Jerusalem. spiritually lost and ruined. Jesus is the one who would pray for his father's glory and his father's glory in the salvation of sinners and the building up of God's kingdom.

Jesus, who in love will suffer and die for our greatest good, that we by faith might be brought into the kingdom of God.

God. He is the leader we look to and with his help we pray, we plan, we act for his glory, for the glory of God, for the renewal and spiritual reformation that we seek here and the clux here in ourselves.

Thank you so much that we have