

Vision and Success: God's way

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[0 : 0 0] Can we open our Bibles please? The passage we read in Nehemiah chapter 2, reading again this evening at verse 20. The God of heaven will make us prosper and we his servants will arise and build.

None of us look for change, but change very often comes upon us. Change sometimes that we wanted, change sometimes that we did not want. And here we are in this congregation, in this part of the island, in the Point Peninsula, and you are at a time of great change in your lives.

You are at a position where the congregation and the strange providence of God is now vacant. Your leadership has been talking and praying and consulting with a vision for the way forward.

You have, or at least you have on the table out there, certain fruits of a recent discussion that the leadership had of the way forward. Certain values, certain places that you want to be.

That you want this congregation to become a vibrant beacon of light for this community. Now I had a dream last night. Number one, I don't often have dreams.

[1 : 3 7] And number two, my dreams have absolutely no spiritual significance whatsoever. They usually come about through eating too much cheese.

But my dream last night was of this area. And it was quite bizarre because I saw an old-fashioned roaring fire. And I saw the church here as that fire.

Bringing heat to the whole community. And just as people gather round. A fire for heat and warmth and fellowship.

Just as a dispossessed in the cold. Flock where there is warmth. So surely the values and the dream of this congregation is.

That they would be such a fire in the middle of the community. A fire which draws people. Because where there is love, we are drawn to love.

[2 : 4 0] Now I wonder what the vision is of the congregation here. We see here a classic statement of a vision in Nehemiah. And it's very bold, isn't it?

The God of heaven will make us prosper. And we, his servants, will arise and build. And I wonder if the leadership in the congregation would stand up and metaphorically say to the people, we will stand up and together we will see Christ's church built in this area of this wonderful island in this part of the world.

Well let me just fill in this story here broadly and then narrow it down a little. The story of Nehemiah is the story of the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile.

The Babylonian exile was a very difficult time for the people of God. They were broken apart for various circumstances. They were in captivity. They were outside their area.

And very many bad things happened to them. But however God brought them back. God restored Israel. Now restoration didn't take part, take place overnight.

- [3 : 58] There was a three-fold restoration process. Number one, the temple was restored under Zerubbabel. And so there was a sense of worship, God exalting worship.
- Worship which magnified the greatness of God. So that was the first thing that, if you like, got sorted. There was the worship of God. And then 80 years later under Ezra there was the restoration of the law.
- The Bible became central. Preaching became alive. The prophets expounded the word of God. There was relevant teaching from the Bible.
- And the Bible was applied to the people in a very powerful way. Now as I go around the country and indeed around the world. I look at growing churches of all different persuasions and colors and sizes and shapes.
- And they are all characterized by lively worship and excellent preaching. These things are not man-made. But these things come when God is honored and God is restored.
- [5 : 07] And then we find in the third phase there was the worship was, if you like, sorted. There was a reading of the law under Ezra. And now the last thing to be sorted was the physical infrastructure.
- The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Now walls were very important. In fact, in the Old Testament days, walls were as important as armies.
- Proverbs 25. Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control. So the walls indicated that the place was vulnerable to attack.
- The walls indicated that there was not much prosperity in Jerusalem. Just as today, nobody likes to see a tatty church.
- Nobody likes to see a church which is in bad state of repair. Which looks neglected. And the smell of damp is in the air. And the very dry rot to them is dear. That is not glorifying to the people of God.
- [6 : 09] And so we find here that the church is being restored. Worship, preaching, and physical infrastructure here with the rebuilding of the walls. And the man tasked with that was not a prophet, a priest, or a king, or a clergyman.
- It was Nehemiah who was a lowly civil servant. He was a cupbearer to the king. Now, we cannot copy Nehemiah exactly.
- He was a unique figure in the plot line of redemption. And we cannot look at every element of Nehemiah's life as an example for our life.
- But in him we see one of the great biblical leaders. And so our text says the God of heaven will make us prosper. And we, his servants, will arise and build.
- If there was one area where our church and our denomination really need God's blessing, it is in this area of bold, visionary, God-centered leadership.
- [7 : 17] And that is exactly what we have in Nehemiah. Because in Nehemiah we actually have elements of the great leader of all. Who is the Lord Jesus Christ.
- He is the captain. And we go forth as we hear the call of Christ, our captain. And so in Nehemiah we have echoes. We have hints of the Lord Jesus who is the ultimate leader.
- Now there is a dearth of leadership today. There is a dearth of leadership in the political world. And there is a dearth of leadership in the church. Martin Luther King, you may like him, you may love him.
- But he said some interesting things. He said a true leader is not a searcher of consensus, but a molder of consensus. In other words, a true leader is not someone who just looks where the wind is blowing and follows the wind.

