

You Don't Approach a King Without.....

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- [0 : 0 0] As we kind of skirt around the edges, we're going to look at Nehemiah chapter 2. Nehemiah chapter 2 and verses 1 and 2. In the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, I hope it is Nisan and not Nisan or something like that.
- When wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, Why does your face look sad? Well, over the Christmas holidays, I set myself the target of thinking through what it meant for Jesus to be king of my life.
- What it meant for Jesus to be king of my life. It's a big subject, way too big for the thoughts of five or six days of Christmas vacation. What does it really mean in practical terms for us to call Jesus our king?
- And I especially wanted to focus in upon the implications of his kingship in prayer. How knowing that Jesus is our king changes our attitude to him when we pray.
- As I was thinking through this over the Christmas period, it struck me that in Bible times, to approach a king was really rather a dangerous thing to do.
- [1 : 2 4] Kings were unpredictable. You took your life in your hands when you chose to ask him for something. And so I began over that week to contrast approaching a king in the Bible with approaching King Jesus in prayer.
- Now, Nehemiah was just such a man who approached a king asking for something. We learn the king's name. His name was Artaxerxes. He was the most powerful man in the world, a fearsome emperor who ruled over millions.
- Nehemiah, one of his most trusted servants, approached him here in Nehemiah 2 to ask him for relief on behalf of the Jewish nation.
- Nehemiah, having learned of the broken down state of Jerusalem's walls and gates, had an ambitious plan for rebuilding. And now in verses 1 and 2, he brings his plan to Artaxerxes.
- He approaches the king of the world and he says in verse 2, I was very much afraid.
- [2 : 3 1] Rightly so. This king held over him the power of life and the death. How different from what we have in Christ Jesus, our king of grace, of whom it is said in Hebrews 4.16, and I'm going to keep your finger in that passage of scripture as well, Hebrews 4.16, let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
- When we pray, we approach a greater king than Artaxerxes. We draw near to the king of kings and lord of lords. But rather than coming to our king with the craven terror of Nehemiah, we come to our king with the boldness and confidence of Hebrews.
- And so, I began to wonder over Christmas, what you needed if you needed to approach, if you wanted to approach a king like Artaxerxes, what you needed to have.

And then to see how much greater our privilege as Christians to approach King Jesus in prayer. And I realised that you don't approach a king without first an appointment, and then a gift, and then a smile, and then a good, a makeover, and then a good reason, and then lastly, an escape route.

And I really hope you don't mind if I share my holiday meditations with you, given that they encouraged me a great deal in view of praying to King Jesus more as a delight to be enjoyed than a duty to be endured.

[4 : 25] First of all then, you don't approach a king without an appointment. An appointment. Now, Nehemiah had a very special privilege in that, as we read in verse, chapter 1, the last verse, he was cupbearer to the king.

He was responsible for ensuring that Artaxerxes was not poisoned by the drink he gave him, nor was Artaxerxes ever short of a cup of wine.

Nehemiah did not need a fixed appointment to see the king. He served at the king's beck and call. It was, of course, different for Queen Esther, who it would appear from the Bible book which carries her name, did need an appointment to see King Ahasuerus.

For Esther to turn up unannounced and expect an audience with the king, even if that king happened to be her husband, was culturally very inappropriate and therefore potentially dangerous.

Because kings of the day were unpredictable. Their moods swung wildly. Absolute power corrupted them absolutely.

[5 : 44] Queen Esther was taking her life in her hands by turning up to the king unannounced. After all, the king's timetable is his business. And if he chooses not to see her, that's his business too.

And if she keeps on turning up unannounced at the king's door wanting to see him, she might well end up like one of the wives of Henry VIII. You know, it's a really good practice to have a regular quiet time where we read and we pray.

It's good before the madness of the day we take time to be with Jesus. And maybe you have a regular morning slot for that. Let's say from 7 to 7.15, whatever.

That, as it were, is your daily appointment with God. You try and keep it as often as you can and that's good. But let's never forget that we don't need an appointment to pray to and receive an audience with King Jesus.

We don't need to write a letter to the king's secretary requesting an appointment to speak to King Jesus. Rather, whenever and wherever we lift up our hearts to him, he listens and answers.

[7 : 04] When the writer to the Hebrews talks to us about approaching the throne of grace in our time of need, what he really means is whenever.

Whenever. The apostle Paul commands in Ephesians 6 verse 18, pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.

