

Humility & Boldness

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[0 : 00] Turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah. Nehemiah chapter 1, which is page 370 in your pew Bibles.

This summer we are doing a series in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which are really two parts of one story. It seems likely that they were originally sort of one book with two parts, as they still are in the Hebrew Bible.

They're separated because they focus respectively on Ezra and then on Nehemiah. Nehemiah is...a lot of the book of Nehemiah seems to be derived from his memoirs that were then recorded either by Nehemiah himself or by someone else who compiled them together.

But let me begin by reading Nehemiah chapter 1. I'm just going to read the first three verses to open us, but we'll be looking at the first two chapters this morning.

So, Nehemiah chapter 1, beginning at verse 1. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah. Now, it happened in the month of Kislev in the 20th year, as I was in Susa, the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

[1 : 28] And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.

Let's pray together. Lord, as we look into Your Word this morning, we pray for Your Spirit to be among us. Fill me as I teach from Your Word. Fill us all with Your Spirit as we listen and take this to heart. We pray that You would equip us, that You would draw us near to You, that You would shape us into the people You are calling us to be. In Jesus' name, amen.

So, the book of Nehemiah begins with bad news. Bad news from Jerusalem, bad news from the exiles who had returned home to the province of Judah. Verse 3, the remnant is in great trouble and shame.

The walls broken down, the gates are destroyed by fire. In other words, the people of God were a small, vulnerable minority. They were facing persistent troubles, and they had been repeatedly humiliated by their opponents. Now, in many times and places, that's what it feels like to be a Christian.

In Gaza, a city of two million people, there's one Protestant church, a Gaza Baptist church. About 15 years ago, one of the pastors of that church was assassinated. Another pastor later fled for his own family's safety. Today, the church has about 50 to 60 people on a good Sunday who face the same struggles as everyone else in Gaza. War, unemployment, poverty, and powerlessness.

[3 : 28] Or, in Central Asia, Christian pastors have been jailed simply for possessing Christian books that are not approved by the government, or for teaching any form of religion to children under 18.

And many of those who aren't in jail feel tired, isolated, and intimidated. In China, many churches have transitioned to meeting in small groups on Sunday mornings rather than meeting together as congregations because of a recent series of threats and police raids in certain parts.

Now, you might ask, how do we know about these faraway places? Well, as a church, we have several ministry partners throughout the world who we support financially and in prayer. And one of the blessings of having these partnerships is that we hear about the state of the church throughout the world from people who are experiencing it firsthand. If you want to get these updates and you contact the office and ask to be added to the prayer list, you'll usually receive a prayer email most Tuesdays with whatever our ministry partners have sent to us that we can be remembering before God in prayer.

Now, hearing about the troubles that other Christians are experiencing in different parts of the world can be a good thing for many reasons. For one thing, it can help put our own troubles in perspective. Sometimes I think it can sort of jerk us out of our slide into self-pity and lame excuses.

At the same time, though, being part of the Christian church here in New England can also feel like being part of something that is small, vulnerable, troubled, or even discredited.

[5 : 07] Now, the opposition here is not as explicitly hostile as in many other parts of the world, but still, there's plenty of church buildings in town that are empty or almost empty or in the process of being converted to apartments, right? There's a church building four blocks north on State Street, there's another one over in Worcester Square that used to be a church, they're now condos. If you walk across a college campus on a Sunday morning, it's about as quiet as it ever gets.

And so, and many people see Christianity as a relic of a bygone era that is perhaps rightly going out of fashion. Further, churches in New England, I have to say, are often troubled by conflicts.

I remember a conversation I had a few years ago with a few pastors who had been in New Haven for two or three decades, and they were remembering several attempts over the years at churches working together or praying together or building pastoral friendships or doing ministry together that had begun with excitement and that had ended or petered out in frustration.