A true leader is someone who forms and galvanizes people together and who gets people together and makes them do things. And of course the ultimate leader is the Lord Jesus Christ.

[8 : 29] He took the twelve disciples and what a motley crew they were. He took them together and he energized them to build a church.

Now again, I don't know my constituency tonight. I don't know who's a believer, who's not. Some of you may not even be Christians. But if we cannot give this vision of a church to the church, How will those of you who are outside the church of God be persuaded to follow Jesus?

Wasn't there the great rallying cry? Was it Moses, come with us and we will do you good for the Lord has spoken well concerning Israel.

And it would be lovely to be able to say that of this congregation. Come with us and we will do you good for the Lord has spoken well concerning the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that's the background. Let's look at the passage here. Remember our text, the God of heaven will make us prosper and we his servants will arise and build.

[9 : 35] What do we see in Nehemiah? What does God require of this congregation and our dear denomination in this island?

The text suggests one or two things. And they are not complex. Number one, a clear vision.

Nehemiah knew where he was going. Chapter 1 verse 5 in the previous chapter says that.

Sorry, verse 5 of chapter 2 there. If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor that you send me to Judah to the city of my father's graves that I may rebuild it.

That was the general goal. We're going to rebuild the walls. And then he says I will need materials. I will need a letter. I will need people. Look at verse 8.

[10 : 36] It's specific. Give me a letter to Asaph that he may give me timber and I'm going to make beams for the gates. And I'm going to do all these things. He was clear in what he was going to do.

He knew where he was going to go. And he knew how he was going to get there. And so there was this clear vision for the church. He was wanting the church of God to prosper.

Now, what do you need for a clear vision? Again, let me unpack this a little. One of the things that you need for a clear vision is paradoxically a dissatisfaction with the way things are.

And a clear grasp of what they ought to be like. So there is a hot indignation about the status quo. You'll never get a clear vision unless you're angry.

Unless you're angry in a kind of godly way. And so Nehemiah's vision was inspired by a dissatisfaction by the way things were.

[11 : 44] We read there that he inspected it. Verse 14 and 15. Verse 13. He saw that the walls of Jerusalem had broken down.

That its gates had been destroyed by fire. Did some folk just say, well, the church in Lewis has seen better days.

That's just the way it is. Whatever. Mahaka. Doesn't matter. Who cares? That's life. That is not the words of vision.

A visionary is profoundly dissatisfied with the status quo. A visionary is deeply distressed. By the wreckage that he sees.

And the potential of God's kingdom and God's possession. A visionary is someone who looks at a situation which is broken.

[12 : 45] And says this ought not to be. There were broken down walls. There was gates burned with fire. And the people were in disgrace. And he was saying this just isn't right.

The other day I was reading of Bernie Sanders. Do you remember him? He was the opposition to Hillary Clinton for the democratic ticket for the presidential election.

That's yesterday's story. Bernie Sanders is an interesting man. He was talking about global poverty. And he says this. It is a moral outrage.

That the top one tenth of one percent. Owns almost as much wealth in the USA. As the bottom 90 percent. He was angry.

At what he saw as social injustice. And you know. Folk talk about young people. And the millennials. And the snowflake generation. And of course. Like that generation.

[13 : 52] Like all generations have their faults. But one of the great things. About a younger generation. Is a sense of outrage. And one of the things that young folk will always say. That's not fair. They see unfairness.

But I'm not talking about that. I'm simply saying that as an example. That outrage gets things done. It is not right. That the church of God.

