

Rebuilding

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[0 : 0 0] Well, folks, I just realized that I've skipped a part of the order of service, and we have another psalm, but that's okay. We'll just throw it into the middle somewhere just to keep things, keep you on your toes, so anybody that's fallen asleep will be awoken by another psalm. Turn in your Bible, if you have one, to Nehemiah and just have it open, chapters one and two, as we consider a wee bit under the theme of rebuilding this evening. A name that might strike a bell in your memory is the name Moira Jones. Moira Jones was a lassie who was walking home from work, parked her car on a normal evening in Glasgow back in 2008 and was promptly abducted from outside her home, marched into a park in Glasgow, and tragically and brutally lost her life. It was a really brutal and traumatic crime, and it horrified the detectives who were dealing with it. But perhaps what confounded them more than anything and what shocked and horrified people in the news in the ensuing days was that many people had heard Moira. They'd heard her anguished cries for help, but they'd failed to do anything.

They hadn't taken any action. They hadn't called emergency services. They just didn't want to get involved. It's reminiscent of a more famous story, perhaps, of Catherine or Kitty Genovese from April 1964 in New York City who endured a similar fate. It's recorded that 38 neighbors heard her anguished cries for over half an hour while her attacker left and then returned, and she too lost her life.

These responses have been termed over the years the bystander effect or the Genovese syndrome, personal non-involvement. And that's a reality in life. People just don't want to get involved.

And sadly, in some instances, that's the case within the church of Christ as well. I just don't have time. It's not really my kind of thing. I have my own schedule, my own family, my own responsibilities. I really don't have time. This is really the work of the minister. This is really for those Christians who have a burden for that kind of thing. Maybe if I look away, maybe if I look at my shoes, nobody will see that I'm here and I can't be asked to help out.

We're living in a world that is increasingly isolated. We are increasingly isolated from one another. That's been forced on us over the past year through the lockdowns. The segregation that we've experienced as a result of that. We are becoming more cut off, more isolated from one another because of the insularity of the world in which we live, because of the onset and the, well, the benefits of technology, but also the dangers of technology in that regard.

[3 : 3 0] Well, we turn this evening to Nehemiah. And Nehemiah is a great example to us of personal involvement, not non-involvement. Nehemiah was willing to get involved. Nehemiah is living a life that is pretty good. He is cupbearer to the king. Now, you might be forgiven for thinking, well, big deal. He was a waiter. He took the cup of wine to the king. What's the big deal? Well, if you know anything about the culture of those days, the cupbearer to the king was the person closest to the king, the person who was trusted most by the king because they would taste his food, they would taste the wine, they would make sure that nobody was coming up with a plot to assassinate or to kill the king by poisoning them and their food. So, other than the queen, the cupbearer enjoyed a really privileged position, a position of closeness and intimacy with the royal household, a position that dictated that he needed to understand current affairs. He must be acquainted with the judicial process. He must be able to engage in meaningful conversation with the king.

So, Nehemiah has a privileged position in the royal household. He's sitting pretty, you might say. He's doing a good job. And isn't it the case that so often the seemingly most inconsequential thing can bring about magnificent change in our lives? All Nehemiah does is ask a question. All he does is he sees his brother, some men coming back from a trip to Jerusalem, and he says, well, how are things in Jerusalem? It's a fairly innocent question. He's just exercising a bit of interest in what

these guys have been doing, the experience that they have had. And they tell him, verse 3, those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down. It had been for 140 years. That shouldn't have come as a surprise. Its gates are burned with fire.

This moves Nehemiah. Nehemiah is 750, 800 miles away from Jerusalem. He's never been there. He grew up in exile. But that's where his forefathers, that's where his people are from. And so, he feels inextricably linked to Jerusalem. And as a result, his heart is moved by the plight of his people. He's never been, but he was moved by them. And so, he prays and he fasts. We read about his prayer there in chapter 1.

