

Nehemiah 1 -2:10

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[0 : 00] In the last couple of days, I've had a few interesting conversations about Bon Accord, about our congregation, thinking especially of some folk who came and visited us over the two open days on Friday and Saturday.

And one or two of the folk that I spoke to touched on the question of what my hopes and aspirations are for the future in the light of the work that we've done to the building.

And I personalize it because the question, well, it was posed to me, and that was the question that was asked. You know, what do you hope will happen, you know, over the next few months and in the life of the congregation?

I was intrigued to discover what one of my hopes is reading the article that some of you may have seen in the P&J; yesterday, where there was a piece on the work done.

And I was interested because I discovered something I didn't know about one of my aspirations, because the piece assures the readers that the minister said that he was hoping that as a result of the work, the church would grow in number.

[1 : 21] Now, I hadn't actually said that. It's an amazing thing, what you discover about journalism when you're, you know, in a very, you know, modest way involved in something like this.

You know, just how just things are just created. I didn't have any objection to what was said, but I didn't actually say that. But it was intriguing that that was what the journalists seemed to think I had said.

Could be that I'm just losing the place. And I did say that. And I don't remember, but I'm pretty sure I didn't. But regardless of the accuracy with which my words were quoted or simply fabricated, it did, it is something that is worth reflecting on.

What are our hopes? What are our aspirations? Are we looking to grow as a congregation? Do we wish to be successful in attracting new people to the congregation, and especially being used to draw people to faith in Jesus?

You know, to use the language that we were rightly reminded of this morning, to baptize and teach as we make disciples.

[2 : 36] Is that what we aspire to? Is that what we wish to be successful at? I wonder if even as I'm kind of introducing things with that language, that language of success, that language of being successful, is that something that grates a little?

Are we a little bit uncomfortable with using that kind of language? Do we want to be successful? Do we maybe hold to the mantra that possibly has a smidgen of truth, that we're not called to be successful, but to be faithful?

And as I say, though there may be an element of truth in that statement, I wonder if it's not often, certainly for some of us, I make no judgment of others, simply an excuse for inexcusable and avoidable failure.

I wonder. I want to spend a little time this evening considering the thoughts of a man who craved success, and who was, in due course, very successful.

His craving for success was realized. It was satisfied. And of course, as we'll discover as we think about this a little bit this evening, we will, of course, discover that that success that he craved was success in the service of God and in the extending of God's kingdom.

[4 : 00] And I'm talking about Nehemiah, not surprisingly, given that we just read the first chapter and part of the second chapter. If Nehemiah were to have coined a slogan or responded to the classic question, what's the secret of your success?

That's a question that's often posed to successful people in different spheres of life, be it in sport or in business. You know, that's not uncommon, you know, for that question to be posed.

What's the secret of your success? And we listen attentively, you know, if we look to emulate or know maybe something of the success those who are speaking have enjoyed. Well, if he had been posed that question, I wonder what he would have said. What's the secret of your success? Success. I imagine that he would have been a bit intrigued by the question itself, but having maybe thought about it, perhaps he would have replied rather matter-of-factly, just ask for it. You want success? Well, just ask for it. That's all I did, and that's what I got. I asked for it, and I got it.

[5 : 18] Maybe if in those days there had been Christian publishers and they'd wanted to sign up Nehemiah on a book deal, that could have been the title of the book.

Just ask for it. Maybe you could have had a subtitle, How You Can Be Successful in Life and Ministry. We could have bought a copy at the CLC and, you know, if we'd read it, it would have just transformed the work that we do.

Well, let's just turn, maybe more helpfully, let's turn to the passage that we've read and explain why it may well have been the answer Nehemiah could have given to the question, what's the secret of your success?

Just ask for it. And notice what he says in his prayer. And we're really going to go to the end of the prayer and then, in a sense, work backwards.

