

Inspection time

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[0 : 00] The reading today is taken from Nehemiah, chapter 2, beginning at verse 1, and you'll find that on page 475. Nehemiah, chapter 2, starting at verse 1.

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Arctexes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence, and the king said to me, Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.

Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, Let the king live forever. Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my father's graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?

Then the king said to me, What are you requesting? So I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king, If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father's graves, that I may rebuild it.

And the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, How long will you be gone, and when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.

[1 : 24] And I said to the king, If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the province beyond the river, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.

And the king granted what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. Then I came to the governors of the province beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters.

Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

So I went to Jerusalem and was there for three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me, and I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.

There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the valley gate, to the dragon spring and to the dung gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down, and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.

[2 : 46] Then I went on to the fountain gate and to the king's pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the valley gate, and so returned.

And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.

Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me.

And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, What is this thing that you are doing?

Are you rebelling against the king? Then I replied to them, The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build. But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.

[4 : 08] Well, good morning, everyone. If you've just shut your Bible, then I think you find it helpful to reopen it at page 475 and 476.

As we look at this passage together, let me lead us in prayer as we do so. We remember, Father, that Jesus tells us that man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from your mouth.

And therefore, we pray that this morning you would feed us from your word and revive us. Amen. Well, I want to begin by reading a rather lengthy extract from the introduction of a book.

It may be familiar to some. The state of this country was so painfully unsatisfactory that it is difficult to convey any adequate idea of it.

English people of the present day can have no conception of the darkness that prevailed. How such a state of things can have arisen in a land of free Bibles and professing Protestantism is almost past comprehension.

[5 : 13] Christianity seemed to lie as one dead. Morality was thoroughly trampled underfoot in the streets. There was darkness in the court, the parliament, and the bar. Darkness in country and darkness in town.

Darkness among rich and darkness among poor. A gross, thick, religious, and moral darkness. The Church of England existed with her admirable articles, her time-honored liturgy, her parochial system, her Sunday services, and her clergy.

The non-conformist body existed with its hard-won liberty and its free pulpit. But one account unhappily may be given of both parties. They existed, but they did nothing.

They were sound asleep. Sermons everywhere were little better than miserable moral essays, utterly devoid of anything likely to awaken, convert, or save souls. The writer continues by describing how the scientists and philosophers of the day scoffed at biblical teaching, and then explains how one celebrated lawyer had the curiosity to go from church to church and hear every clergyman of note in London.

He says it would have been impossible for him to discover, from what he heard, whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mohammed, or of Christ. He quotes an archbishop who said, Another bishop is quoted, It has come to be taken for granted that Christianity is now at length discovered to be fictitious.

[6 : 53] The author goes on, What were the bishops of those days? The best of them seemed unable to do more than deplore the existence of evils, which they knew not how to remedy. Others fulminated fierce charges against enthusiasm and fanaticism, and appeared afraid of England becoming too religious.

The majority of the bishops, to say the truth, were mere men of the world. They were unfit for their position. What were the clergy of those days? The vast majority of them were sunk in worldliness, and neither knew nor cared anything about their profession.

They neither did good themselves, nor liked anyone else to do it for them. They swore, they drank, they gambled. They seemed determined to know everything except Jesus Christ and him crucified, and sought to preach as seldom as possible.

And when they did preach, he says, Their sermons were so unspeakably and indescribably bad, that it is comforting to reflect that they were generally preached to empty benches. What were the morals of the day?

It may suffice to say that adultery, fornication, gambling, swearing, and drunkenness were hardly regarded as vices at all. They were the fashionable practices of people in the highest ranks of society, and no one was thought the worse of for indulging in them.

[8 : 11] Well, those are extracts from the opening chapter of J.C. Ryle's Christian Leaders of the 18th Century, in which he describes the spiritual and moral character of England at the beginning of the 1700s.

And yet they're words which could perhaps sadly be applied to our own church and nation today, aren't they? They present a depressing picture.

But wonderfully, the rest of Ryle's book tells us a story of how God used the preaching of the likes of George Whitefield and John Wesley to bring about the greatest revival in English history.

Strangely encouraging, isn't it, to know that things have been this bad in our country before, and yet God acted in mighty power to transform our nation. And what happened then in the 18th century is also what happened to the people of God in Nehemiah's day.