So picture the seed in heaven with reverence. God is seated on the throne of the universe and he's got stars and he's got planets and he's got galaxies to sustain.

He's got the entire ecosystem of earth to overlook. He's overlooking the lives of every single human being on the face of our planet.

It's not as if God wants for things to do. But the moment one of his people prays, he bends his ear to them and hears their voice.

[8 : 05] It's no dangerous thing to come to Jesus unannounced. It's a delightful thing. You don't approach a king without an appointment. That's the first thing.

Second, you don't approach a king without a gift. A gift. Everyone in the throne room of an ancient Middle Eastern king had something to contribute.

There were cupbearers like Nehemiah. He had wine to contribute. There were warriors and there were courtiers and there were politicians and there were nobles and everyone was there because they had something to contribute.

Visitors to the throne room of a Middle Eastern king came bading gifts. So remember how the Queen of Sheba came to the court of King Solomon with what in today's money would have been millions and millions and millions of pounds worth of gifts.

Even Esther and her contemporaries had something to offer the king namely their virtue. How different it is with us and King Jesus.

[9 : 16] What after all do we have to give him? Certainly not our merits our demerits perhaps but not the things we've done for him because every one of them is tainted by our own selfishness.

So many people go wrong precisely here at this point that they feel they need to bring Jesus something. Yes even if that something should be a statement of their own resolution to follow him more closely.

Listen we came to Jesus as we were for salvation. We knew that salvation was a gift to be received and not a reward to be earned. And so we came as we were and we let our king do the rest.

In the same way our lord doesn't wait for us to give him a gift before he'll accept us in prayer. He just waits for us to come.

We have nothing to contribute to him. He doesn't need our muscles because he's almighty. He doesn't need our brain power because he is infinitely wise.

[10 : 31] Praying to our king isn't about us coming to him with our hands filled with our own gifts and talents and offers but about us coming to him with our hands empty praying for his gifts.

Nehemiah brought Artaxerxes a cup filled with wine. We come to Jesus with our poverty and emptiness. Nehemiah approached the king with something to offer. We approach king Jesus in prayer with only our need.

How else do you read that verse in Hebrews where the writer encourages us to come to the throne of grace that we might find help in our time of need.

In other words we don't come to him we never come to him with our plenty we only ever come to king Jesus with our need.

Because in the last analysis prayer is the ultimate expression of our dependence upon God for everything we are and everything we have. We come asking, we come seeking, we come knocking, praying that our heavenly father will supply us all that we need according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

[11 : 56] And so what then if we have nothing to offer him except our backslidings as we talked about this morning? Or our doubts? Or our fears which we'll talk about later in February?

Listen, he wants us to bring them all to him so that in return he can give us his comfort and his forgiveness and his strength.

It's not a dangerous thing to come to king Jesus empty handed. In fact it's the only way we dare come at all. If we should even think of coming to Jesus filled with our own abilities and our own gifts.

be sure we'll leave his presence empty of his abilities and empty of his gifts. You don't approach a king without a gift.

Third, you don't approach a king without a smile. You don't approach a king without a smile. Now you know what struck me about this encounter of Nehemiah with King Artaxerxes at first.

[13 : 03] It's what comes at the end of verse one and verse two I had not been sad in his presence before. I was very much afraid. It would seem that ancient Middle Eastern kings didn't like to be served by the sour faced.

They liked their throne rooms to be places filled with confident happy and laughing servants. They didn't want to be depressed by their servants gloominess because it's almost like the servant is saying to him you know I'm not happy as your servant I'm not happy having you as my master.

So no wonder Nehemiah was afraid. A sad face before the king leads to a dead face before the king. That's the way it was.

Now you know what they say laughing the whole world laughs with you cry and you cry alone. People just don't want to be around someone who is sad and gloomy their hard work and often they'll drag you down into their sad world along with them.

And so we follow don't we the words of the great first world war song pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile smile smile. That's the way it has to be when talking to important people.

[14 : 32] We've got to put a brave face on it because the last thing important people want to see is our sadness.

How different it is between us and King Jesus. Because we come to him as we are warts and all. We come to him in prayer both with our smiles and our sorrows.

Our delights and our depressions. our glories and our glooms. Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

In other words you can come to Jesus whether that's a grin you've got in your face or a frown you've got in your face. Whether you're smiling or whether you're sad.

You don't have to come with a fear Nehemiah had in approaching Artaxerxes with a sad face in Nehemiah 2 verse 1-2. But with the confidence of the Christian who knows that she's approaching a throne of grace.