But notice what he says right at the end of his prayer in verse 11 of chapter 1. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayers of your servants who delight in revealing your name.

[6 : 28] And then very particularly, give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man. Give your servant success today.

Nehemiah enjoyed success using his own language because he asked for success. Now, we need to think a little bit more about that and dig a little bit deeper to draw out some of the lessons and challenges and encouragements, I hope, for ourselves.

I think there's three main things that we need to consider. First of all, that he asked in the right place. So, we're saying that he asked for it and he got it. But let's be clear that, first of all, he asked in the right place.

Secondly, we'll notice that he asked for the right things. And then thirdly, that he asked in the right way. And it's really on that third point that we'll spend more time. Not that it's more important than the previous two, but simply the material that we want to think about here in the passage focuses, in a sense, more on that.

But these are the three key elements. Why was he successful? Well, because he asked for success. And he asked in the right place. He asked for the right things. And he asked in the right way.

[7 : 44] First of all, then, he asked in the right place. Who did Nehemiah ask for the favor that he sought? Now, we've read the passage.

I'm not going to give time to explaining to you maybe the historical occasion because I imagine many of you are familiar with it. And the passage itself relates it.

Jerusalem is in ruins. That is where Nehemiah is from, where his people were from. And he wishes to go back and rebuild Jerusalem, rebuild the walls. That's what he wants to do.

Where does he go to ask that he might be given the opportunity to do that? Who does he ask? Now, you know the answer that I'm going to give.

But just bear with me as we just think a little bit about how it might have appeared to those round about him. Here he is in the palace in Artaxerxes. He seemed to have occupied a position of some significance.

[8 : 42] He identifies himself as the cupbearer to the king, very much a trusted position within the civil service of that empire. And he would have had other civil servants who were men and women who were part of that extensive empire, Persian empire.

And they would have perhaps been looking on to Nehemiah at this juncture. And they would have discovered that Nehemiah had been given permission to go back to Jerusalem for what would evidently be a very long leave of absence.

And all the facilities that he needed were to be provided for him. And just imagine two of these civil servants speaking among themselves and saying, well, you know, who did he ask to be able to have such a successful outcome?

And his colleague would have said, well, obviously Artaxerxes, that's who he asked. You know, that's who's giving him what he wants. He's the one who's giving him everything he needs. Indeed, he's giving him more than he even asked for.

It's Artaxerxes who he approached. And it's because he was bold enough to do that, that he is enjoying that outcome. That's how it would have appeared to anybody looking on.

[10:01] But of course, we have the privilege of being invited in to Nehemiah at one and in private with God.

And we know that, of course, in the first instance, the one he asked was God Himself. And sometimes we imagine, well, we'll get what we want if we go up high enough to somebody high up enough in authority, then we'll be able to get what we want.

Well, if that is true, then it's certainly true that Nehemiah went as high as you can go. He went straight to the top and asked God to grant him success.

Give your servants success today. If we hunger for gospel success, we have to go straight to the top and just ask for it.

That is what we need to do. We need to ask for it and we can be assured that God will answer our requests and grant us the success that we ask for.

[11:11] And, you know, what's involved in that we're going to be thinking about in terms of what we're asking for and how we ask. But the bottom line is this, that we need to ask in the right place. And that's what Nehemiah did.

Of course, asking God for success is what we do as we pray to God. And so there is the call and the challenge to do this, to engage in prayer, approaching God, asking Him to grant us success. Each of us in whatever place that God has placed us in His service, but also very much together as a congregation of God's people. And maybe at this moment it would be a good thing to encourage you to set aside your time.

I don't think I mentioned it in the notices as I spoke the notices, but it may have been up on the screens and electronically the notices that were sent out, that we have a morning of prayer program for the 23rd of September.

That's a Saturday morning. And there'll be more in due course to explain how we're going to occupy our time. Though morning of prayer pretty much gives it away. But set aside your time for that morning so that we can go straight to the top and ask for success as Nehemiah did.