For 140 years, the walls of Jerusalem have been broken down. Its gates have lain in ruin. The temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel. The law was reinstated by Ezra. But the people are in distress. They're in disgrace. There is no protection for them. The walls are broken down. It would have been so easy for Nehemiah to say, that's sad. They're 800 miles away. I'm cupbearer to the king. What am I going to do about it? Not my problem. Let's move on. He could have exercised personal non-involvement. But that wasn't his response. No. The news of the people's plight in Jerusalem shook him to his very core. It shook him emotionally, and it moved him practically to seek to do something to help those of his people in Jerusalem. And as you move from chapter 1 into chapter 2, you begin to see the story unfolding.

It's a great book. I commend it to you. Go and read through it when you get home tonight. It's really the story of Nehemiah's willing, determined, active involvement in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, born out of a heart that was moved by the plight of a people surrounding him, a people that he'd never met in a place that he had never visited. And Nehemiah provides for us here this evening a great example of how we're to live, how we are to live as we seek to follow the call that God places on each and every one of our hearts, and indeed how God will use us in the places that we are, and often in the most unlikely of ways. If somebody had told me—I'll have to go back a wee while now, I'm getting older—15 years ago, 20 years, let's say 20 years ago, that I would be—let's say the last time I was in Bonacore.

[8 : 32] My sister studied here in the mid-90s. She studied teaching at Northern College, as it was then. Don't even know if that's the same. If somebody had told me on a Sunday morning when I came down to visit Mari here that one day I would be standing in this pulpit that Ivor Martin was preaching in, I would have probably laughed, not a chance. And yet, here I am.

Often the Lord will use the most unlikely candidates in the most unlikely places. But Nehemiah gives us a great example of how we are to live in seeking to follow the call of God, how to pray, how to wait, how to prepare, how to go, what to do. And so I want to look at that this evening by just looking at various bits of chapter 2 as we go through it. Let's look at a couple of principles. First is waiting.

Learning to wait on God. That can be difficult, can't it? We are naturally people who want to do things. You see an issue, you might want to address that issue. Some people are more proactive than others, of course. Others just say, not my problem. But if you have a proactive mindset, if you see a plan, you might say, right, I want to do this and I want to do that and I've got this and I can use that and I'll get them and we'll do this and we'll sort out the problem. But sometimes God wants us to wait. As the psalmist says, be still and know that I am God. Be still and wait upon me. Nehemiah has prayed to God. He's prayed that God would be attentive to his cry, attentive to his plea. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. He knows that he's going to have to go to King Artaxerxes. He knows he's going to have to go to his boss. As his heart is moved to do something for these people in Jerusalem, he knows he's going to have to have the conversation. Listen, King, I know that I'm cupbearer. I know this is a privileged position. I know that you kind of want me around. I know that you can trust me, but I've got a real desire, a real longing, a real burden to go and to reinstate the walls of Jerusalem for my people. But he has to wait. The men have come. They've told him the story. His heart has been moved. He's fasted. He's prayed. He's really moved. It's an urgent—there's pressure on him in that sense. But what do we begin chapter 2 with in the month of Nisan?

It's not a car he's talking about here, but it's the Jewish month of Nisan. It's been four months. We know that chapter 1 in the month of Kislev, there has been four months between the month of Kislev and the month of Nisan. So Kislev is November, December time. Nisan is mid-April.

[11:38] So, conservatively, four months have passed since Nehemiah heard the news. Four months have passed and nothing has happened. Four months has passed and he's been waiting. Four months have passed and the guys are saying, well, what happened to all that prayer and fasting, Nehemiah? You haven't done anything. Well, what's going on? I thought you were going to go to Jerusalem. I thought you were going to do something for God. He was moved. His heart was touched. He'd fasted. He'd prayed. He'd called upon God with an urgency and with a fervency. And yet, here he is four months later before the opportunity comes before him to speak to the king. And there's a lesson to us in that, isn't there?