In my experience, there are a significant number of Christians in New England, including some former church leaders who have simply given up going to church altogether, disillusioned by multiple bad experiences in dysfunctional churches. Other people visit occasionally but have no intention of committing and settling and joining. You see, sometimes a church in New England feels like a remnant of what it once was, a small minority in an increasingly secular society in great trouble and shame, just like the returned exiles in Jerusalem. Now, how do we respond when the church is in a bad condition, whether close by or far away? And this morning's passage shows us a way forward as we look at Nehemiah's response to the bad condition of Jerusalem. And we'll see that the way forward involves two things.

It involves humble prayer and confident action. But before we dive in, I want to briefly introduce you to Nehemiah and put Nehemiah in his historical context. If you look in the bulletin, in the center page of the bulletin, I've included a timeline. It was in the bulletin a few weeks ago, but I've put it in there with a few additional notes relevant to Nehemiah. So, you can see the progression of events in Ezra and Nehemiah, which as we've said are two parts of the same story. Now, the book of Ezra began with the decree of King Cyrus in 538 B.C. that the people of Israel could return to the land, return from their exile, and rebuild the temple. And that's the emphasis of the first six chapters of Ezra, restoring the worship of God and rebuilding the temple. The rest of the book of Ezra focused on rebuilding the community, in particular under the Word of God. Ezra was sent about 80 years after the first group of returned exiles. Ezra came to teach God's Word. And as they heard God's

[8 : 31] Word, the people realized some things need to change. Our lives need to be reshaped according to God's Word. And they began to order their lives differently. Now, Nehemiah continues the same story.

Nehemiah picks up 13 years after the end of Ezra, 445 B.C. And Nehemiah will lead the people to carry out the work of God, namely rebuilding the city and its walls. So, worship, Word, and work. That's the big picture of Ezra and Nehemiah that we're looking at this summer. We've seen the first two phases, and we're going into the third. But this is how God is rebuilding His people, reestablishing their worship, teaching them, and shaping them by His Word, and now calling them into the work that He has for them. Now, who was Nehemiah, you might ask? Nehemiah was a Jew, descended of Jewish descent, but he was living in Persia, living in Susa, which was the capital of the Persian Empire, located in modern-day western Iran. Now, Susa was an impressive city. We have archaeological remnants of the palace that King Darius built in Susa, and it was 350 feet long, 350 feet wide. It was square, and they had probably 70-foot-tall stone columns. That's taller than this building. It was a very impressive palace that was built in Susa. And Nehemiah was most likely born and raised there, and he had sort of risen in the ranks of the Persian king's court. Verse 11 of chapter 1 tells us he was one of the cupbearers to the king. Now, the official role of a cupbearer was to taste the king's food and drink in order to verify that it hadn't been poisoned. But more broadly, cupbearers were chosen because they were seen as unquestionably loyal and trustworthy servants of the king. They were usually young men who had access to and often a little bit of influence with the king.

So, that's the role that Nehemiah is in. But what we'll see here is that Nehemiah wasn't just concerned about his own individual career advancement. He wasn't just concerned about maintaining a comfortable life in Persia. Nehemiah was concerned about the well-being of God's people. Hanani, who was either Nehemiah's biological brother or simply one of his relatives or kinsmen, Hanani shows up, and Nehemiah asks him, how's everyone doing back in Jerusalem? Tell me the news. Even though he was a thousand miles away, Nehemiah cared. Nehemiah cared about the well-being of God's people who were a long geographical distance away. And as we'll see, he was willing to move from the royal splendor of Susa to the ruined rubble of Jerusalem. Now, most likely, this bad news that Nehemiah heard wasn't just a rehashing of what Nebuchadnezzar had done. That would have been almost 150 years ago when he first carried off the people of Israel into exile. Most likely, it was bad news about a more recent setback.

In Ezra chapter 4, Ezra chapter 4 includes one incident that sort of fast-forwards to the time of King Artaxerxes and time of the book... sort of between... probably between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. And it tells us that some Jews had begun rebuilding the city of Jerusalem in the days of Artaxerxes. But then some local Persian government officials fired off a complaint to the emperor. Perhaps they were concerned there had been some revolts in the Persian empire, and they thought, these people are rebuilding the city. This is not good. We're going to write a letter to the king and get them to stop. And guess what Artaxerxes does? He sends a stop-work order until further notice. Ezra chapter 4 verse 23 says that the Persian provincial officials then went to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease. They shut it down.