[12:30] Give your servants success today. So he asked in the right place. But secondly, he asked for the right things. We discover what it is he's asking for with some detail when he does approach the emperor, when he approaches the king, King Artaxerxes.

And then in verse 5 of the second chapter we read, and I answered the king, who basically had said to him, what do you want? If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.

This is what he's asking for. This is the success that he asked God to grant him. That as he approaches the king, what he asks of the king will be granted.

This is what he's asking for. And it is so crucial that we ask for the right things. I'm reminded of what James says to us in his letter in the fourth chapter and in verse 3, how he says often we pray and we ask and we don't receive because we pray amiss or we don't pray with the right motives.

We don't ask for the right things. But Nehemiah asked for the right things. He asked for what was close to God's heart and what was aligned with God's will. The rebuilding of God's city, the welfare of God's people, the honor of God's name.

[13:57] These are the things that he asks for. And that too must direct our asking. What do we ask for?

What will we ask for? What should we ask for? In what sense is God's cause in ruins? Or in what way are we called to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem?

Perhaps not so much rebuild the walls as to extend the walls of Jerusalem. Jerusalem and the extent of Christ's dominion in the world as men and women are brought to submit joyfully to his rule. Nehemiah asked for the right things. We too must do the same. But the third thing I want us to think about, and here's where we're going to spend a little bit more time, is that he asked in the right way. I want to draw out, and I'm almost wary of telling you how many characteristics, because you might think, whoa, that's a lot.

But we're going to do so very fleetingly. I want to draw out just very fleetingly as we go through his prayer, nine characteristics of Nehemiah's asking or of his praying to God.

[15:08] Again, I was talking about the possibility of Nehemiah having a book. If he had a book, it would have to be ten, because nine just doesn't work. But it's nine. I was tempted to find another one just to make it ten.

But no, it was nine things that I'd noticed and we're sticking with nine. And as I say, we will go through this in a very fleeting manner. I hope not superficial, but fleeting manner.

And identifying these nine characteristics that have to do with asking in the right way. It's not just about asking in the right place, directing our request to the one who is able to answer.

It's not just about asking for the right things, but also asking in the right way. And as we identify these features, the challenges or what would be helpful, I think, for us is to reflect on the measure in which these are features that characterize our asking of God.

The first thing that strikes me is that his asking was informed. There at the very beginning of the chapter, we're told how he had these visitors from Jerusalem.

[16:14] A mention is made there of Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men. And I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile and also about Jerusalem.

And so, these men come from Jerusalem where the problems are and they inform Nehemiah. Indeed, he specifically asked them to explain how things are going.

And he's given this report and it's a very discouraging report. But he is informed as to the state of play. He's informed as to the chaos that reigns there in Jerusalem.

And so, when he turns to God to ask for God's help and God's favor, he does so in an informed manner. Now, the application of that is so perhaps obvious that it doesn't require, you know, stressing or emphasizing.

But it is often the case, is it not, that our prayers can be so general and so vague as to be bordering on the meaningless. Let me just give you an example of how it can be so much more useful and helpful to be informed in prayer.

[17:29] This morning, we were very pleased to have Andy with us, sharing something about the new church plant in Charleston. And opening up God's word for us and applying it really in a sense to those circumstances.

Though also, of course, applicable beyond those circumstances. Now, having had that opportunity to hear Andy, to hear his report, and, you know, it makes our involvement so much more meaningful than if I had simply said, Oh, by the way, folks, you know, there's a new church plant in Charleston.

And, you know, we really should pray for that. We should pray that God would bless and pray for Andy. And who's Andy and where's Charleston? But if we're informed, then we're better able, as well as more enthused, to ask God, in this case, that he would grant success on the endeavors of his people in that place.