As we saw last week, and we'll see this morning, Israel's national and spiritual life was in a pitiful state. God's people, having suffered his judgment and been subjected to exile and occupation.

[9 : 19] Even after the return from exile, things were a far cry from the glory days of Israel, and the people had begun to fall back into their same old bad habits. And yet wonderfully, God worked through men like Nehemiah and Ezra to revive the nation.

And as with the 18th century revival, it ought to be a great encouragement for us to see how God transformed the fortunes of his people in Nehemiah's day. And it ought also to provide us with valuable lessons as to how he goes about doing so.

And this morning we're going to notice five things from Nehemiah chapter 2, which will, I think, both encourage and instruct us as we consider the parallels with our increasingly godless society and compromised church.

And you'll see the headings on the outline on the back of the service sheets. Here's the first. The power of God's hand. The power of God's hand. We left the story last week with Nehemiah having heard news secondhand of the plight of his people and in his distress, praying that the Lord would restore Israel.

And at the end of the chapter, he prays for God's blessing as he prepares to go to the king to plead Israel's case. Now, it's important for us to realize that what Nehemiah was doing here was very dangerous.

[10 : 39] To appear sad as he does in front of the king was considered disrespectful and an offense punishable by death. More than that, Ezra chapter 4 tells us that Artaxerxes was the king who'd previously ordered the rebuilding work in Jerusalem to stop.

So Nehemiah was taking an enormous risk asking him to overhaul his foreign policy. No wonder we're told at the end of verse 2 that he was very much afraid.

But Nehemiah remembered the promises from Deuteronomy that we thought about last week and had prayed to the Lord for help. And that gave him the courage and confidence not only to pray, but then to act.

He became the answer to his own prayers. And yet he does so with great wisdom. Because although there's only a sentence in our Bibles between the end of his prayer and his meeting with the king, three months had actually elapsed between them.

That's why Nehemiah records the months in chapters 1 and 2. So it seems that Nehemiah was both praying continually for several weeks and waiting patiently for a suitable opportunity to speak to the king.

[11 : 53] And that opportunity comes in verse 2. Have a look down with me. And the king said to me, Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick?

Nehemiah answers him respectfully, but also honestly, and is then given the chance to make his request. Verse 4 over the page. Then the king said to me, What are you requesting?

But before he replies, Nehemiah prays again. So I prayed to the God of heaven, he tells us. Isn't that fascinating? Nehemiah's in the king's presence.

He's afraid, but has this great opportunity. And yet before he answers, he prays. Now presumably this was a very short, silent prayer. An arrow prayer as we sometimes call it.

And it's a reminder to us that as well as praying longer, persistent prayers of the sort we saw in chapter 1, we can and ought also to be praying quick, shorter prayers all the time as we meet challenges, opportunities and temptations at work or at home.

[13 : 00] Committing them to the Lord and asking for his help before we proceed. And for Nehemiah, God's help came in the most wonderful way.

Because not only does the king agree to his request for him to be given leave from work to rebuild Jerusalem, he also signs off Nehemiah's bold request to receive safe passage and the timber that he needs to complete his project.

Seems almost too good to be true. But at the end of verse 8, Nehemiah discloses the real reason for his success. Just have a look. And the king granted me what I asked for the good hand of my God was upon me.

You see, it was the power of God's hands that was really pulling the strings and directing events. As the book of Proverbs puts it, even the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord.

We've just finished a little series here at Grace Church looking at God's sovereignty. And what's so fascinating about Nehemiah is that we see both God's total sovereignty at work and also human initiative.

[14 : 13] Nowhere in the Bible are those things set against each other. In fact, it's God's sovereign control over history that motivates Nehemiah to act. As we saw in his prayer, he knew God would keep his covenant promise to rescue his people.

And that knowledge led him both to pray and then to have the courage to act, playing his part in working out God's plan to rebuild Jerusalem. Now, as we saw last week, the New Testament equivalent of the city of Jerusalem isn't a physical place in this world, but God's people.

We sung about that in our first hymn, didn't we? Saviour since of Zion city, I through grace a member am. That's why I guess for American evangelicals, the most important question isn't whether Trump or Clinton will best preserve Christian values in America, but how can God's invisible and future kingdom be established?

