

The Adventure of Faith

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[0 : 00] the heroes of faith. We're going to read the whole chapter, it's our longest chapter, but we read all of it to get the full context of what we're going to look at in a minute. So let's read from the start of chapter two. In the month of Nisan, the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I, this is Nehemiah, took up the wine and gave it to the king.

I had not been sad in his presence, and the king said to me, why is your face sad seeing you're 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. 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. And I said to the king, if it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province beyond the river, beyond the river Euphrates, so that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah. And I'll enter 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 me 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 son Ballet the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite, 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 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 in 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. 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.

I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who are to do the work. Then I said to them, you see the trouble we're in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned, come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that would mean 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.

[3 : 42] And they said, let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when St. Ballet the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite servant, and Gisham the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, what is this thing that you're doing? Are you rebelling against the king? And 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.

May God add his blessing to that reading from his holy word. We all like adventure stories. We all like these stories that particularly are based in fact, even as Andy's been giving us in the children's address, the true story of Jim Elliot.

But we like adventure stories that have gripping plots, have tense encounters, and a successful outcome for the heroes that are the hero of the story.

Of course, in the Bible, the Bible is full of adventure stories. The adventure of Joseph from being rejected by his brothers, from being imprisoned falsely, and then becoming the second most important person in Egypt.

We all like the adventure stories of the Bible, the adventures of the Israelites. The Israelites who left the oppression of Egypt for 40 years, traveled through the wilderness, and then entering the promised land and the adventure of the conquest of the promised land under Joshua.

[5 : 31] And throughout the Bible, the Old Testament, we see so many individuals and their adventures of faith. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Samson, Gideon, David, Samuel, prophets, Elijah, Elisha.

These individuals, these characters whom God blessed, whom God used in his service, in their adventure of serving the one true God. And these, as we read in Hebrews, these great clouds of witnesses, these witnesses who live by faith in the promise of God, looking forward to the promised Christ.

And of course, when we think of the Lord Jesus Christ, we see his adventure. The adventure, the most adventurous adventure of all, if you like.

The adventure of Advent. The adventure of his perfect obedience unto the law, his perfect obedience unto God. His adventure in his living.

That perfect obedience, even in the face of the challenges that Jesus faced by those who despised him. And of course, ultimately, the adventure of the giving of his life on the cross.

[6 : 52] That adventure of service for the sake of the gospel for all to come to Christ by faith. And enter into your adventure of the gospel of salvation of the Lord Jesus.

And in the case of Nehemiah, his adventure of faith in the one true God, his adventure, as we've seen, as we've read, leads him to Jerusalem. It leads him to seek to rebuild the walls.

It's a gripping adventure. Because in that adventure, we learn about God. We learn about how God directs the lives of his people to serve him, even in the face of so many obstacles that his people face.

Obstacles that others put in the way of the Lord's people to try and divert the Lord's work. But even as we see in the case of Nehemiah, as we'll see, he triumphs in the Lord.

He knows that success in the Lord because his faith in the one true God is sure. His dependence in God is certain. And as we'll see in that adventure, we'll seek to, in application for our own adventures of faith, as we seek to live for God, as we seek to do his will, even in the world where God has placed us.

[8 : 17] What are lessons for us all in the great adventure of Nehemiah there in Jerusalem? But what do we see or what do we read? First of all, in verses 9 to 10, we read there of resistance.

Because whenever, whenever the Lord's work is happening, whenever the good news is proclaimed, there's going to be opposition. So we read there in verse 10, two names who we're going to see again and again, two names that, as it were, cast a shadow over so much of the story. These individuals, Sanballat and Tobiah. These two individuals were going to try every means possible to thwart Nehemiah in his work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Because it's not essentially the walls that these two individuals are opposed to. It's the one true God, the God of Nehemiah, the God of his people.

And so when these individuals hear news that somebody's come all the way from Susa in the Persian Empire, this individual who's come to repair the walls, we're told, they're greatly displeased, greatly disturbed.

[9 : 33] Their intention is to thwart the purposes of God. They don't want to see God honoured and glorified. I mean, these were outsiders.