Nehemiah's asking was informed. If you want to be even more informed and even more engaged, Andy's induction, this is a little bit of an aside, but his induction is on Friday the 1st of September. And I was just thinking it might be quite nice if some of us could go down to be present. So if that appeals to you and you'd be interested, speak to me and we can maybe work out.

[18:51] Maybe we can just go in one car or what have you. So Friday, 1st of September. That's just a wee aside, but it has to do with this. So his asking was informed. But then think about ourselves more immediately here in Aberdeen, here in Bon Accord, of the neighborhood in which this building is located.

How informed are we as to the circumstances and the needs of those about us? It struck me in what Andy was saying about Robert Murray McChain being given a tour around Dundee and how he was so struck by how little he knew at that point of the lives and circumstances of many who lived in the very city where he ministered.

And, you know, he was stirred to pray to God, awaken my soul. But why was that prayer even prayed? Because he became informed.

Had he not been informed, then it wouldn't have then progressed to him praying to God, awaken my soul. And then all that followed in his ministry.

And, of course, we could, you know, go beyond that and apply this in so many ways. But let's move on. He was informed. His asking was informed. But also, it's very clear from what we read that his asking was heartfelt.

[20 : 08] Notice how he responds to the news that he hears. When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

Can you even imagine what it must have been for Nehemiah to be there listening to this report that seemed all darkness and all gloom. And it was so depressing in many ways to hear what was going on in Jerusalem.

And his response is from the heart. He wept. He mourned. He fasted. And so when he comes to God and he asks that God would grant him success, it is grounded in this heartfelt concern for the matter to hand.

I wonder for ourselves, you know, when was the last time we wept as we came to God, pleading with him to grant us gospel success on behalf of God's people and the welfare of God's people and the extending of God's church.

There's no merit in contrived weeping. But it is the case that it's only in the measure that we care that we will ask. And so the asking of Nehemiah was we could describe as heartfelt.

[21 : 31] So it was informed, but it was also heartfelt. We can also notice that his asking was serious and persistent. Notice what he says there in the second half of verse 4.

For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed. And then in verse 6 he also gives some indication as to the seriousness with which he approached this matter of asking God.

There we read there in the second half of verse 6 that your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants. He doesn't just immediately go to God and without any prior approach to God simply say, well grant me success.

Well I've done it, that's it, leave it in God's hand, he'll do what he has to do. No, this is a serious and persistent praying to God that culminates, if you wish, in this bold request.

Grant me success in the presence of the king. It's also intriguing to notice and we kind of lose the sense of it when we see the time references because they're not familiar to us.

[22 : 46] But in chapter 1 and verse 1 we read that in the month of Kislev these friends, countrymen, arrived and informed Nehemiah of what was going on in Jerusalem.

And of course that is the spur for him beginning to pray to God. So that's in the month of Kislev. Now that would equate in terms of our calendar to November, December.

Kislev straddles our November, December. And then in chapter 2 and verse 1 we have another time reference and we read in the month of Nisan. And the month of Nisan in the same year of the Jewish calendar equates to our March, April.

So you can do the maths between say December and March or April. Everything would suggest that throughout this period Nehemiah was in prayer to God concerning this matter before he ever approaches the king.

Now we don't know if he spent that time simply because he was waiting for an opportune moment. It may be or it may be that he felt that this was the time required to be ready to take things to this next stage as he seeks success from God.

[24 : 05] It certainly speaks of prayer of asking that was serious and persistent. Now we're not for a moment suggesting that praying for a long time over a prolonged period somehow is meritorious.

That it will twist God's arm and that if you pray for a long time you're more likely to be answered than if you pray for a short time. We're not saying that for a moment. But it is the case that the manner of our praying reveals our heart and the seriousness of our concern for the rebuilding of God's city.

The welfare of God's people, the honour of God's name. His asking was informed, it was heartfelt, it was serious and persistent. And his asking was also worshipful.

Notice how he approaches God in prayer. In verse 5, Then I said, O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and obey His commands.