That's probably the bad news that Nehemiah heard about here at the beginning of chapter 1. The people are in great trouble and shame, and the city is the complete shambles.

[13 : 22] So, Nehemiah hears this news, and he responds in two ways. And we're going to look at these two themes about how Nehemiah responds and how we can respond when the church is in a bad state.

So, first, in the rest of chapter 1, we're going to see that Nehemiah responds with humble prayer, and then in chapter 2, we'll see he responds with confident action. So, let's go and read the rest of chapter 1, Nehemiah's first response. Starting at verse 4, as soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

And I said, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, statutes, and rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there. They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name and give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now I was cupbearer to the king. So, Nehemiah doesn't just stop and pray for a minute or two. He sits down and weeps for days, and he fasts and prays for months. Chapter 1, verse 1 begins in the month of Kislev, that was December, and chapter 2, verse 1 begins in the month of Nisan, which is April. So, that means there's four months that Nehemiah is fasting and praying. It says continually. He was praying day and night.

Now, that doesn't mean that he ate no food at all during the whole time. That's not quite humanly possible, but perhaps he fasted like Daniel, refraining from wine and meat and delicacies.

[15 : 58] Regardless of the details, Nehemiah spent extended time seeking God in prayer while refraining in some form or other from some of the pleasures that he would normally enjoy. Now, why did Nehemiah do this?

Why did he mourn and fast? Now, John Piper describes Christian fasting as a kind of hunger or homesickness for God. He says half of Christian fasting is that our physical appetite is lost because our homesickness for God is so intense. In other words, we want God so much that earthly delights fade into the background. He says the other half is that our homesickness for God is threatened because our physical appetites are so intense. He says, so we resist the dominance of our physical appetites in order to cultivate our spiritual appetite for God. If you want to learn more about fasting, John Piper's book, *A Hunger for God* is a good place to start. It's on the bookstall downstairs.

But Nehemiah wasn't just fasting for his own spiritual benefit or to draw closer to God personally. He was fasting in solidarity with the troubled and despised people of God.

Nehemiah realized that his brothers and sisters back in Jerusalem were suffering greatly. And so, he didn't just carry on with his own life as usual. He mourned with them. He sought God earnestly on their behalf. And that's an appropriate response when brothers and sisters in Christ are broken down, facing great trouble, or ensnared by sin that brings dishonor on the name of Christ.

Make their trouble and temptation your own by fasting and praying for them, by crying out to God with them, or even praying for them when they're not crying out to God themselves.

[17 : 51] Now, one mother fasted and prayed every Monday for eight years, crying out to God for her wayward son. Romans 12, 15 says, rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. That's what Nehemiah did here. And this wasn't just an expression, this wasn't primarily an expression of Nehemiah's personality.

If Nehemiah took a personality test today, he would not have been labeled as a melancholy contemplative. We'll see throughout the book, he was not Eeyore. He was a man of action. He was the get things done guy. He was an able administrator. But for Nehemiah, prayer was not his last resort after all human attempts had failed. Prayer was his first resort before any human attempts were made.

Now, maybe Nehemiah prayed because he wasn't initially sure what his plan of action should be. And perhaps his plan of action became gradually clearer over the course of these four months.

Or maybe Nehemiah had a sense of what he needed to do from the start, but he realized how high the stakes were. And so, before jumping in action, he committed his plans to God in prayer. Either way, it's a good example whether we have a clear sense of what we need to do and simply need to ask for God's help and empowerment and strengthening to do it, or whether we really don't know what to do and we need to ask for wisdom and guidance and clarity, we can turn to God in prayer.