In the islands. Here you look at this community. What's the proportion of folk going to church. Is there 2,000th of a population in this area? How many folk are in this building tonight? What is the proportion of people who need the gospel?

Moral. Moral. Moral. Moral. Moral. Moral. Moral. Moral. Outrage. Gets things done. Of course. Bobby Kennedy. Was no evangelical.

But the brother of the late John F. Kennedy. He said something famous. And quite wise. For someone who didn't profess. He said this. There are those that look.

[14 : 51] At things the way they are. And ask why. I dream of things that never were. And ask. Why not?

Why not? Why not? The church of God in this place. Filled with worshippers.

Worshippers that reflect our community. The weird and the wonderful. The good and the not so good. Every single one of us. Touched by the gospel.

That is the possibilities. People who do not accept the unacceptable. That was Nehemiah. You see this in biblical history.

Moses was appalled. At the oppression of the Israelites. He remembered the promise of God. You will be brought to land. Flowing with milk and honey. And he was depressed and despondent.

[15 : 51] Because the people of God. Were being oppressed. By the Egyptians. Nehemiah had heard from Babylon. That the holy city was ruined.

He heard that. Look at verse 17. You see the trouble we are in. How Jerusalem lies in ruins. With its gates burned. Come let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. That we may no longer suffer.

Derision. What is our vision? It's not a grandiose vision. It's not that the deacon's court. Is going to meet in two weeks time.

To alleviate world poverty. That's not going to happen. It's not a grandiose vision. The section is not saying. We have set a program in place. That will mean that 2,000 people.

Will pack this church. Or some other building. That's the right. That's not a grandiose vision. But the vision is. That we will have a congregation.

[16 : 46] That will grow deep. That we will have a congregation. That will grow out. That there will be a congregation. Which is. We cannot give shade to others. Unless our own roots go deep.

And so you are looking here. An example of clear vision. Not just a good man. Who wanted a city built. But if you want an example. Of clear vision.

Yes. Nehemiah was outraged. Nehemiah was. Scandalized. Because the people. Held the Jerusalem. In derision. I think of another.

Visionary leader. Who had a clear vision. Luke. Tells us Luke. 9.51. As Jesus. Resolutely. Set out for Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus. Had a clear vision. And in Hebrews. Chapter 12. The people of God. Are told to have a clear vision. Of Jesus.

[17 : 42] Looking steadfastly. Unto Jesus. Fixing your eyes upon him. Nehemiah was only the wine bearer. For the king. Jesus was the king. Who trod the wine press.

Nehemiah gave the wine. Jesus was the wine. A clear. Vision. Of what could be. Under. God.

God. My dear folks. We are not talking about. Microsoft here. We are not talking about. The Apple. Corporation. We are not talking about. Marks and Spencers. We are talking about. Something bigger than that.

We are talking about. The church of God here. We are talking about. Something that has got. All the resources. Of the universe. Behind it. We are talking of. An enterprise. That's truly global. We are talking about.

An enterprise. That cannot. Be destroyed. And we are to play our part. In rebuilding. The walls. We need.

[18 : 38] A clear vision. But there is something else. We need. We need. A deep. Feeling. And Nehemiah had that.

Look at. All the feelings. That you get there. Now. I'm not a big. Feelings guy. But. It's not about me. It's about the passage. Verse one. He was sad.

Verse two. He was fearful. Verse 17. There's this. Realism. You see. The trouble we are in. How Jerusalem lies. In ruins. With its gate burned.

Come with his build the walls. That we may no longer. Suffer. Derision. There was a. Passion. Is there a passion here?

Romans 9.2. The apostle Paul. I have a great sorrow. And unceasing anguish. In my heart. I wish that I could be cursed.

[19 : 34] And cut off from Christ. For the sake of my people Israel. Passion. Men and women. Going to a lost eternity.

And we. Don't fiddle. While Rome burns. We are. Taken up. With all such. Other things.

When there should be this. Not. Within our. Being. That. God's. Kingdom. Is not. Prospering.

There is. As I said here. A deep. Feeling. Look at Nehemiah. Verse four. It. It was in his heart. We find it.