So the book of Nehemiah teaches us what it looks like and what we can expect as we seek to build the church. So isn't it an encouragement for us to remember God's powerful hand is in control of all things?

And shouldn't it spur us both to pray and to take the initiative in seeking to grow the church? I don't know what that might look like for us.

[15 : 39] Not going to a pagan king, but sticking our neck out and inviting a neighbor or colleague to the Cayley or carol service perhaps. Or maybe asking our boss for permission to be able to leave work earlier so we can get to growth group regularly on a Tuesday.

For those in jam, it could mean asking a friend to jam or to join you at a summer camp. Sure, we may feel very much afraid of such conversations as Nehemiah did.

Like Nehemiah, we may need to pray for several months before a suitable opportunity arises. And no, God doesn't always promise to answer our prayers as we want. Nehemiah will show us that there'll be setbacks along the way.

But the power of God's hand, his sovereign control, and his promises mean we can be sure he will build his church and that he wants to use us as he does so.

It was Nehemiah's trust in the power of God's hand that enabled everything that follows to happen and that ought to move us to action also. But then secondly, despite this confidence, Nehemiah also had a realistic view concerning the state of God's people.

[16 : 50] The state of God's people, and we'll move more quickly now. Having received the blessing of King Artaxerxes to rebuild the city, Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem in verse 11.

And in verses 12 to 15, he inspects the city. And his findings are recorded in verse 17, if you just look on, where he tells the Jewish leaders, you see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.

At its high point under Solomon, Jerusalem had been a great city with a magnificent temple, but now it had been reduced to rubble. The temple was a shadow of its former glory and the ruined walls left the city unprotected.

It had become a laughing stock to the nations. Nehemiah refers to the derision it evoked at the end of verse 17. And I guess we might reach a similar conclusion if we conducted an inspection of the state of God's city today, of his church.

If we were to do such a survey in the UK, we might well report on a church that's in trouble, derided, and dismissed by the world. A church that lies in ruins with its gates burned.

[18 : 08] Just consider a few statistics for a moment. Whereas over half the population were regular churchgoers in the middle of the last century, only 5% regularly attend church today.

20% of Church of England clergy don't believe in a creator God. Half don't believe in the virgin birth. Half don't believe Jesus is the only way to God. And a third don't believe in the resurrection.

The House of Bishops is packed with bishops who in many cases openly disbelieve what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage, homosexual practice, and the complementary roles of men and women.

But doesn't contain a single diocesan bishop with a biblical understanding of male headship. Our theological colleges, even many of those which claim to be evangelical, too often hardly open the Bible and train ordinands with skewed priorities.

When I used to have to go on a diocesan clergy training event, I often found the only thing that united many of those present was heavy drinking and crude language.

[19 : 13] And of course, many churches are dying. Again, it's just like J.C. Ryle's description of the England of the early 1700s. Things can seem really bleak.

But remember, history tells us God is well able to turn the tide in our churches and our nation. All is not lost, just as it wasn't in Nehemiah's day.

So thirdly, let's consider the motivation for God's work. The motivation for God's work. In verse 17, Nehemiah speaks openly of the trouble we are in.

But the state of God's people didn't lead him to despair. Rather, it spurred him on to action. Let me read from verse 16. Just back a verse. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing.

And I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, you see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.

[20 : 18] Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me.

And they said, let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. Nehemiah was no one man band.

Notice how he gathers together not only the priests, but also the nobles, officials, and others who were to be involved. In fact, in chapter 3, we'll see how all kinds of people put their hand to rebuilding the city walls.

And if we wish to see the church grow under God in our own day, we'll also need to work together to build his church. All of God's people are to be involved.

Now again, it's important we understand that the way God's city, his church, is built today isn't by building walls of stone, but through the preaching of his word. As we saw in our series in 1 Corinthians, Paul describes himself as a skilled master builder as he proclaims the gospel.

[21 : 33] The church grows as people are converted and nurtured through gospel ministry. And so the desperate need for today is for workers to get on board with that task.

Many of God's people in Nehemiah's day were living in the land of Israel but had been content to leave the city in ruins, to leave others to do the work. They were more concerned with building their homes than the city, we're told.