Now, let's look at the content of Nehemiah's prayer, which I think in many ways can be a model for our own prayers. There's sort of four parts to Nehemiah's prayer. In verse 5, he begins by declaring God's greatness, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God. He begins with God's awe-inspiring sovereignty and greatness. And he continues with God's promise-keeping goodness, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

[19 : 55] You know, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught us to begin in the same way, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. To begin our prayer by looking at God and his character, by declaring his greatness and his goodness and loving kindness. That's the basis on which we can approach God because of his character. But then Nehemiah continues, second part of his prayer in verses 6 and 7, he confesses the people's unfaithfulness. He says, we, the people of Israel, have sinned against you. Even I and my Father's house have sinned. And, you know, both of those dimensions are important to acknowledge, the corporate and the individual. If we only talk about the sins of the church or the sins of the society that we live in, we can actually become rather self-righteous about ourselves.

That's a danger. At the same time, if we only ever confess our own individual sins and flaws that we have directly and intentionally committed, we can become blind to how ungodly patterns become embedded not only in individual hearts but also in human relationships and societies and institutions. So, Nehemiah recognizes here that God's people as a whole had become corrupted and unfaithful and he acknowledged his own and his family's, his and his own family's participation in that corruption and unfaithfulness. But then he doesn't stop there. He goes on in verses 8 to 10, he leans on God's promise. He declares God's greatness, confesses the people's unfaithfulness, and then he leans on God's promise. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses.

Nehemiah is referring back to Deuteronomy 30, where God had said, if you're unfaithful, I will scatter you, and that had happened in the exile. They had been scattered all over the place.

But then God promised, even if you're at the ends of the earth, if you return to me, I'll bring you back home. Even at the end of Deuteronomy, God looked forward to that day and said, even if you mess it all up, I'm still going to make a way for you to come home and to repent.

And Nehemiah holds on to that promise. He leans on the promise that God had made years or generations ago. And in a sense, he sort of holds up that promise before God and says, God, you made this promise.

[22 : 30] Make good on your word to return us and restore us. In fact, throughout this prayer, Nehemiah, whether intentionally or not, he echoes the words of earlier biblical prayers. Like Ezra, the prayer we looked at last week, he laments the corruption of the people. Like Solomon, he prays that God's ear would be attentive and his eye open to the prayers of his people. Like Jeremiah, he prays that God would remember his covenant, remember his promise.

So, declaring God's greatness, confessing unfaithfulness, leaning on God's promise, and finally, in verse 11, Nehemiah presents his need. Give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Again, right? Jesus taught us to pray in the same way in the Lord's prayer, right? Give us this day our daily bread. Lord, give me what I need today. Give us as a people what we need today. Feed us, deliver us from evil. Lead us not into temptation. We're surrounded by dangers.

We need your protection. We need your provision. Nehemiah is very specific in his request. His praying was not an excuse for doing nothing. Rather, his prayer in chapter 1 prepared him for the action steps we'll see him take in chapter 2. So, that's the pattern of Nehemiah's prayer, declaring God's greatness, confessing our unfaithfulness, leaning on God's promise, and presenting our needs. Now, do you realize that we just did those four things this morning in the first half of our worship service? Look at your bulletin for just a minute.

Take out your bulletin and turn to the order of service. We begin with adoration, declaring God's greatness. That's how we want to begin when we come together to remember who God is, to turn our eyes off of ourselves and turn to the Lord and think of His greatness and His goodness. And then that leads us to confession, right? When we hear the Word of God, we realize that we have not lived up to it, and we acknowledge that. We want to be honest before God, and so our prayer of confession is an invitation for us to come and to confess our sins before God that we have committed in the last week. But then we go...we don't stay there. We don't wallow there.

We go on. We lean on God's promise. That second set of songs always has promises of God in them. And the Word of Assurance is declaring the promise of God to all who look to Christ.

[25 : 23] And then we go on in the pastoral prayer, and we present our needs. You see, we didn't make...this isn't just an accident how our service is arranged. Now, we don't always repeat the same exact words, but there's a logic and a flow behind what we do when we come together. We didn't make it up. The prayers in the Bible are like well-traveled paths through the wilderness of this world toward our true home in the presence of God.

