

Standing Before The King!

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[0 : 00] I don't know about you, but I think one of my favourite films over the past decade or so has been the film The King's Speech. Who do you see The King's Speech? It's a great film and it comes out at Christmas time, isn't it?

And it starts Colin Firth and he's absolutely brilliant. It's the soon-to-be king, George VI. And he's got a stammer, that's the main premise of the story. And he brings in this Australian speech and language therapist.

It's played by Geoffrey Rush. And the two form this unlikely friendship. And it's after King George VI's brother, Edward VIII, had abdicated the throne that the new king would rely on Lionel Logue, Geoffrey Rush's character, to help him to make that first wartime radio broadcast.

Of course, the wireless radio was beginning to play a significant part in the role of the royal family. It was a way that they would enter people's houses. And so this new king, waiting, would prepare for this.

And then when he became king and the war broke out, it was this first wartime radio broadcast upon Britain's declaration of war in Germany in 1939.

[1 : 11] And so there's that connoissement scene where Godwinst Churchill and there's the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo, Gordon Lamb, and there's the Prime Minister then, Neville Chamberlain, there present to offer their help.

And then he goes King George VI to give that speech. And they go to the broadcasting room and Logue is conducting him and making sure he's saying the right words and all the training that they have gone through.

But by the end, he's speaking freely, even though he's somewhat nervous, even though he knows this is a huge moment and there's broadcasts all around the country and you go to the camera, the pans into the houses, listening around the, not just the country, but around the Commonwealth, around the world, and seeing what's happening and that war being declared.

And in today's passage, the roles might be reversed, it's Nehemiah's going to the king, but the premise is sort of similar. It's a big task, it's a risky move, it's a bold move for Nehemiah, who was a member, really an insider to the king's circle.

He's a cup bader to the king. And if it backfired this move, it would have meant his head off, literally. But if it didn't backfire, it may have meant that he would actually, well, you might have lost your mind here and you can just go.

[2 : 34] And so it was kind of like a double-edged sword in him going into the king and asking for his heart, just as we read in the beginning of Esther, how she was called for such a time as this.

But in Nehemiah, what we see is the heart of a true servant and a true leader. And he was willing to stand in the gap on behalf of God's people, willing to take that significant risk to go into the company of the king and to ask him to reverse this order that we have blessed.

And Nehemiah, his heart was to both pray and to act and to be willing to move forward. And I guess that for us today is the place where we find ourselves challenged in.

That's that challenge to step outside our comfort zone, that time that we're living in. It's now this very particular, distinctive time where our society is changing, very much so. Our church is changing, very much so.

So the call for us is, oh, we can't stay in the same position. We can't even just tiptoe to the next step. We've actually got to make a big step or even a few big steps and say, God, what is it that you're doing?

[3 : 41] We've got to be praying and we've got to be moving forward as well. And we've got to be unwilling people who aren't going to take that risk because we thought about it on Thursday at the training that the fields aren't wine under harvest, that in the church up and down the country there are churches that are growing and that is so encouraging and that is true.

But also, generally speaking, the labourers are fewer in our time. The God is calling people, young, middle-aged, older, all generations, to serve Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

And that's a challenge for us today to respond and to step out of our comfort zone, to stand and be counted. So, just thinking about Nehemiah and where we've got to over the last couple of weeks, the first chapter, just reminding ourselves, Nehemiah, he's a thousand miles away from his people, the Jews.

He is a Jew and he is a cupbearer to the king. He's a high entrusted, he's in a high entrusted office like the Prime Minister and he's serving in the palace in Susa under King Parches and services and he received these unsettling news that the walls of the Jews had broken down, the gates had been burned with fire, there was rubble all around.

And so as a Jewish descendant of the exile, the longing of his heart is that it's still with that place that he once knew. And we saw in the first chapter that he responds by praying.

[5 : 09] I've been thinking about that over the last couple of weeks. He has a high view of God, he acknowledges God, a sovereign God, who has moved in times gone past, he can move again.

He also repents along with and being part of God's people, even though he's a thousand miles away. He repents of how they disobeyed God in times gone by, how they disobeyed God now. And he also reflects and he remembers what God has done and asks God to do it again and yields himself to God's plans and purposes.

And so then we begin at the beginning of, so then we begin at chapter two. At the start there, we read that it's the month of Nisan. And that's roughly April. So that tells us that from the point that Nehemiah has begun praying in chapter one to the beginning of chapter two, it's about four months that he's been praying, waiting on God.