[15 : 46] It may be broadly true laugh and the whole world laughs with you cry and you cry alone but it need not be universally true. It may be that the world will laugh with you when you are laughing.

And it may be that the world won't cry with you when you are crying. Jesus wants you to come to him whatever your state of mind and however heavy or light your heart happens to be.

The last thing we need is a mask in prayer. We can leave our pretending to other people at other times in other places because in prayer we're meeting with the real Jesus.

Jesus. And it's not a dangerous thing to come to the real Jesus without a smile because he wants us to come to him as we really are. You don't approach a king without a smile.

Fourth, you don't approach a king without a makeover. A makeover. So just for those who came in a bit late these are my holiday meditations and I'm thinking here about the difference between approaching an Old Testament king who often these Old Testament kings were often fierce and they were unpredictable and if you approached them in the wrong way you'd end up dead and how you approach King Jesus in prayer.

[17 : 07] Okay, so you don't approach a king without a makeover. Picture the scene. Nehemiah is planning to meet with King Artaxerxes and he has the most audacious of requests.

He's been planning it for some time down to the extent of figuring out exactly what he's going to wear when he meets with the king. He's going to wear a t-shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts and some flip flops.

Yeah, that's going to go down really well in the courtroom of an ancient Middle Eastern emperor, the most powerful man in the world an oily t-shirt, loud shorts, and a pair of Primark flip-flops.

Yes, you can imagine Artaxerxes' immediate response, a pretty quick beheading. You know, we learn that Queen Esther had to undergo a whole year of beauty treatments before she met with King Ahasuerus.

She was a very beautiful lady, but even she needed a whole year's makeover before meeting with the king. I'm pretty sure that if she'd gone to meet King Ahasuerus wearing a pair of joggies and a jumper, he would not have been particularly impressed.

[18 : 27] If you should be so lucky as ever to be called to go to Buckingham Palace to meet with Her Majesty the Queen, make sure you wear your best clothes and look the smartest you can.

That's common sense, that's courtesy, even though our Queen, I'm quite certain, wouldn't send us to the Tower of London for not having a complete makeover before we saw her.

So you don't go anywhere near kings like Artaxerxes or Ahasuerus without a serious makeover. But we can approach Jesus just as we are because the garments we wear and our appearance before our King are not our own, they are His.

He covers us with His perfect righteousness and His flawless purity. We couldn't have a better makeover than what our King has already given us when we came to faith in Him and He took from us the dirty clothes of our own sin and dressed us in the dazzling robes of His righteousness.

King Jesus not only receives us gladly, but He dresses us in clothes of His own righteousness. Never do we look more splendid in His eyes than when we approach Him in prayer.

[19 : 58] To others we may look a pitiful disgrace, but the angels see us as we really are. Imitations of the Lord they worship and they're awestruck.

Behold, He prays. The makeover we need as we come to King Jesus in prayer is one He Himself gives us. He makes us fit to come to Him for after all His is a throne of grace.

fifthly, you don't approach an Old Testament king without a reason. Without a reason. So, Nehemiah comes to King Artaxerxes and he has a bold and ambitious plan to secure the city of Jerusalem.

A plan that's going to involve the hard work of thousands and thousands of Jewish laborers. Later, Queen Esther will come to King Ahasuerus with a request that he rescue the Jewish people from annihilation at the hands of Haman.

They came to their respective kings with big requests for the best of reasons. Hundreds of years before this, two women came to King Solomon with a request to secure the custody of a child.

[21 : 22] A request in which Solomon showed otherworldly wisdom. And they're all big requests. Because the truth is, you don't take the risk of approaching an unpredictable ancient Middle Eastern king unless you've got a very good reason for doing so.

Little reasons don't count. So, imagine going to King Artaxerxes one morning and saying to him, you know, I need your help. Someone's wronged me and I need your help to forgive them.

Or you go to King Artaxerxes and you say, look, I'm having a really hard time. Will you give me the strength I need to get through another day? Do you suspect that he would give you the forgiveness you needed or the strength to get through another day?

Or would he kill you for wasting his time? How different from King Jesus and our approach to him in prayer. The Apostle Paul says to us, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Did you hear that? Anything? Really anything? Can we pray not just about big things, but small things also?

[22 : 47] Can we approach our King with the smallest of things in prayer? in fact, can we go to him with no other reason than that we're just feeling anxious? Again, the Apostle Peter says, cast all your cares upon him because he cares for you.