And so we sort of take one of these paths and want to walk on it together. I like to go running, and when I go running, I often like to explore. I like to explore different neighborhoods, main streets, side streets, bike paths, hiking trails. But I also like to find a couple of familiar routes that I can always go back to that I know well. And the more I run those routes, the more things I notice along them. And in a similar way, when we pray as Christians to God, our Father in heaven, we can come before Him with freedom and boldness through our Savior, Jesus Christ. We can explore, you might say, right? We can pray sitting or standing or walking or kneeling or laying prostrate. We can read an ancient prayer or a biblical psalm or pray in our own words or even pray in tongues. We can pray silently or out loud. We can pray alone or in a group. J.C. Ryle wrote, just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world is the act of breathing, the first act of men and women when they are born again is praying. In other words, praying is what a healthy Christian normally does, talking to God, right? Through Jesus Christ, we have a heavenly Father who is committed to looking after us, and He's given us His very own Holy Spirit to dwell within us and to motivate us from the inside out. And so, we can cry out to God just like little children,

Lord, help me. Lord, thank you. Lord, I'm sorry. Lord, I love you. Lord, I need you. But you know, God has also given us, we can pray in our own words freely, but God has also given us the prayers of the Bible to be like those well-traveled routes, those familiar routes that we can always go back to. And the more we travel them, the deeper we can go in them. Adoration, confession, remembering God's promise, presenting our need. So, you can take a prayer like Nehemiah's and in your own personal time with the Lord, and you can read it verbatim, or you can just sort of follow the pattern, run with it. Let it be a framework to bring your own needs and the needs of the church near and far before our Lord. So, that's Nehemiah's first response, and that can be our first response in the face of bad news, humble prayer. But then we see Nehemiah's second response in chapter 2, confident action. Let's read the first eight verses of chapter 2.

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now, that's his normal job as a cupbearer. Now, I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, why is your face sad, seeing that 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. 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, 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 me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

[29 : 55] Chapter 2 really falls into two halves. Nehemiah's confident action before the king in the verses we just read, and then his confident action before the people in Jerusalem in the rest of the chapter, which we'll get to. So, in these first eight verses, Nehemiah approaches King Artaxerxes with a bold request. You know, think about what he's asking for. He's essentially asking the king to give him at least a year's leave from his job. Took four months to travel one way. So, to travel there, he has to save for at least a few months to make his trip any good, and then travel back. So, he's asking for at least a year's leave from his job. Second, he's asking to be sent to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the city and effectively to serve as its governor.

And then he's asking to fund the whole building enterprise with timber from the king's forest. Now, all of that in itself is a pretty bold request to bring to the king. But what's even more risky is Nehemiah's asking the king to reverse his previous policy, right? Remember in Ezra 4, right? People, you know, somebody starts working on something in Jerusalem, and the provincial government officials get all up in a tizzy about it, and they send a letter to King Artaxerxes, and they say, this city is a hotbed of sedition. Shut it down. And Artaxerxes says, yes, shut it down until further notice. There's a little loophole there until further notice. But still, right? Artaxerxes' policy was no rebuilding Jerusalem, and Nehemiah is effectively asking him to overturn it.

This is a very bold request. But notice that Nehemiah comes with tact and thoughtfulness and planning and preparation. Let's look at how this conversation unfolds. As a cupbearer, he was not permitted to initiate a conversation with the king. The rule was, you don't speak unless you're spoken to. So, he couldn't just go to the king and present his request directly, and besides, that wouldn't have been... that probably wouldn't have achieved what he wanted. But what he does for the first time in his life is while serving wine to the king, he doesn't hide the burden of his heart. As we might say, he wore his grief on his face. And the king noticed, why is your face sad? This is nothing but... you're not sick. This is nothing but sadness of the heart. Everybody else who came before the Persian king wore a happy face. No one was expected to be sad in the presence of the Persian king.