These were people who were outside of the true flock of God. This man, Sanballat, he's from Moab. And this man, Tobiah, he's from Ammon. And the Moabites and the Ammonites, they were enemies of God, enemies of God's people.

They were a people whom God had forbidden to come into the covenant community of the Lord's people. These were peoples who had no love for the one true God.

And so when we see here of these true individuals from these particular nations, when they hear that someone's approaching who wants to do good for the people of God, they're angry.

They're angry. And in fact, the original, the wording that's used suggests evil. There's evil behind the response of opposition to the work of the Lord.

[10:38] Here's the Lord's man coming to restore Jerusalem, to revive the work of God in the city. Here's a man who's come to, as it were, reverse the shame of the city of God being a ruin.

And the enemies of God aren't happy about this. And you know, that reaction to the work of the Lord inevitably, inevitably produces a reaction from the enemies of the gospel.

The devils are disturbed, the devils displeased when the cause of the gospel is promoted. And things are done in the name of Jesus that are resisted and opposed.

Whether it's atheists in our education system who seek to remove the name of the Lord Jesus from our classrooms, whether it's those in the media, our government, who seek to silence the influence of the church on our land, we have modern day Sunballots and Tobias who seek to eliminate the name of the Lord Jesus, who seek to eliminate the influence of God's people in the world.

We have even today, the Sunballots and Tobias, the enemies of the true gospel. And even those whom, as one person sang many years ago, when he said, I see, the enemy I see wears a cloak of decency.

[12:04] And we confess before God that there is that particular mindset, even in our own land, even in our own nation today. And for the Lord's people, for you, who make that stand for truth, who make that stand for the gospel, expect opposition.

It's inevitable. When I used to teach history many, many years ago, we were taught in history nothing is inevitable in the course of history. Well, no, there is inevitability.

When the Lord's people proclaim the name of the Lord Jesus, it is inevitable that there'll be opposition from those who despise that name. And if you follow Jesus, if you follow him, then you will face those fierce wolves who'll seek to tear you apart for your faith.

Even wolves in sheep's clothing who might appear inoffensive and yet wear that cloak of decency. Remember, as Jesus spoke, of the ravenous wolves who come in sheep's clothing and yet whose intention is to devour the Lord's people.

Remember this, that the gracious hand of the Lord's upon you and you're engaged in that work and witness for the Lord. We don't give up. We don't despair. Even when you hear of particular opposition to the work of the Lord, even when you yourself face that opposition, you don't despair.

[13:39] Because remember that you go where God leads you in his strength and for his glory. Just as Nehemiah was going to Jerusalem in the strength of God and for the glory of God.

And he persevered in that work, the work that God had given him to do. And the God who is with Nehemiah is the same God who's with you.

He's the same God who strengthened Nehemiah. He's the same God who promises and does strengthen you. The same God who wouldn't let the enemies of Nehemiah triumph over him.

He's the same God who will not allow the enemies of his people to be victorious over you. When you serve the Lord faithfully in the work that he's given you to do.

And we see Nehemiah in that triumph when we see him exercise that God-given wisdom that God has given him to do in the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem.

[14:40] That's what we see next in verses 11 to 12. We see rest. Rest. I mean, Nehemiah has been on a long journey. He's left some 800 miles away from Jerusalem from the palace of Susa in modern-day Iran.

So, as it were, think, know your geography, think of modern-day Iran and going down to Israel.

There's an 800-mile journey and it's not on dual carriageway. It's on rough track on horseback with particular difficulties in the way.

and he's travelled back the 800 miles. And, of course, in that journey, obviously, he's been thinking, he's been contemplating how he's going to lead in the particular work of the restoration of the walls in Jerusalem.

But when he arrives in Jerusalem, he must have been absolutely shocked. I mean, this is a city he's never been to before. This is the city of his ancestors. And, yes, what does he see?

He sees that the walls are broken down. The gates have been destroyed. It's a picture of overwhelming destruction. These last few days, we've been, or some of us anyway, have been very much mindful of D-Day, the beginning, as it were, of the end of the domination of Nazi Germany in Europe in the Second World War.