And if we're to compare and contrast the characters of Ezra, he's more of a Bible teacher, Nehemiah, he's more of an extroverted, get up and go, just do it, sorry, that must be quite challenging having these four months to be still and to know that God is God and to go at his time.

But he wanted to go in God's time. He didn't want to miss that. He was determined to move to the point that God and asked him to. And it may have also been pretty strategic because the month of Nisan, there would be the festival time, so it came to be a bit more jolly.

[6 : 32] So he'd be praying up to this moment, but there's a timing there, the exact timing. And Hanson Taylor, the great apostle to China, who could have just said that God's work done in God's way shall never lack God's supply.

And that's what Nehemiah was looking out for. He's going into the king, he's asking the king to be part of God's plan, this pagan king. And Nehemiah's aware, very likely, that the work on Jerusalem's wall back in 445 BC in the book of Ezra, that it had been ordered to stop by this same king, in Artaxerxes.

But there was a clause in that order. There was a clause in what the king had ordered. Ezra 4:21 tells us this. This is what the words of the king. Now, issue an order to these men to stop work and rebuild the walls so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order.

Until I so order. So there's that get it clause and Nehemiah's going to use that strategically. He's going to go into the king's presence and knowing that God had worked in the past and trusting God to work again.

Nehemiah goes in and what we see here is that even though he knew this to be true, even though he had faith and confidence that God was, what do we read? That he goes in as usual, wine was brought to the king, takes the wine, gives it to the king.

[7:51] I haven't been sad in his presence before. He can't hide his emotions. He says, I'm sad and he's very much afraid. He's sad and he's very much afraid. And here we see the first great risk.

Festival time, it's the role of the cupbearer to go into the king to always be happy, to always be joyful. The countenance to always be the slain that, which is, you know, I'm the best of the king and I cannot let my guard down.

But the king notices, Nehemiah, my trusted cupbearer, has let his guard down. He's sad in his presence for the first time. And so he asks Nehemiah, why does your face look so sad when you're not ill?

You don't have a stomach bug, you don't have anything wrong with you. Why does your face look so sad? This can be nothing but sadness of heart. So Nehemiah, he cannot show his emotions, he's sad in his heart and on the other hand, he's very much afraid and it literally reads when we say that, a terrible fear came over me.

A terrible fear came over me. That's how Nehemiah felt. You know, when we often think about the role of the heart in the Bible or when we think about it in society, you can say, oh, you know, Michael, they've got such a good heart.

[9:09] You know, we know what they're talking about. You know, you watch Ross Kennedy yesterday and it looks too early and you say, well, 75 and 70, they lost heart. The steel men played better.

The mother will eat them. They lost heart. And we know what we're referring to, but in the Bible, when we take their emotions like anger, joy, envy, rage, anxiety, fear, sorrow, something else, what we see, the Bible thinks of the heart in kind of different ways to what we would in modern society's terms.

So, for example, when in the Old Testament, Aaron treats Moses and we read that he was glad in his heart. Paul wrote the Corinthians out of much anguish in heart.

And the Bible goes even further than this in Ephesians 4:32, we're found to parts of the human body. So when God urges us to have a tender heart, you say, have good bowels.

Have good bowels. So it's not talking about the heart, it's talking about the bowels. So when we say that we feel something in our gut feeling, it's actually what the Bible refers to as the heart.

[10:17] When we attach our thoughts to the head, the Bible quite often talks about the heart. So when we talk about the head, the Bible says, well, that's the heart. In the Bible, when we think the heart, the Bible's actually referring to the gut feeling that we have.

The Bible goes more as that gut feeling. So that's the sort of feeling that Nehemiah's going through. You might think about it along those lines. Jesus himself, you know, he's in the garden of Gethsemane and he would pray, Abba, Father, everything's possible for you.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowen your name. You know, thy kingdom come. But then, Jesus says, take this cup away from me. It's a little bit different to the Lord's Prayer.

He'd say, Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yeah, not what I will, but thy will be done. Your will be done. So we've got this very personal feeling of Jesus feeling that anguish and sorrow and heart and gut feeling that goes into the sweat drops of blood.

So Nehemiah, he's both sad and heart and his gut right down his belly. He's very much afraid as he goes to meet the king.