The very manner in which he addresses God in prayer. The very manner in which he leads into this great request that he has is in a spirit of worship and of biblical worship.

[25 : 20] He knows God. He knows the character of God. He knows that God is a God of power, of might. But also a God characterized by covenant, loyal love.

His prayer is not directed to a God of His own imagination, but the God who has revealed Himself in history and in Scripture. And so, His approach, His asking is worshipful.

His asking is also marked by great humility. Notice the way in which He acknowledges the sins, not only of the people, but His own.

And in a very deliberate and explicit way. There He goes on in verses 6 and 7. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant in praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.

And then particularly what He says. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly towards you.

[26 : 29] We have not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses. I confess the sins of the people, the sins that we have committed, including myself.

The we would have covered that. You know, we have sinned. Well, that, the we, the first person plural, includes himself. But how curious and how intriguing that Nehemiah, having said, we have sinned, then very deliberately says, including myself.

You know, in the event that there were any doubt about this, I also have sinned. I also am guilty.

Now, I would imagine that if you had had a, you know, a representative group of Israelites there in Persia, and you had said, well, who are the pious ones?

Who are the ones faithful to the Lord? Nehemiah would have been up there. You know, he would have been up there. And yet here he is, approaching God, asking that God would grant him success, but in this spirit marked by great humility.

We have sinned, including myself, a clear sense of who is the greatest offended party in the matter of our sinfulness. We have sinned against you.

[27 : 45] And that is always the mark of one who appreciates the gravity of sin. You're reminded of Joseph there when he was being seduced by Potiphar's wife and how he defends himself against her seductions.

How could I do this great evil against, you're almost expecting him to say, Potiphar? But no, against God. How could I do this great evil against God? If I were to do this, I would be sinning against God. And Nehemiah also is conscious of that reality. He recognizes the gravity of sin. We have acted very wickedly. We have broken the commandments you gave us.

We're without excuse. We cannot claim ignorance. And so his asking is marked by this humility in acknowledging his own sinfulness and his own need for forgiveness.

But then together with that, and it's really quite a combination, this humility is also accompanied by what we might call respectful boldness.

[28 : 50] Then in verse 8, if you've been counting, we're on to number 6. Respectful boldness. Verse 8, remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses saying.

And then he goes on. The point I'm really drawing out here is that there's a sense in which he's prodding God here. He's saying, you've made promises. Yes, you said that if we sinned, we would suffer the consequences.

Well, that's what happened. Here we are. But you also said that if we repented, however far away we were from Jerusalem, you would draw us back again. You said that, God.

You promised that. And you keep your promises. And there's a boldness there. Here he is. The man who's acknowledged his great sin and yet he says, God, you know, here's the promise.

And we're claiming the promise. We believe you to be a God of covenant love. You keep your promises. Well, here's the promise you made. Let me remind you of your promise.

[29 : 48] God doesn't need to be reminded of his promises. But, of course, this is the point. There's this boldness, this respectful boldness in his asking of God.

But his asking also was urgent. And that brings us really to the heart of, I don't know, it's the heart of his request, but certainly the culmination of this prayer. When in verse 11, he says, give your servants success today.

I wonder how many of us would add that word today. I think we, you know, we shy away from the today. We might even shy away from the word success. But let's say, okay, I'll understand it in a proper way.

Grant us success. But grant us success today? I think we find that a little bit scary. What if nothing happens? You know, we'll kind of be left with egg on our face. But, you know, there's real urgency here.

There is an urgent specificity. I think that's a word. Grant success today. Oh, Lord, give your servants success today.

[30 : 55] Now, clearly there's a reason why it's today. Because it was that day that he was going to go and see the king. There's an explanation for it. But nonetheless, it is marked by this urgency.

Give your servants success. Today. Now, of course, we do need to wisely balance that urgency or that holy impatience with a resting in God's prerogative and God's timing.