Because how often do we give up on prayer after a day, a week, a month? Four months later. Four months later comes, and one thing about Persian courts, or in Persian courts, those who were engaged in works of service had to have a happy countenance, had to have a smile on their face all the time, because they didn't want to expose the king to any sadness or any kind of sad thoughts. You had to keep a smile. And so, Nehemiah is dreadfully afraid because the king spots him and he says, what's wrong with you, Nehemiah? Why does your face look so sad when you're not unwell, when you're not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart, Nehemiah. What is happening to you? I was very much afraid, it says in verse 2 of chapter 2. The king is moved by Nehemiah's plight, but he's not upset about it. And that's significant. That's significant. He notices Nehemiah's sadness of heart. He can tell, even though Nehemiah is probably trying to mask it, it's been four months that he's been doing it, and the king hasn't noticed it until this point. Nehemiah is probably experiencing the reality of

Proverbs 21.1. In the Lord's hand, the king's heart is a stream of water that channels toward all who please him. The heart, the mind of King Artaxerxes is in the Lord's hand. In chapter 1, Nehemiah hears the news. He prays and he weeps. In chapter 2, Nehemiah, having prayed, is now waiting. In many ways, it takes more courage to wait than it does to act. Think about it in a battle situation. For the soldier, it takes more courage for them to wait than it does to act rashly. Now seems like the right moment. The Lord in his providence brings to pass that this is the right time. But four months have passed. Nehemiah has had to wait upon God, just as you have had to wait upon God in the pursuit of a new minister. We must always be willing to wait upon God. Remember Moses? Remember Moses saying to the people, gathering the people, and the people are seeing an Egyptian army advancing towards them. The sea is in front of them. And what did they cry out? Exodus 14. Was it that there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out to the desert to die, Moses? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, leave us alone, let us serve the Egyptians? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert. Moses answers the people. What does he say? Don't be afraid. Stand firm. And you will see the deliverance of the Lord. You will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you. You need only to be still. Don't we need to be taught that?

Don't I need to be taught that? Stand still and see the salvation the Lord will bring. Just watch. Just watch and see what God is going to... Well, it was worth the wait, wasn't it, for them?

[16:10] Sometimes we have to wait. Stand still. Call out to God in prayer. Wait upon the Lord and see what He is going to do. Sometimes we want to act impulsively, rashly, looking at our own resources.

Sometimes we need to wait upon God, giving God time to move. Not that He needs it, but sometimes He takes it. And usually it's to teach us a lesson to relinquish control and to delight in the sovereignty of God. Now, we have to add a wee caveat in here. Nehemiah waited upon God for four months at least, but he wasn't idle. He wasn't idle. During these four months, as he waited upon God and as he continued to pray, he was preparing. He was praying and preparing. One follows the other. If you kneel before the King of heaven in prayer, then you can stand before any king on the earth. And that's what

Nehemiah does. And the king asks him in the Lord's time, what is it that you want? Bingo. This is the moment I've been waiting for. This is what I have been praying for. This is the moment. What does he do?

He prays. Verse 4, the king said to me, what is it you want? Then I prayed to the God of heaven. He doesn't go to his room, close the door, get down on his knees. Doesn't kneel, doesn't make a big deal of it. A lesson to us that we can pray briefly, wherever we are, whatever we're doing, whatever we're engaged in, whoever we're speaking to. He prays to God in that moment because