It was in his face. As well. Verse two. Why is your face sad. Seeing. That you are not sick. We see the same thing in Jesus.

[20 : 31] Don't we? Oh Jerusalem. Jerusalem. How often would I have gathered you under my wings. As a hen gathers her chickens. And you would not.

One. The shortest verse in the Bible. Jesus wept. At what sin had done. Sin had taken away his. Dear friend Lazarus. And then Jesus wept. The agony of Gethsemane.

Where. He just. Agonized over. What was going to happen. There was passion here. I can't whip up.

Passion. I'm not. An orator. I don't have that. Persuasive ability. To. Motivate people.

I'm not someone who. Can stir up the crowds. But. Surely there is something far wrong. If there is no passion.

[21 : 36] Within our hearts. For the glory of God. Without him. I stand amazed. In the presence of Jesus of Nazarene.

Jesus of Nazarene. A bit old school. But. One verse says. For me. It was in the garden. He prayed. Not my will. But thine. He had no tears.

For his own griefs. But sweat. Drops the blood. For mine. Someone once said to me.

And folk are always saying to me. Mission director. So. What do you do? What do you do? And. I was in a church recently.

And. The person behind me. Beside me. A friend of mine. Before I could say anything else. He says. You know. If you imagine features like. Like. Tesco. He says.

[22 : 33] And we've got all these outlets. And. The mission director is like a. A sales manager. Who's trying to get the. The outlets to perform better.

What. What. Absolute. Nonsense. We cannot take a.

Mere. Managerial view. Of the church. Our strategy is not some kind of. Sales plan. Etched in an Excel document.

To be. Worked out. We grieve. Not as a manager. But.

We yearn. Like a shepherd. A clear vision. Powerful emotion.

[23 : 32] There's another thing we need here. We need the support of God. And man. Together. The support of God.

And man. I love the. The balance of this chapter. It talks about God. The good hand upon us. Prayer is there all the time.

We talk about. The Lord's will. Was with you. It pleased the Lord. To bless me. God is everywhere. But.

You hear people sometimes. And there. There. You can be too spiritual. You know. Folk can say. There is no need of man. Whatsoever. It's nonsense.

Absolute. Arid. Unbiblical. Nonsense. God. Could do it. Without us. But. He has chosen. To involve us. In the process.

[24 : 29] Nehemiah. Nehemiah. Did things. He's not. Super confident. Prayer. And action. Go together. They are. Friends.

Not alternatives. He prays. Notice. Look. His prayer life. He prays for. Sometimes. He prays for. For days.

Look at chapter 1. Verse 4. As soon as I heard these words. I sat down and wept and moaned for days. So he's praying there for days. Then chapter 2.

Verse 4. We have what we call an arrow prayer. What are you requesting? So I pray to the God of heaven. So long prayers and short prayers. He's praying. What a privilege to pray.

You know. Any church. That's alive with church. Has got. A culture of prayer. Notice what I've said. A culture of prayer. Not just lots of people at the prayer meeting.

[25 : 24] That's. Can be just counting numbers. That is very different to a culture of prayer. I'm talking about people in prayer triplets. I'm talking about individuals.

Praying for the prosperity. I'm talking about folk who've got a WhatsApp group. Who are WhatsApping. WhatsApping one another for prayer topics. I'm talking about elders who pray. And men and women who pray.

I'm talking about prayer in multiple levels. In multiple ways. Just folk praying that God would move. But there was action. He went to Jerusalem.

He went there. He sent letters. He went to Asa for materials. And the story. The story was.

It's a true story. Of course all my stories are true. But there's. Down in the Uists. There was a fairly famous. Some would say infamous free church minister.

[26 : 22] And he was. Very, very good gardener. And he had his garden. And he made things grow. And although. His. His friend was the Catholic priest.

Believe it or not. And the priest also had a garden. And nothing would grow. So the priest.

Was talking to him one day. And he perhaps rather flippantly. Said. James. Would you come down and pray over my garden? And the Reverend James went down.

He says. You don't need prayer. You need. You need. Compost. And the man had a point.

And that's what Nehemiah is saying. Yes. There's prayer. But there's also. Stuff to be done. If there's going to be growth. There's got to be.