And sadly, we too can easily, perhaps because we don't want to go out of our comfort zones or face the world's derision, fail to get on board with the task Jesus has left us of building his city through the proclamation of his word.

We can easily, can't we, be more concerned with building our careers or our ideal homes than God's people. So just as Nehemiah gathered fellow workers, we need to pray for God to raise up faithful gospel workers in our land.

Jesus said, the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. But we're not only to pray but also to play, to each play our part in building the church.

[22 : 56] Now, of course, that'll look different for each of us. Some of us, like the nobles of Nehemiah's day perhaps, may be involved in giving generously to support gospel ministry. Others will be on the front line speaking God's word to people.

But all of us will have a part to play. Look at the second half of verse 17 again. Building the city is a corporate activity.

Come, let us build the wall, says Nehemiah. And in verse 18, the people reply, let us rise up and build. It may just be that one or two of us here could contribute to that building work here at Grace Church by meeting a need at Sunday Club or practically, for example.

Now, I guess this single-minded focus on building God's church won't come naturally to any of us. So let's remember what motivated so many to come on board.

The second half of verse 17 again. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good and also of the words that the king had spoken to me and they said, let us rise up and build.

[24 : 11] Despite the hard work and hostility and setbacks which would follow, Nehemiah's appeal was successful because, you see, the people no longer wanted to suffer derision.

The ruined city walls and Israel's recent exile had led her to become a laughingstock to the nations. And the church today is often seen in the same way.

Media reports of child sex abuse perpetrated by clergy or divisions in the church, for example, have done nothing to enhance our reputation. It should grieve us when we read of Christianity being mocked in the media or Jesus being shut out of public discourse in our nation.

We should, I guess, have the same attitude the missionary Henry Martin had when he said, I could not endure existence if Jesus were not glorified. It would be hell to me if he were to be always dishonored.

So I wonder if we'll have such a concern for Jesus' glory that we'd be motivated, like Nehemiah's contemporaries, to give ourselves to the building of God's people.

[25 : 25] Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. But this won't be easy, and that brings us on to our fourth lesson from these verses, because we need to be realistic about the hostility of God's enemies, the hostility of God's enemies.

Have a look with me at verse 19. But when Sanballat, the Horonite, and Tobiah, the Ammonite servant, and Geshem, the Arab, heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, what is this thing that you are doing?

Are you rebelling against the king? Now we first meet Sanballat and Tobiah back in verse 8, and here they found a new ally, Geshem, the Arab, a reminder to us that opposition will often grow as faithful gospel work grows.

The places where these three officials operated were directly to the north, east, and south of Israel, meaning the whole country was hemmed in. With the sea on the west, opposition came from all sides, as it will for us today.

The media, the political establishment, and the academics of our age can sometimes seem to be uniting against Christian teaching. But what's particularly sobering is that Sanballat and Tobiah should have known better.

[26 : 53] Sanballat is described as a Horonite, and the Horonites lived in Samaria, so were half Jews. Tobiah, more disturbingly, is a Jewish name, and so presumably he was a Jew who was working among the Ammonites.

And yet he too opposed Nehemiah, just as so often it's those who are outwardly members of God's people who oppose authentic gospel ministry.

These verses teach us that opposition to God's people comes from both outside, Geshem, and inside, Tobiah. And notice these opponents resort to mockery, threats, and false allegations of rebelling against the king.

And we can expect the same today. The fiercest opposition that George Whitefield and John Wesley received when they sought to revive the church in the 18th century was from within the Church of England.

They were both ordained, Anglican clergy, but were expelled from the Church of England and found church doors locked to them because they preached the gospel. And sadly today, it's too often the church hierarchy which obstructs church planting initiatives from evangelical churches, for example, just as they sought to silence Whitefield and Wesley.

[28 : 14] And just as Nehemiah's opponents tried to intimidate him into stopping his building project. So we're to be realistic and expect hostility.

After all, Jesus himself, persecuted by the religious leaders of his day, said, no servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

And yet, we're not to let these opponents intimidate us. Just have a look at Nehemiah's words at the end of verse 20. For all their influence and status, he says his opponents have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.