He might not react very well to that. And so, Nehemiah realizes when the king says, why are you sad? He realizes his time has come, and he says, I was very much afraid. More than most biblical writers, Nehemiah gives us these periodic glimpses into his inner emotions. And in some ways, that's why he can be such an attractive character, is because he sort of shows us what's going on on the inside a little bit. Right? He's, oh my, this is the moment. It's now or never. I better not mess it up.

Now, Nehemiah doesn't start by saying, King Artaxerxes, I have come to you with a request that you pass a law to reverse your previous policy against Jerusalem. No. Again, he's tactful. He presents a personally deeply felt sorrow. The place of my father's graves lies in ruins. Now, the graves of Artaxerxes' ancestors were impressively preserved in the rock carved into the rock in Persia.

[33 : 51] So, Nehemiah perhaps thinks, maybe Artaxerxes can sympathize with my desire to honor my ancestors because, boy, he's put a lot of work into seeing that his ancestors' memories are honored.

King goes on, what are you requesting? Do you notice throughout this whole conversation, Nehemiah is sort of polite and slightly verbose. And Artaxerxes is crisp and to the point.

Artaxerxes is used to being in charge and being in power and making decisions. And Nehemiah is careful and respectful toward him. Then verse 4, another one of these glimpses into Nehemiah's inner life. So, I prayed to the God of heaven. Now, that prayer cannot have taken more than a second or two.

Right? You know, the king doesn't... it's not like the king says, what are you requesting? And Nehemiah kneels down and prays for a minute. No. You don't... no. He's in the middle of a conversation and he shoots up a prayer. Sometimes this is called an arrow prayer. You shoot up a prayer to God when you're in the middle of a tense conversation, a difficult situation, and Nehemiah prays.

In the time it takes him to take in a breath and prepare to speak, God give me wisdom. Help me. You know, God hears those prayers too. He doesn't just hear the really nice, well-rounded prayer of chapter 1. He hears the prayer when you're in the middle of it.

[35 : 31] When you're in the middle of a difficult conversation and you just say, God, help. I need you. He goes on, verse 5, if it pleases the king, if your servant has found favor in your sight, send me to Judah that I may rebuild it. Well, the king wants the details. When are you going to leave?

When are you going to return? He presents his timeline. Verse 7 and 8, he presents a clear and realistic and well-thought-through plan. This is not a dream, a vague dream that Nehemiah has.

No. He has, in these four months of praying, he has clarified in his own mind a very detailed plan for how to proceed, including where the building materials would come from and what permissions he needs from whom. At the end, verse 8, the king granted me what I asked for. The good hand of my God was upon me. In other words, God listened to Nehemiah's prayer, and God also worked through Nehemiah's tact and thoughtfulness and planning and preparation in order to bring about a favorable outcome. You see, when the church of God is in a bad condition, or even when our own lives or families are in a bad condition, or when the church is small and vulnerable and troubled and humiliated, we should pray in humble dependence before the Lord, but we should also think.

Use all the tact and thoughtfulness that God has given us to plan to address the problems and begin to make a difference, one step at a time. You know, many of you work in environments like Nehemiah did.

Many of you work or study in environments where your bosses or teachers or professors do not share your Christian commitments. Nehemiah was not a religious professional. Ezra was a priest. Nehemiah was not.

[37 : 44] Right? Ezra was a scribe and a teacher of the law. That was his profession. Nehemiah was a government official. And he worked under people who did not share his faith commitments, and there were some in the Persian administration who were actually hostile toward his faith community. Not everyone, but some. There are two guys mentioned in verse 10. But Nehemiah didn't hide his loyalties.

He advocated for the well-being of the suffering people of God. He saw that God had put him in his position for such a time as this, and he didn't just draw back and do nothing. So, let me challenge you.