[11 : 23] It's not that he's having second thoughts about it all. It's that he's going in and he knows that he's prepared his heart. He's prepared in prayer. He's planned for this. He's planned for what to say to the king.

And now, here is the moment. Here is the time to move forward. Here's the time to get out of his comfort zone even more so and to stand before the king and stand in the gap before God's people.

And here, what he's doing is asking the king to force this complete reversal of both his attitude and his position, this rule that he's put forward, this clause that Nehemiah has noticed as we put it there in Ezra chapter 4.

And it's a great deal to ask this of a king. One scholar puts it this way, that asking Artaxerxes to reverse a very decision could bring about a charge of meddling at best or rebellion at worst.

Either charge would do Nehemiah. So, Nehemiah's been in. Maybe he's weighed down still by the sense of sin from his prayer. But we know that he's been praying day and night.

[12 : 27] He's perhaps also fearing for his life. He's thinking like Ezra, I've signed my own death warrant here. And then also, he might be questioning his purpose.

Not that he's having second thoughts about doing this, but questioning all these things. As we, you know, think about tonight in our prayer course, Unanswered Prayer, we're asking all sorts of questions about life, the ups and downs, not just the high points, not just the mountain tops, but actually the very real situations we often find ourselves in in life.

It's this question, has God really sent us? It's the great temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness. It's the great temptation that Adam and Eve succumbed to as they fell into the Garden of Eden. And so as we look through Nehemiah and we think of him as a man of great strength, a resilient man, a man of prayer, no doubt he was, but also we see that he's very human.

He was sat in his heart, he cares about the situation, he's very much afraid as he goes to meet the king. He's questioning why he was chosen for such a task, but he's also confident that he's called for such a time as this.

And it would be quite daunting, can't it, to be following God's call for our lives. Sometimes it doesn't make sense, sometimes it doesn't seem like it works out the way we might imagine.

[13 : 43] Sometimes we're called out and we look foolish and sometimes, perhaps more now than ever before, where we're stacked, the odds are stacked against us.

The odds are stacked against the church and has the church ever failed? No, because Jesus said he will build his church and the gates of hell, not even the gates of hell could prevail against it.

And so we look to Jesus in these days, simply, but we look to Jesus, all that he is, all that he's done, all that he's promised, and we look forward and we step forward and we stand in his presence.

And we can be reminded of the comfort found in his word, such as we find in Matthew 6, 34. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Today's worries are enough. Don't worry about what is six months down the line. Today's worries are enough. Nehemiah was sad, anxious, and troubled. Today, what about the future?

[14 : 45] What about all that people? What about all that would come that he was worried today? And that is no sign that he did not trust God. Rather, it is a recognition that God is with him, that he was very, very human.

And we as Christians trust in Jesus, what he's done on the cross. As we stand, being Christians who have been filled with the Holy Spirit, we can be reminded of courage, strength, and power that in our moments of sadness and weakness that God is with us, that his Spirit dwells in us.

And we have access to Jesus in ways that these old text and figures never had. But yet they trusted in the same God that we did. What a privilege it is to serve God.

So, to quote another film, Disney film, Frozen, we step out into the unknown, but not with an unknown God, but a God who knows, who knows us, who knows his plans, his purposes, in and through us, and who stands alongside us.

And the question for us is, will we trust in his promises? Will we trust who he says he is? Will we follow his purposes for us? Even if that makes us uncomfortable, even if that makes us go through times which are hard and sorrowful and brings us through the valley, that we know even the shepherd will lead us through those times.

[16 : 09] So Nehemiah, then, he's coming before the king with the sadness of heart, looking for the heart of the king to be moved. God would move the heart of the king. He'd done it before.

He had hardened hearts. He had moved hearts too. And as Nehemiah goes in, we read that it's a personal relationship that he seems to share with the king.

Why else would he be able to go straight in? And it seems to be in verse 6 that it tells us about this, that the king wouldn't be the queen sitting beside him. The queen sitting beside the king.

So that tells us that it might be a little more private meeting in the midst of the very public festival that's going on. And Nehemiah, what does he do? Very strategically, he says, it's a personal issue for him.

It's not a political one. He's not mentioning it. It's Jerusalem. It's this. Remember the baggage that comes with mentioning Jerusalem. The king might say, no chance. I'm not helping out. I'm not going to take heart. It's a peep of pain.