he wasn't going to stand silently before the king. That would be viewed as treason. He could take his head off for such a thing. So this is a short, sharp arrow prayer. Lord, please help me. He prays to the God of heaven as well, which is the same as the prayer in chapter 1. Lord, the God of heaven. It gives us a bit of Nehemiah's perspective, doesn't it? Often we forget that God is in heaven. We thought of heaven this morning. Heaven is defined by the fact that God is there. It's the place where God is. He is the God of heaven. He is the God who has made heaven. He is the God who sustains heaven. He is the God who's seated on the throne, in the throne room of heaven. He is the one in sovereign control of everything that comes to pass. And he is seated on his throne. And we need to know that, don't we? In a world where there is so much despair, and where there is so much sadness, and where there is so much brokenness, and where there is so much hurt. Because if we don't recognize the sovereignty of God and the place that he occupies, then we will become overwhelmed. Because it's easy to look around and become distressed or depressed. What was it? Corrie ten Boom, I think, wasn't it? That said, if you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. But if you look to God, you'll be at rest. Nehemiah is at rest. He's at peace before the king. He has been waiting for this opportunity. And so boldly, preparedly, he speaks to the king about what he needs. He wasn't idle during his period of waiting. He used it to pray, to be persistent in prayer, and to prepare for what he needed to ask. Well, king, now that you say it, well, I've been thinking about this. I need to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall for my people there. Okay. And I'm going to need a couple of letters. I'm going to need letters to the guys that can give me some of the timber that I can use for making new gates. And I'm going to need some men to go with me. And I'm going to need a couple of letters to give a safe passage as we go there. Oh, you've thought about this, Nehemiah. You've got it all worked out. But he does it respectfully, doesn't he? If it pleases the king, if it pleases the king, he's bold before the king. But he's respectful and he is humble. He recognizes that this king is in the hand of God. He is a stream of water in the hand of God, if it pleases the king.

[21 : 12] He doesn't start out with a bulshy kind of arrogant attitude and saying, well, listen, mate, I serve the God of heaven and, you know, he's sovereign over you, so you just do as I say. No.

He doesn't say, look, we must obey God rather than men. I'm not listening to your position or your authority. I submit only to God. No. He's humble. He is respectful. But he is bold. He is bold. And so he asks God for, he asks the king for all that he is going to need. And the king agrees with his request. He gives him everything that he might need. Immediately at this point, we should notice that that verse in verse 10, when Sambalat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites. Here's Nehemiah. He's been moved in heart by the plight of his people.

He's gone boldly before the king. He's willing to step down from his position of privilege to go and to serve the people of Jerusalem. And immediately there's opposition. Immediately, straight out the gate, there are people who are going to oppose what he's going to do. And that's just something that we always have to bear in mind as the Lord's people, is if we commit to Jesus Christ, we'll experience pushback. If we commit faithfully to doing the work of God in a world that is secular, is largely intolerant of anyone who aligns themselves with God, you can expect that you will experience opposition, persecution, mockery, malignment, whatever it may be. These people were going to be a thorn in his side. And if you read through the book, he continues to have trouble with them. So he waits upon the Lord, and then he prays and he prepares. So he's not idle in his period of waiting. He is preparing so that when the time comes, he is ready to say exactly what he needs. Thirdly, he possesses and develops a gospel vision. He possesses and develops a vision for the work. And that's what we have to have in the church. We have to develop a gospel vision for what we want to do, where we want to be, and therefore how we're going to get there. That's what Nehemiah does.

He inspects the walls as he arrives there. He takes a ride alone to survey the damage which is significant, and he goes and has a look. It's interesting always, isn't it, that when the Lord does a work, often when he does a significant work, first of all, he'll do an inward work in the heart and life of a person. Before Nehemiah actually assembles a team and rebuilds the wall in a miracle 52 days, he's planting a vision within the heart of Nehemiah, this waiter, this cup bearer to the king. He's not a builder. He's not somebody who's built walls before. He's not a guy that's led an army of construction workers. No. But the Lord is planting within him a vision. He's giving Nehemiah his vision. As Nehemiah has been moved by the plight of a people, and as Nehemiah has called out