[16:06] And in D-Day, or certainly in the days after D-Day, so much of the cities and many of the cities in Normandy were destroyed by enemy, by Allied forces seeking to destroy the enemy who were hiding in these cities.

Cities like Cannes utterly destroyed in 1944. I think of the cities in Germany destroyed in the bombings, Allied bombings in 1944 and 45.

I think it was 1991, I was in Dresden and I remember the shock I saw of a once beautiful church, a church called the Frauenkirche, the Lutheran church that had been utterly destroyed and bombed. And I saw just a heap of rubble and I was shocked and I was even more shocked when I learned later that one of my relatives had actually been part of that bombing that destroyed that beautiful church in a beautiful city.

Some years ago I returned to Dresden and the church is restored, it's beautiful both inside and outside. Well, Nehemiah, he certainly was shocked when he saw the city that, well, in many ways his relatives had destroyed.

[17:22] His relatives had destroyed by their disobedience to God. what looked at an overwhelming task before him. Well, he exercised wisdom as to how to deal with that situation.

He exercised wisdom, he exercised patience, he exercised trust in God, trust that God would enable him to do the work that God had placed in his heart to achieve.

That's what we read there in verses 11 to 12 and really reading for our encouragement in the work that God has given each one of us to do. Nehemiah had a massive task ahead of him.

It was going to take months to rebuild the city walls, but he wasn't going to do it immediately. He wasn't going to begin a task that certainly in his physical condition he wasn't ready for.

He would have been utterly exhausted in that three to four month journey from Iran. And so you find there in verse 11 that he takes a three day rest in Jerusalem.

[18:30] And it was no luxury sightseeing tour that he engages in. His physical needs had to be taken care of. The need of body and mind to recuperate and to prepare for the work ahead.

And there's a principle, of course, a biblical principle that's rooted in scripture, the necessity of rest. God rested on the seventh day of creation.

Likewise, we are to rest on the Lord's day and cease from all unnecessary work. And the Sabbath principle is not an ancient, sort of cultural outdated landmark that has no relevance.

It's absolutely relevant as a present recognition of our need to honor God and how we follow him in our pattern of living. Of course, there are times when we really do have to recuperate physically, particularly when our bodies and minds are tired.

Jesus himself, of course, Jesus recognized that need both for himself and his human nature and for his disciples. And if we're to be fit servants for the Lord, then we can't allow physical tiredness even to rob us of, Rob, do you have any sort of clear thinking and energetic activity in the service of the Lord?

[19:52] Too often, I think we were sort of crazy busy even in the work of the Lord. God's created us to have bodies to work, minds to work for him, but also the need even to rest, at times of rest for the work that he's given us to do.

And so we are to exercise wisdom even as to how we use these times of rest in order to energize us for the work of the Lord.

But we see here in the passage, Nehemiah exercised that wisdom and the work that God had given him to do. We read further in the passage that after his three-day rest, even then he didn't jump immediately into the work.

What does he do? He assesses the situation. He sees the devastation all around and he goes into the city at nighttime. He's just had a few men with him. He's not going to attract attention at this point.

He keeps his own counsel as to what he's going to do. God's continually speaking to his heart as he sees the way forward in restoring the city.

[21:01] And of course there's a time to keep silent as we see there. Of course there's a time to speak. That time for silence was uppermost in Nehemiah's mind at that time.

He's got to assess what's going to be done in the city. But then times of silence give way to time for speaking. That's what we see further in the passage where we see the resolve of Nehemiah.

And you see Nehemiah in his leadership. It's clear he's speaking to all the prominent people in Jerusalem as well as those who are going to do the actual building work. For a long time, I mean, nothing for months even, nothing had been done to restore the security of the city.

But now a leader's come from outside the immediate community. And he's going to restore not just the physical walls, but he's come to restore the name of God before a concerned people and indeed

before a watching enemy.

And there are a number of things then to observe for our own application. The first thing is this. Nehemiah had a firm resolve to do the Lord's work.

[22 : 15] Nehemiah saw the need and he resolved to alleviate the troubles there in Jerusalem. And you know, the spiritual climate of our own nation, of our own land, when there's so much spiritual compromise, when there's so much spiritual decline, when there's so much false religion around, when there's so much hostility to the gospel, it's for you who are the Lord's people to have that resolve to work for the Lord, yes, with all your might, with all the wisdom that God gives you, to further the work of the kingdom where God has placed you.