Really, Peter? All my cares? Peter, can you tell me, are you telling me that I can come to Christ not just because I'm praying for the deliverance of the church from its enemies, but because I'm struggling to do my homework?

You don't need, you don't go near kings like Artaxerxes or Ahasuerus or Solomon unless you've got a really good reason, but you can approach King Jesus with anything.

You can live your life with him, your whole life and share everything with him. If it's a big enough issue to cause you anxiety, it's a big enough issue for him to care about it and want to hear about it.

The writer of Hebrews says, let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

[24 : 03] I'm not aware that the needs to which the writer of the Hebrews is referring needed to be very big, because certainly in that verse he does not put a limit on them at all.

So you'll never hear King Jesus protesting, saying, my time is far more important than listening to you talking about your feelings, or about how anxious you are, or about that homework you cannot do, or about that bickering you've had with your missus.

Stop bothering me. you don't need a good reason to approach King Jesus in prayer. In fact, you don't need a reason at all, except perhaps that you just want to enjoy his fellowship and his presence with you for a while.

So coming to Jesus in prayer is a delight to be enjoyed rather than a duty to be endured. You don't approach a king without a reason.

And then lastly, you don't approach a king without an escape route. Without an escape route. As we close, I want us to picture this scene in the throne room of King Artaxerxes as Nehemiah makes his request that he be allowed to leave the service of the king in order to travel to a far-off city and devote the rest of his life not to King Artaxerxes but to God.

[25 : 43] I wouldn't be surprised if Nehemiah had a bad dose of knock knees and was very, very much afraid. What if King Artaxerxes had responded somewhat differently?

What if King Artaxerxes had taken exception to the scowl on Nehemiah's face or the sheer audacity of his request? What if King Artaxerxes had turned to his executioner and said seize Nehemiah tomorrow is the day of his death?

Indeed it was a very, very dangerous thing to approach a Middle Eastern king in ancient days. You took your life in your hands there was no escape route for you.

Most kings didn't allow weapons into their throne rooms so you couldn't fight your way out. And usually the throne was surrounded by palace guards so you couldn't run your way out.

You don't approach this kind of king without a really good escape route. Not so with King Jesus. For of what use is an escape route in prayer?

[26 : 55] Because in some ways we may even say that prayer is an escape route. but more importantly we can never ask Jesus something too audacious and Jesus will never lose patience with us in prayer.

We can't tire him out and his intentions for us are entirely and only ever for our good. He comes to give life eternal and not death.

We don't need to come looking for a way to get out of his presence. We just want to enjoy being with him in prayer. and enjoy the fellowship of knowing him.

The ultimate truth is that not one of these Old Testament kings not even the best of them are anything like King Jesus.

In fact their deficiencies in the Old Testament point to our need of a perfect king. The kind of king we have in Jesus Christ of whom in prayer we are never terrified.

[28 : 06] If Jesus is your king today if you're a Christian you don't need to approach him in prayer with an appointment with a gift with a smile with a makeover with a good reason or with an escape route.

you just need to come as you are and tell him how it is with you and he'll graciously hear an answer. That's gospel truth.

Now nothing must keep us from prayer. Let us pray. Lord we thank you for these little words in the Old Testament and little texts that set our minds a-wandering.

We thank you for sometimes how our meditations can walk in fruitful ways like these and I'm sure that each one of us here, oh Lord, that you've given similar meditations to about other passages of Scripture.

Lord we thank you that we don't need an appointment to meet with you in prayer on the train and the way into work in the morning as we're doing the ironing. whatever we're doing, as we're doing our homework, as we're listening to that lecturer droning on, we thank you that we can approach you whenever and wherever we are.

[29 : 30] We thank you that we don't need to take you a gift because you've already given us the greatest gift of them all, the gift of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. We thank you that you want us to tell you how it is with us, not to hide from you our negative feelings.

We thank you that Jesus Christ and his righteousness is our makeover, that there can be no superior dress than the one he has given to us.

We thank you that you call on us to cast all our cares upon you, those big cares concerning the future of nations and the small cares also, the ones that we share with no one else because we think they would consider them too trivial.

And we thank you oh Lord that the one thing we never need when we approach you in prayer is an escape route. Why on earth would any of us want to escape from you?

For with you there is life in all its fullness, in all its joy, and in all its glory. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

[30 : 39] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.