[17 : 07] But Nehemiah, what does he appeal to? He appeals to his father's graves. He says, may the king live forever. Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?

He appeals to his father's graves. His ancestors have been buried there. It's a personal blow to him. It's not a political issue. So part of this reasoning that Nehemiah would do this that the ancestral tomb's respect for them was universal in the times that Nehemiah was living in but also especially amongst loyalties.

So it's very strategic Nehemiah to pray and prepare and take internal notes and he goes in and he's waited his time for this right moment. And we see then in verse 4 how prayer would continue to form that integral part of who Nehemiah is.

that even standing before the king we might imagine there are conversations being he waits for the king to speak there's a gap there's a pause and we're back and forth what do we read in verse 4 and the king said to me what is it you want then I pray to the God of heaven it's that famous arrow prayer that we often refer to it appears to be a wordless sign it's as if he's just going that might have been not even saying God that's his prayer it's a wordless sign it's not a very Presbyterian prayer we're really worthy aren't we we're going to listen to what we speak in this morning what we've been learning in the prayer course again is that prayer takes different forms different vocabulary different methods but it's a matter of the heart and Nehemiah had prepared this but himself for this moment that he knew he needed to pray to the God of heaven and that he would then answer the king both prayer and planning come together and as one

Archbishop Francis Fenelon advises us make good use of chance moments one moment will suffice to place yourself in God's presence to love and worship him if you wait for convenient seasons you run the risk of waiting forever the less time one has the more carefully it should be husband Nehemiah's got a moment here pauses and prays and the king says to him what is it you want what is it you want you might be reminded of Jesus words what is it you want what do you want from me to Bartimaeus what do you want he says to his disciples when when they start following him John the Baptist calls out look there's the Lamb of God look I see him and people start following Jesus two of John the disciples and Jesus says what do you want when Jesus asks us a question it's never for his benefit he knows all things but his heart words is such that when he says this what is it you want to us

[20 : 27] Jesus is saying what is your heart's greatest desire what right then here what's your greatest desire what's the greatest ambition you would have for God's people and for your family and for your church and for your community what is your greatest desire John the Baptist had declared the whole the Lamb of God when we lift up Jesus name on high as the one who's the savior and king Jesus isn't pressing us for that immediate response but giving us the opportunity to spend time with him as he says to us come follow me come away with me and when these disciples found and followed Jesus these disciples of John said to those around him we found the very person of Moses and the prophets wrote about his name is Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth this Jesus who's irresistible the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world the one promised from the likes of Moses and the prophets and those who also pointed forward including

Nehemiah Jesus is the one true perfect leader Nehemiah is a good leader he's a good man a great man of God but he's flawed we'll see that in weeks to come but Jesus is the one true leader one true perfect leader who became humble and low for our sake is now exalted and on high for God's glory for the sake of God's people that we might be all that he calls us to be Nehemiah was the right man in the right place at the right time and being a Christian means going against the grain and today God might be calling some of us forward and saying what is it you want what's your desires what are the desires in your heart and if we were to stand before him in his presence today and answer that question what would we say would we say Lord I'm willing to stand and be kind as one of your own I'm willing to take a step forward Lord I might be afraid and maybe sad in heart having to leave some things behind but I'm willing to step forward

I'm willing to move at whatever pace you would have me move God promises to lead us and to guide us as we look to him and trust in him so then just to close just very briefly we've considered Nehemiah's fears his very real concerns as well as his preparation and prayer before the king and so he not only has prepared his requests but also his responses so we read there in verse 5 again if it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight and let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it so again reference to the ancestors just getting that very clear in there Nehemiah the king asks him how long is the journey going to take and the king has to send Nehemiah a time was set and being this practical guy Nehemiah he gains the king's approval and then he moves on to those practical needs in verse 7 to 8 alongside a leave of absence which you would require from leaving the

Susa part of the king the space he would need a guarantee of safe passage he would need supplies for the building and he would need housing for himself and if we're to take these things together we might notice a contrast between Ezra and Nehemiah as men of God you might notice two different spiritualities for on the one hand Ezra he was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen he was ashamed to ask for this but Nehemiah requested an armed guard for a safe passage who's more trusting than Nehemiah doesn't Ezra doesn't request an armed guard Nehemiah does I think by now we gather that it would be wrong to suggest that one is more trusting than the other but it's two different types of people two different types of spirituality two different men of God Ezra was a teacher of the law the lesson of his own safe passage bore witness in itself to God's divine protection it would be for us saying in our day when Billy Graham went to preach at one of his crusades it would be right with it that would be Billy Graham but Ezra that would be his way of showing by having no protection by saying this is God he's with me