The need is great. And ask yourself, is it your resolve, is it the resolve of your heart to address the need that we see all around us in our land?

Nehemiah had that resolve, and that resolve, as we see in the chapters, chapters 1, chapter 2, that resolve that was grounded in prayer, the resolve that was guided by God, that resolve to do the Lord's work that was carried out by the one, the person whose heart was right with God.

Nehemiah's object in all this was itself glory, it was the glory of God. You see in verse 17, come with us, build the walls of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision, that we may no longer suffer disgrace, or even as the old translations put it, that we may no longer suffer reproach.

It wasn't simply to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem that Nehemiah's heart was burdened for the city, and it wasn't simply to keep the citizens safe from outside attack.

[24 : 02] That wasn't the reason why you travelled 800 miles to a city he'd never been to before. It was the crucial aspect to glorify God, to give God the glory, to honour and uphold the name of God, at the root of all his desire.

That's why he came all that distance to Jerusalem. I mean, the derision, the disgrace of broken down walls, that had created the impression in the minds of the pagan enemies around that the God of Israel somehow had abandoned his people.

And the brokenness of the city to them indicated a broken relationship with God. And the implication being that the God of Israel no longer cared for his people.

The ruins that indicated a ruined relationship with God. And so the pagan neighbours, like Tobiah, like Sunballat, throwing scorn on the people of Jerusalem.

It's the kind of attitude that we see even in our modern times when, for example, when church buildings are neglected, when the exteriors of religion can often be seen to indicate what's interior.

[25 : 24] I remember when we lived in Skye in a certain church building that for decades had been so well kept and beautiful in its exterior. And it certainly did portray a vibrant faith in that small community.

But that building became derelict through neglect. And the impression then that even that outside of the building, that impression that was given was that the religion of the people who attended that church, that religion itself, was derelict and redundant.

Of course, we can't simply say that a beautiful building equals a true faith. Nevertheless, even how we present ourselves before a watching world, that's important.

But of course, it's not just the physical decay of church buildings that convey a picture of a derelict faith in the eyes of the world. It's the decay of true religion in our land.

I mean, the mention in verse 17 of suffering derision, suffering disgrace, that's a direct reference to the fact that the people of God themselves, that people had brought upon themselves by their disobedience, by their compromise, they brought upon themselves the breaking of that covenant relationship with God that incurred God's judgment upon them.

[26 : 50] And so we do have to address the spiritual decay even within our own hearts and even in the church in our own land. The divisions, the disunity within the body of Christ that is, that is grace to the name of God.

And there should be unity, when there should be true fellowship in the Lord, and there's not. And that brings about derision from those who look on. Even when there's compromise, even with other faiths, even when there's self-righteousness, even within our own hearts, even when we seek to take the speck of dust out of a brother's eye and don't see that beam within our own eye, very quickly we become a focus of derision from a world that so very quickly and easily detects hypocrisy in all who profess one thing and do another, when we preach and don't practice what we preach, when we claim faith in the Lord Jesus and yet deny his word.

So it's for the Lord's people to seek that wisdom and strength of God to enable the rebuilding, even of the walls of God's cause and God's church, the walls to be rebuilt, to build up the Lord's work even in building his church and being that band of brothers who delight to do the will of God and delight to do that with fellow believers and not seeking derision from outside, but to point those who do mock, point these, those who mock the cause of the Lord, to point them to the one true God, to point them, yes, to the Lord Jesus and to be his witnesses through a sincerity of truth, a sincerity of true living even before the world who's watching on and to have that resolve to do the work of God and acknowledge that it's God's work for his glory that you do what you do in his name.

And that's exactly what we see in Nehemiah, where we see him acknowledging God in the work that God had given them to do. Let's read again verse 18, and I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also 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 wasn't one of these people who hid his light under a bushel, under a basket.

[29 : 38] Nehemiah acknowledged God in all his ways. As we've already seen him, when he tells us of his praying to the God of heaven, and he tells the people of Jerusalem that God's hand was upon him to direct him to the work to be done in the city.