upon God fervently and consistently, and as Nehemiah has prepared for the eventuality of this coming to pass, the Lord is now instilling within Nehemiah a vision. I'm sure some of you know the story of the great stone that was cut out of the famous Carrara quarry in Tuscany in Italy. It was cut out of this quarry, and it was put in a churchyard. Some sculptors, some artists came and looked at it, and they found a flaw in it, and they all turned from it and said, oh no, this is a flawed piece of stone. It can't be done. But Michelangelo, he saw it, and he said that there's an angel trapped within, and I must set it free. He saw potential in this bit of stone, this bit of rock that nobody else could see, and he worked at it, and he made out of that stone arguably his greatest work, [25 : 45] Michelangelo's David, which is still in Florence to this day. And it's a great picture of the Lord working in our lives, isn't it? That he looks down, and he sees not the flaws or the imperfections, which are many in my life anyway, but he sees the imperfections, and he recognizes still that he can use us, still he can employ us, still he can give us a vision for our community, for the streets and the people surrounding our churches. He can see potential within the brokenness. The question is, can we, as we step out onto the street here, and as we look up and down, as we see people sitting in pubs on a Sunday afternoon, can we see the potential in the brokenness to go and to share with them Jesus the Savior and the hope that he brings? Nehemiah goes out, and he surveys the damage. He wants to get a feel for what he's dealing with. He needs to know what is necessary. He takes the time to assess the need. He takes the time to examine the facts. He takes the time to see the full extent of the damage.

And that's a good lesson for a congregation just about to induct a new minister, isn't it? As you look around and as you take time to allow him to come in and to assess the need and to examine the facts, I don't know about to see the extent of the damage, but to look in the rubble and to see the potential, to see what needs to be done. What does God want from Nehemiah? What does God want from me? What does God want from you? And Bonacord, he wants us to wait upon him. He wants us to pray.

He wants us to prepare. He wants us to assess the need before us. And then he got Nehemiah to assemble a team. Wait on God, prepare and pray, possess and develop a gospel vision, assemble the team.

He communicated his vision, his hopes, his desires from God through prayer and his careful assessment to a small group and then to a larger group of people. He surrounded himself with the right people. He engaged with people who were willing to do the work. He uses we and us. It is plural.

Indeed, if you go into chapter three of the book where the work begins, 38 people are mentioned. 38 people are engaged in the building project. 38 different names. There would have been more than that, but 38 are mentioned. 42 different locations around the city wall. 38 people, 38 families. [28 : 33] High priests, priests, they wouldn't usually be humping stones or batching cement. Goldsmiths, perfumers, perfumers, used to working with dainty and delicate things, lifting big stones, hanging big rough-hewn timber doors. They wouldn't have normally be doing that. There are so many lessons. All of these people out with their own comfort zones, doing things that they don't usually do, all for the common good, for the common goal, united in the gospel. 38 people mentioned, 42 locations. Nehemiah is never mentioned once. Chapter three. Go and read it for yourself. Women are mentioned. Men are mentioned.

Goldsmiths, priests, perfumers, all of these different people working for a common goal. There are, of course, others that are saying, hmm, I'm not doing that. The Tekoites, the nobles of Tekoa. Nehemiah has a vision, and he communicates it to a people who get on board and who are willing to work even in places that they wouldn't ordinarily, even doing things that wouldn't necessarily be within their comfort zone. But do they not say that life begins at the edge of your comfort zone? We have to climb that fence. That can be a high fence, can't it? Nothing will ever be perfect, so we can't live by the if-only mantra. Oh, if only. If only this or if only that. We can identify that, can't we? Oh, if only they did this, and if only they did that, and if only they were more like me, and if only they had the same opinion as I have, and if only they did the things that I do. Hmm. If only everyone in this church had the same viewpoint that I have. Well, we have to be careful in that, don't we? Nehemiah was an outsider. He came. He'd never been to this place. He hadn't been amongst those people. He came, and he had a fresh perspective. And in some ways, your new minister is an outsider.

He's coming, and he will have a fresh perspective. I hope you'll be ready for that. I hope you'll be humble enough to let that be worked out. Sometimes we need fresh vision. Sometimes we need fresh faith.