And in the same way, we need to remember that false teachers in the church have no real legitimacy in God's sight, even if they occupy prominent positions. The Church of England, for example, doesn't belong to the liberal bishops who deny the gospel its founders died for and which its articles are polled.

So when we see the gospel being opposed within the church, far from being silenced, it ought like Nehemiah to drive us to our knees in prayer and to open our mouths in proclamation.

[29 : 33] And then the final thing we're going to note very briefly means that we can take heart as we do so. So fifthly, the assurance of God's promise. The assurance of God's promise.

You see, nothing would distract Nehemiah from his task, not even fierce opposition. And notice why. The chapter ends as it began with the assurance that God's powerful hand is pulling the strings.

Verse 20, the God of heaven will make us prosper and we his servants will arise and build. Now again, success isn't being promised in every battle.

Nehemiah met plenty of setbacks along the way and sadly we'll see things go wrong again at the end of the book. Whitfield and Wesley were expelled from countless churches. John the Baptist and Stephen were martyred along with many of our Christian brothers and sisters today.

But ultimately, success is certain. We may appear to lose some skirmishes along the way but final victory is guaranteed because Jesus, the one who, like Nehemiah, came from a faraway land to rescue his people has said so.

[30 : 52] Remember again his promise in Matthew 16 using the imagery of building. I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

God will give us success in the end. Every one of his chosen people will be saved. The heavenly Jerusalem will be built.

And for that reason, like Nehemiah, we're to go on building with that assurance. Let's not allow opposition or discouragement or false teaching silence us.

Let me finish as I've begun with an extract from J.C. Ryle's Christian Leaders of the 18th Century. This time from his second chapter which is entitled The Agency by Which Christianity Was Revived in England.

Ryle writes, The government of the country can lay no claim to the credit of the change. Nor yet did the change come from the Church of England as a body.

[31 : 55] The leaders of that communion were utterly unequal to the times. Nor yet did the change come from the dissenters. Who then were the reformers of the 18th century?

To whom are we indebted under God for the change which took place? The men who wrought deliverance for us were a few individuals, most of them clergymen, whose hearts God touched about the same time in various parts of the country.

They were not wealthy or highly connected. They had neither money nor family influence. They were simply men whom God stirred up and brought out to do his work. They did his work in the old apostolic way by becoming the evangelists of their day.

They taught one set of truths. They taught them in the same way with fire, reality, earnestness, as men fully convinced of what they taught. They taught them in the same spirit, always loving, compassionate, and like Paul, even weeping, but always bold, unflinching, and not fearing the face of man, not waiting for sinners to come to them, but going after and seeking sinners.

The movement of these gallant evangelists shook England from one end to another. At first, people in high places affected to despise them. The wits cut jokes and invented smart names for them.

[33 : 17] The church shut her doors on them. The dissenters turned the cold shoulder on them. The ignorant mob persecuted them. But the movement of these few evangelists went on and made itself felt in every part of the land.

Many were aroused and awakened to think about religion. Many were shamed out of their sins. Many were converted. When God takes a work in hand, nothing can stop it.

When God is for us, none can be against it. The instrumentality by which the spiritual reformers carried on their operations was of the simplest description. It was neither more nor less than the old apostolic weapon of preaching.

They taught constantly the sufficiency and supremacy of holy scripture. In all their preaching, they were eminently men of one book. They honoured, they loved, they revered the Bible.

Well, that happened nearly 300 years ago. And let's pray for God to raise up similarly courageous and faithful men in our day to build his church for his glory just as he rebuilt Jerusalem under Nehemiah.

[34 : 30] And let's pray that we, by God's grace, might play a part in that happening. Let me lead us in prayer. Father, we thank you this morning for the realism of your word.

We thank you for the way that it reminds us that the church is often persecuted, seemingly small and weak, and ridiculed by the world.

And yet, we thank you for the way in which both the Bible and church history teaches us that you are well able to revive your church and that Jesus' promise to build his church will be fulfilled.

And we pray therefore this morning that you would give us courage and the motivation to be those involved in building your church in our day. Help us to be prayerful and give us the same boldness that Nehemiah had when he went to the king to speak your word to people.

And we pray that by your grace you might use it to build your kingdom in this city and in our nation. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.