[27 : 25] You got to go to Jerusalem. And see the king. The king's got to send letters. You got to go to this guy. Asaph for material. All these human resources. Led.

Look at the end of verse 8. There's a great balance in that verse. And the king granted me what I asked for. For the good hand of my God was upon me. So there you see. In verse 8 there.

The sovereignty of God. And the responsibility of man. Human resources and God's blessing. It's repeated there in verse 18. Where he does things.

And the same expression. Is used there. Then I told them of the hand of my God. That had been upon me. We need to do things.

Even Jesus did things. When he healed the blind man. Remember how he healed the blind man? Extraordinary miracle.

[28 : 18] Remember he used the paste. Sort of a gruesome story of saliva and mud. And he anointed the man's eyes. He could have done it without that. But he used almost the ridiculous.

To show that it is of God. And remember when he turned the water into wine. He didn't just miracle up some pots. He says bring the pots. He said bring the water into wine. He said bring the water into wine. He said bring the water into wine.

He said bring the water into wine. So we've got to do things. Of course we've got to do things. We don't just wait and do nothing. We have the support of God and man.

So where have I been so far? We have a clear vision. We need a deep feeling. We have the support of God and man. And then fourthly from Nehemiah we see here that he develops a realistic plan.

Now. People are intrinsically against plans in church. Now you make a plan for every single element in life.

[29 : 29] Everything has a plan. You planned how you could get here. You could have walked. But you didn't. You planned to take the car.

Presumably there was enough fuel in your car to take you here. So yesterday you had to look at the fuel gauge. And you thought yeah I'm okay. I'm enough for. You planned and you planned what seat you'd go in.

Well plan. That's what we do. It's good to have dreamers. But the dreamers who get things done.

Also have a plan. Because the dreams of the night. Can evaporate in the cold light of day. But we see here.

Now I had a plan. I'm going to rebuild this wall. The thing is. They put it into practice. I spend my ministry these days.

[30 : 34] Helping congregations with plans. In the old days. Most of these plans.

Ended up in the same place. You see. Let me. Let me. Take you into a secret here. All churches. I've not explored this church enough.

But all churches have got cupboards. And something somewhere. And in these cupboards. You will find. Piles of old.

Books. Magazines. And they're usually there forever. They're usually there for. For a hundred years. Because. Nobody. Seems to have the gumption. To get rid of them.

Or maybe they don't have a heart. To get rid of them. And. That's where plans. Usually end up. In the back of one of those cupboards. A mere historic document. Nehemiah had a plan.

[31 : 35] But he knew it was God's plan. And he put it into action. People of vision. Need to be people of action.

Moses dreamed about a land flowing with milk and honey. He had heard of a land flowing with milk and honey. And then he took the people through the wilderness. To that land flowing with milk and honey.

He organized a rabble. And he led them. And. Strategic plans. They're usually like a. A neglected. You know. Girlfriend. Back in the day.

Oh. You never visit me. You never phone me. You've neglected me. That's what we do. With most of our plans. But here the plan is executed. Verse 13. He examined the walls.

Verse 15. He inspects the walls. He gets things done. And then briefly. Just two more things. He builds a team. If a person is a leader.

[32 : 37] They will attract followers. But the leader needs to know where they're going. When I was at Smithton. I used to obviously do weddings in the church.

And folk would come in. Out of town. And maybe the reception was. A common thing was. Dramossi Hotel. So. Someone would come in from out of town.

And they'd go to Smithton for the wedding. But they would not have a clue. Where the Dramossi Hotel was. So one day. I'd conducted the wedding. Everything was looking great.

Our manse was located. Down the end of a. Single track road. Which was a cul-de-sac. So I conducted the wedding. I drove home.

As I was driving up the single track road. I checked my mirror. There are 20 cars. Following me. 20 folk who thought.

[33 : 39] Well. I don't know where. The Dramossi Hotel is. But the minister must know. So we'll follow him. It's easy to get a following.

But you've got to be going. In the right direction. Well Nehemiah. Builds this team. And he persuades others to follow. Look at this chapter.