[30 : 56] Sometimes we need somebody to come in from the outside with an objective viewpoint and say, look, here is things that I have seen as I have assessed, and I have looked. Now, let's come together and rebuild. Let's come together and do amazing things in and through God.

Finally, briefly, expect opposition. Okay, we've already touched upon that. If you're a Christian, if you follow Jesus, you will experience opposition in your life. And if you don't, or if you are not, where is your witness of Christ? We live in a world that is hostile to Jesus. We live in a world that champions tolerance as long as you're not a Christian. So, if you're not experiencing any pushback for your faith, where is your faith? Do people know? Do you speak of Jesus your Savior?

Is he in your heart, but is he on your lips as you witness to the world? How will they hear unless we tell them? There will be opposition. There will be opposition. It always comes.

They were laughing at them. But when Sanballat, verse 19 of chapter 2, the Hodenite, to buy the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us.

What is this you're doing? They asked. Are you rebelling against the king? The people that Nehemiah had communicated his vision to, they'd got it. They were on board.

[32 : 40] Yes, let's do this. Let's rebuild the wall. Let's get involved. They had perspective from the Lord. They had unity in the Lord. They were working for a common goal. They were ready to reinstate and rebuild the wall that's been broken down 140 years, and as soon as they engage in the work, they're opposed by the enemy. We needn't be surprised by that. It's just a reality in life. We can't expect that the evil one will be all for us if we are all for Jesus. We will become a target.

So if anyone ever tells you that, well, Christianity is just a cakewalk. It's the rose garden. It's just opting out of life and being happy all the time. Not if you read your Bible. Not if you see the experience of the Lord's people. Not if you talk to a Christian who is alive for Jesus. But are we willing to step into that arena of opposition? Are you willing to step into the arena of opposition? Are you willing to get your hands dirty, so to speak? Or is church a convenient kind of routine thing that you come along to? If Nehemiah wanted to rebuild the wall around any other city than Jerusalem, he probably would have got very little opposition. But the evil one wants to crush the vision. The Lord himself, I said I was going to do it, and we didn't do it, and I'm just going to pass from that. But Psalm 87, upon the hills of holiness he his foundation sets, God more than Jacob's dwelling all delights in Zion's gates. The Lord delights in Jerusalem, and so the evil one is going to be absolutely adamant to break down any vision for its prospering.

But we have to expect that. The first car was passed by a horse and cart. People laughed. The first plane flew for a couple of feet, and people laughed. Nehemiah comes to build or rebuild the city wall. People laughed. Joe is coming to your congregation, and you're going to reach out into the community, and people will laugh. You want to serve the Lord? People will laugh.

But Nehemiah was determined. His people that worked with him were determined. They had a heart. They had a mind to work, and they had a heart to pray. They weren't willing to give up. I'm sure many of you have seen the movie, or Chariots of Fire, or read about it at least. Harold Williams, the runner, he's in the movie, and there's a part where he suffers his first defeat. And he's so despondent, and he's so down in the mouth, and his girlfriend is trying to encourage him. And he shrugs it off, and he says, I run to win, and if I can't win, I won't run. And she responds with wisdom, as the women in our lives often do.

[36 : 11] But if you don't run, you can't win. We can't quit. It's always too early to quit. You are at the dawn of a new ministry, and we will pray for that and for you. So as your new minister prepares to come, pray for him. And as individuals, as a congregation, will you learn to wait upon God. Be prepared as you pray to develop your gospel vision, to assemble your people, to expect opposition, but to go out into the battle and do great things for God, for he has people in this city. Shall we pray?

Our Lord and God, we thank you for the example set before us in Scripture through Nehemiah. We thank you for his willingness. We thank you for his faithfulness. We thank you for his leadership. We thank you for all that is set before us as an example. And may we follow the instruction that you have given to us in and through that, we pray. Go before us now and forgive us our sins, we ask. In Jesus' name. Amen.