But we can be sure that God doesn't get upset if we ask for success today. Today. His asking, and we are coming to a conclusion, his asking was accompanied by action.

And how, yes, it's so fundamental. He asks, but then he goes to the king. He doesn't simply ask and say, right, it's in God's hands. God is powerful. God is omnipotent. I'll wait until the king, you know, calls me and, well, we'll see what happens.

I've done my bit. I've prayed. No, he asks and he goes. He goes to the king. And we're told that he was afraid. It was no easy task.

[32 : 00] I was very much afraid. He declares very honestly to us. I was very much afraid. But his asking is accompanied by action.

He asks and he acts. And, of course, the application to that is, I would hope, so clear. You know, we can't only ask. Our asking must be accompanied by action.

If we're asking that God would bring men and women to faith, if we're asking that we would be used of God to make disciples, we can't just ask God that we would be used in that way.

We then need to do something. We need to act accompanying our request. And the final thing that I want you to notice in terms of a characteristic of how he asks is that his asking was marked by real practical expectation.

Let me ask you a question, a final question for you to think about as we draw things to a close.

Notice there in chapter 2 where he has this audience with Artaxerxes.

[33 : 12] Artaxerxes clearly is favorably inclined towards him. That in itself an evidence of God's gracious hand upon him. And he actually says yes. You know, this is what you want.

You can have it. Okay. Now notice what Nehemiah immediately goes on to say in verses 7 and 8, having gotten a green light, as it were, from Artaxerxes.

We read there in 7 and 8, I also said to him, this is part of the one audience. You know, this is all running together. I also said to him, if it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates so that they will provide me safe conduct until I arrive in Judah.

And may I have a letter to Asaph king, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates for the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy.

Well, what's that all about? The question I pose to you is, what does that, do those very specific requests tell you about Nehemiah's expectation of success as he went before the king?

[34 : 16] Well, what does it say to you? Was he expecting the king to be favorably disposed to him? What do you say? Who says yes? Yeah, like he even, he's got, you know, he fully expects a positive answer, else he wouldn't have had so much detail.

If this was, oh yeah, I suppose I should ask because, you know, it's the right thing to do and I'm really scared, but, you know, that's what we need to do. We need to pray because God tells us to pray, so I'll pray and I've done my bit. No, he expects success.

Yes, and that's why he's got all this long list of very detailed requests. The moment the king says, yes, okay, well, I've also got A and B and C and D.

Why? Because he was expectant. He expected God to grant him success. He asked for success and he was given success. He expected success.

He expected success in the terms of how that word is being used by Nehemiah himself. I wonder if that's true of us. You know, my purpose here isn't that we would beat ourselves about the head and say, oh, I'm not like that.

[35 : 18] But to what extent we can draw and be encouraged by Nehemiah in some of these features. Now, you know, don't imagine every time you sit down to pray, you've got to tick the box at all of these nine things, you won't even remember them all.

But if some of them kind of maybe just help you to ponder on some of these aspects of the manner that Nehemiah asked, then I hope that can be a practical usefulness to you and to us.

Well, let's just draw the threads together. Will you pray with Nehemiah? Grant your servants success today. Well, if that is something that you want to join with Nehemiah in praying, well, make sure you ask in the right place, that you direct your prayer in the right direction, that you ask for the right things, and that you ask in the right manner.

And may God answer you and may He answer us beyond our asking or imagining. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for all that we learn concerning Yourself, who You are, but also for how we can learn from Your servants, Your people, as they relate to You and speak to You and pray to You.

We thank You for what we can learn from Nehemiah. We pray that we would know something of His craving for success in the rebuilding of God's cause, in the welfare of God's people, in seeking the honor of God's name, and that with that as our motivation, with that as our heartfelt concern, that we too would come to You asking that You would grant success to Your servants as we seek to do Your work and make known Your good news.

[37 : 13] Help us, we pray, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.