If you study or work in a secular environment or with people where your superiors do not share your faith commitments, have you considered why God has put you where you are? Why has God put you in your elementary school, your middle school, your high school, your summer program, your research lab, your office job, your position of authority within a secular organization? Sometimes just a small group of dedicated Christians can make a significant difference in the culture of a school or workplace.

So, find some older Christians who work in your field, if you haven't already, and learn all that you can from them. Think and strategize with them. How do we make a difference for the glory of God and the good of our neighbors? Read a book like Every Good Endeavor or The Gospel at Work to help you think through how you can faithfully bear witness to Jesus in the place where He has put you on a day-to-day basis. So, we see Nehemiah's confident action before the king. And then the second half of chapter 2, we see Nehemiah's confident action before the people in Jerusalem. I won't read the entire section, but I'll summarize. Verse 11 to 16, or verse 9 to 10, he arrives in Jerusalem.

Verse 11, he does some careful research. So, he doesn't come in with a bunch of hasty, half-baked ideas to the discouraged and defenseless and perhaps disillusioned inhabitants of the province of Judah. On the other hand, he doesn't waste any time either. He stays in Jerusalem for three days, perhaps gets a little rest after his long journey. And on the third night, he takes a nighttime scouting trip around the perimeter of the city. Verses 13 to 15 describe where he starts. He starts on the west side, goes down to the south side, over to the east side, and back to the west side.

[40 : 26] He checks everything out so that he's well acquainted with all the relevant details, and he does this before he presents anything to the leaders or the entire group of people. And then in verse 17, he comes to the people. He says, 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. Notice, Nehemiah doesn't talk down to the people. He doesn't come in and start ordering them around.

He doesn't say, You bunch of lazy failures. This city is in shambles. You're a laughingstock. Here are all the things you need to start doing differently. I'm now your governor, by the way.

No. Well, sometimes people who come in from the outside and see a mess are tempted to react that way. But that's not how Nehemiah leads the people. He says, This is our problem, and this is our project.

He doesn't say, You guys do this. He says, Come, let us build, that we may no longer suffer derision and shame and embarrassment.

[41 : 46] And furthermore, in verse 18, he encourages them with the way that God has already provided. 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.

So, Nehemiah says, Look, we've become a disgrace, but we are the people of God. Let's come together and do this. God is right here with us. He is at the center of this project.

And so, the people willingly take ownership in verse 18, Let us rise up and build. So, they strengthen their hands for the good work. Now, verses 19 and 20 mention some opposition, but we'll deal with that in more depth in chapter 4, so I'm going to pass over that today.

But what do we learn from this section? If we want to see the church of Jesus Christ thrive and flourish in places where it has previously been disorganized, dysfunctional, and discredited, we need leaders like Nehemiah.

Leaders who will pray and do careful research and develop thoughtful plans and work alongside the remnant of God's people who are still there. You see, the pattern we see in these two chapters, the progression is not accidental.

[43 : 09] Humble prayer before the Lord produces confident action before the world. Brothers and sisters, God has put us right here in New England, the most unchurched region of the United States.

In New Haven, alongside students and families and the poor and internationals, to spread the life-changing power of the gospel in New Haven and beyond. That's the mission that God has given us.

And to do that alongside our brothers and sisters with other churches and other ministries in this area, and to come together and say, let us rise up and build the church of God.

So, let's continue to humbly depend on our Lord in prayer, and to proceed with confident action for the glory of His name. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Father, we thank You that when Your people face trouble and shame, we thank You that You provide all that we need.

[44 : 15] We thank You for providing and raising up Nehemiah in this season, the post-exilic period where they were rebuilding, needed to rebuild the city.

Lord, would You continue to raise up people here, to within this church, within this city, within this region, to declare Your greatness, to depend on You in prayer, to lead Your people in building up the church for the glory of God.

Father, help each of us, help each of us to depend on You humbly in prayer, and give us the confidence to act in the ways that You have set before us.

Lord, for the good of our own lives, for the good of our families, our churches, our friendships, our communities. Lord, we praise You for Your faithfulness, and kindness and goodness to Your people.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.