And as we see there, as he tells these malicious haters of God, he tells them that God of heaven, will make us prosper. He says, we his servants, will arise and build.

Nehemiah, you see here, he's bold, he's courageous, because there he is speaking of God as the one true God. As Andy was telling us of Jim Elliot, he's not ashamed to testify to the living and true God.

He's not ashamed to proclaim the name of God. Nehemiah wasn't ashamed to testify of the one true God. And so the lesson for us is obvious.

Before a watching world, don't be the person who so blends in with the world that you're absolutely indistinguishable from the world outside of Christ.

[30 : 54] Make your stand for Christ and stand out for Christ. May it be that your testimony is that I'm not ashamed to own my Lord and to defend his cause.

Even when you're faced with opposition to your faith, don't be ashamed to make that stand for the Savior. As we see there with Nehemiah, we see him and his restraint as we read there in 19 to 20 where the taunts of San Ballad and Tobiah and then a third individual comes and they see him and they taunt, not just taunt, Nehemiah, but even accuse him of treason, of rebelling against the king. And notice Nehemiah's reaction. Verse 20, then I reply 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.

Nehemiah had a great work to do for the Lord and he knows that with God's help, he'll succeed.

Nehemiah is placed as trust in God and the same characters that we read at the start of the passage, we read the same characters are there plus another and they're mocking Nehemiah, they're jeering, they're despising him, as we said, they're accusing him of treason and Nehemiah is obviously being goaded he's obviously been irritated, there's been verbal violence directed against him, false accusations made against him, how does he respond?

Is he going to return violence with violence? Is he going to return hatred with hatred? Absolutely not. He exercises restraint, he's showing his unashamed allegiance to the God of victory.

[32 : 55] Nehemiah's adventure of faith isn't going to be derailed by those who have no part in the community of God. As we've said, as it were, turn full circle, in your adventure of faith, you're going to come up against opposition, against slander, jeering, despising, for you're following the Lord Jesus.

As you follow Jesus, you respond as he responded, even when he was jeered and mocked and despised.

Listen to the words of 1 Peter 2.23, when Peter speaks of Jesus. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats.

Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. Christ's adventure of faith and his entrusting himself to his father, even as he suffered the assaults of sinful man.

Christ's adventure of faith, you might say, is that supreme example for you and for me in our adventure of faith. As we go out in strength of God the Lord, seek in your perseverance.

[34 : 15] Yes, to persevere in faith. and not to return hatred with hatred, even when you suffer for that faith. Look to the Lord Jesus.

Look to him as the gracious hand of God rests upon you in your service. Be strong. Be strong in him. I know that victory in Christ alone.

Amen. May God add his blessing to all that we've been considering this morning. Let's join together and pray. Let us pray. Lord, have mercy upon us, we who are sinners, we who deserve nothing of your grace, of your strength, of your enabling.

Teach us, Lord, in the work you've given us to do. Teach us to look to you and to know that truly our strength is in you and in you alone. Hear us, Lord, as we continue before you now in worship and praise.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Now we'll see if we can get the second psalm up and running.

[35 : 23] It's psalm 62, verses 5 to 12. Find rest, my soul, in God alone. In him my hope is ever sure, my safety, fortress, sheltering rock.

In him alone I am secure. Psalm 62, 5 to 12, to God's praise. I rest my soul in God alone.

In him my hope is ever sure, my safety, fortress, sheltering brought.

In him alone I am secure. My honor and salvation rest on God, my love and mighty port.

O people, trust in him always. To him adore pour out your heart.

[36 : 53] The Lord, man, is not a breath, earth. The high-born man is but alive.

Within a balance, side by side, they come to nothing but a sigh.

do not do not see out of wealth by force, or triumphant in ill-rotten bin, and even though your roots increase, set not your heart on what is thin.

My God has spoken, I have heard that you are strong and loving, Lord, each one according to his ease, you will assure and be reward.

Let's close with a benediction. And now may grace, mercy, and peace from God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rest upon and remain with you, both now and forevermore.

[38 : 52] Amen.