It's quite interesting. At least I think it's interesting. At the beginning of the chapter. We have a lot of singulars used. Like. Verse 6.

Send me. A lot of I. And a lot of me. The first half of the chapter. It's all about him. Nehemiah. But then in verse 17.

It changes. No longer is it. I. I. I. And you can see that. Verse 17. It says. Come let us. Build the wall of Jerusalem.

[34 : 39] That we. May no longer suffer derision. It changes into plurals. It's got a team. This is what we have here.

We've got a team. In the congregation. I love the way you'll be doing your meeting. On Thursday evening. Small groups. It's a team.

Folk. It's not just command and control. It's together. We're in this together. With different ideas. And different gifts. The disciples.

You had. Gentle. Soft people. Like John. The beloved disciple. Who was emotionally intelligent. Intuitive. Quiet. Poetic. And then you've got Peter.

Who was kind of bombastic. And out there. You've got Thomas. Who was a little bit doubting. And you've got other folk. And together. Together. Together. Together. Together. Together. Together. Together. Together. Together. Together.

[35 : 32] Together. And then finally. He refuses to get discouraged. You come up with a great idea. And immediately folks say. Nah. Can't be done. It's one of the reasons that I like spending so much time in America.

For all their faults. It's a positive. Yes. It can be done. You can do it. Scotland. Nah.

Never worked. We tried that. It failed. Again. Bobby Kennedy says. One fifth of the people. Are against everything. All the time.

One fifth of the people. Are against everything. All the time. Sometimes you don't get unanimity. Nehemiah didn't get unanimity.

[36 : 32] He had these. He had these. Hecklers. Didn't he? Sanballat the Horonite. Tobiah the Ammonite. Geshem the Arab. Discouraging him.

Can't do it. Shouldn't do it. This is rubbish. This is wrong. This is terrible. It is so much easier. To be in the sidelines.

Mocking and negative. Where it's seemingly safe. And the Lord Jesus Christ. Suffered opposition.

Didn't he? If you are the son of God. Save yourself. The devil tempted him. And even in the cross itself.

Two were beside him. One of them essentially. Heckled him. You can't do this. The other one embraced him. But Nehemiah refused to be discouraged.

[37 : 33] William Wilberforce. Who was a great evangelical politician. Of the 19th century. Sponsored 12 bills.

For the abolition of slavery in parliament. All of them failed. In 1833. It finally passed.

And he died three days later. My late friend and mentor. Kenny MacDonald.

The minister of Ruskin. Went to Ruskin. He went to preach for the vacancy. They took him into the building. Big barn of a place. And one of the deacons says. We've got plans for this place.

Oh what are your plans? We're going to box off the gallery. We're going to take some seats out. We're going to reduce the size. And Kenny says.

[38 : 32] Stop. Stop. By God's grace. We're going to fill this place. We're going to be talking extensions.

Not reductions. Jesus faced discouragement. The Pharisees. His own disciples didn't understand him at times.

Let me conclude. Thomas Chalmers said. No matter how large. Your vision is too small.

Sir Alec Ferguson. He's one of the world's greatest leaders.

And I emphasize world's greatest leaders. Said in all his days managing Manchester United. With all the big players. He said. I only could detect four world class players.

[39 : 33] Now that's football. It's only a game. There is. I use this.

Most respectfully. Only one world class figure. God only needed one. His son. And the promise was.

For the whole earth. Will be filled. With the glory of the Lord. As the waters cover the sea. Let me apply this sermon in two ways.

There are those of you who are not believers. I'm sure. And I am trying to persuade you to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because. He is the way. The truth. And the life. He is true. He is God. And he is the ultimate victor.

[40 : 40] You can find a fault with the church. If you know five. I will tell you five more. You can find a fault with me. If you find two faults with me.

I will tell you two hundred. You can find a fault with the system. You can find a fault with. How we have dealt with this. That and the other. But I challenge you.

Find a fault with Jesus. Come with us. We will do you good. For the Lord has spoken well. And what about those of you in this congregation?

What's the application? The application is simple. The God of heaven. Will make us prosper. And we.

Will rise up. And we. Will. Build. Build. Let's pray.