Nehemiah on the other hand he probably had no choice in the matter because he worked for the king he was an insider and he was a Jew at the same time so if something was to happen to him on the journey it would be an attack on the king himself and so arriving in style mattered in the case of Nehemiah it authenticated him for the purpose of revising the king's earlier policy but for both Ezra and Nehemiah in their different situations the king had granted them everything they asked with the hand of the lord their god was on them that's the important thing the hand of the lord their god was on them both everything had come about due to god's arranging of it through the planning the preparation the prayer and now they proceed with the request the gracious hand of my god was on me the king granted my request Nehemiah recognised this that this pagan king was a mere channel to god's blessing that he would put out upon his people and it pleased the lord to work in such a way because god can use whoever he wants he can use whatever means he chooses he is the lord so let me just finish with this story about a preacher John Stodd John Stodd pushed the great ministry throughout the 20th century and in 1958 he went to Australia went for six days and he was very busy he was speaking at lunch hours to 700-800 students every day he had lots of personal interviews in the afternoons he had speaking engagements in the evening and the final meeting was in one of the great halls of one of the universities in Australia a thousand students crammed in that John Stodd had a bug completely lost his voice and throughout the day he had been uncertain he had been very anxious whether to just phone the mission community and say look

[27 : 01] I can't preach and sorry but throughout the course of the day he decided I'm not going to do that and half an hour before the meeting was to start some students were around him he asked them to read 2nd 12 the thorn in the flesh chapter he asked them to gather them to pray that god would heal them because god wasn't healed he went on to preach I think what an amazing testimony to god that god would heal them just as he was gone he would go to speak to a thousand students but god didn't do that in fact he said that he stood before them and he croaked the gospel that's what he said he croaked the gospel in a rather monotone voice he couldn't project his personality the gifted orator that he was couldn't use any of his clever turn of phrases he just croaked despite this and maybe perhaps due to this he said there was a wonderful stillness a real sense of god's presence as a thousand students were facing all sorts of issues of life and he was preaching the gospel to them and at the end of his message he gave us some more straightforward instruction on how to come to christ and he said there was this immediate surge of bodies that came to the front and he said that every time he went back to australia and the years that followed individuals would come up to him and say do you remember that night when the great hall became a follower of jesus that night do you remember what god did god did that night that was a demonstration of the power of god at work the good hand of his god was upon him that evening upon john stodd he used his weakness to change lives and god is looking for the very best of us christian he is looking for the very well best behaved and for those who appear to have it all together or even who don't have fun to have it all together god is simply looking for those of us who are willing to follow him who are willing in their weakness to make you look foolish at time but for the sake of jesus say i'll do that i'll go there i'll go with that person and more than anything as we read in verse 8 the good hand of his god was upon him we need the action the enmity of god the blessing of god upon all that we do because if our vision of what church could be what church is meant to be doesn't scare us it may be we need to ask if we're playing church and ask god to give us an increase of faith an increase of expectancy for him to move an increase of love from him and for him and friendship with him because one day we'll all stand before the king the king of kings we'll all be called to give an account before him and we must know and first you'll recognize for ourselves that he loves us he wants to be in a relationship with us and that his strength has made perfect made complete through our weakness for those of us who believe in

Jesus we stand before god one day and be a good day and that you have a faithful son but until we go to see him until we meet Jesus face to face let's pray for his kingdom to come his will to be done in regard as it is in heaven pray for that move of the spirit in this town this region this nation again I believe that a key part of the vision of our church going forward of this church is that we are indeed to be a church for our whole community that might mean for us here that the respectability of our morning services might come under threat if we're to be willing to let people come in from all sorts of different lab friends the respectability of the service that I'm from under threat people who have no connection to church but if we're willing to let that happen and to allow God to move in a serious way in a wonderful way in a marvellous way may we continue to be open to him because the ain't so nothing so wonderful and amazing is knowing

Jesus for ourselves may we know him in our life both in our strength and our weaknesses as we trust in him for his purposes and his promises for our higher tomorrow Amen