

Nehemiah 2:1-10

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 September 2019

Preacher: John Ross

[0 : 00] Well, let's go back to Nehemiah chapter 2. We're thinking this morning of what this passage, verses 1 to 10, teaches us about overcoming fear with prayer and faith, overcoming fear with prayer and faith.

How do you get on with thunder? Is thunder something that puts a shiver up your spine and you hear it and you want to draw the bedclothes over your head and hope that it'll go away?

One summer night, there was a severe thunderstorm and a mother was tucking her small son up in bed and she was about to turn the light out when he asked with a trembling voice, Mommy, will you stay with me tonight until the thunder's gone?

And smiling and trying to reassure him and comfort him, she gave him a hug and she said tenderly, I can't, dear, I have to go back to Daddy. A long silence followed.

At last, it was broken by a shaky little voice saying, the big coward. Fear plays a real part in many people's lives, sometimes a large part in their lives.

[1 : 24] And sometimes fear hits you, especially when you're doing something new. You've not been there before. New situation. What does it hold?

How do I navigate this? How do I find my way around it? And fear can often inhibit us from achieving our full potential.

It can stop us from playing a full part in family and in community and in church life. But we learn from this little passage that what Nehemiah may have been, he certainly was no coward.

A coward isn't someone who feels fear. A coward is someone who runs from fear. And Nehemiah certainly didn't do that.

He knew fear, but he knew how to overcome it. He did not allow it to destroy his usefulness, nor did his anxieties lead to any kind of paralysis or inertia.

[2 : 26] Now, over in the West, in Kilmally, we've been trying to learn from the book of Nehemiah. It's become quite sporadic, as I've, over the last few months, been preaching there less and less.

A good sign, perhaps, that there are potential new ministers on the horizon. But when I'm there, we're working in the mornings through Nehemiah. And some months ago now, we were here in this second chapter.

And we're trying to look at Nehemiah as a kind of character model for us, a man of faith, as we, in the context of Kilmally, seeking to build a gospel church.

And what we find with Nehemiah is that he is, despite his many strengths, he's very, really human. He's subject to all kinds of negative influences and sometimes gives way to depression.

He faces discouragement. And here, in this passage, he encounters fear. And yet, through it all, he was enabled to trust in God's grace and press on regardless of his own feelings.

[3 : 40] And he teaches us how we, too, can overcome the negative emotions that so often hinder us from doing the right thing, from doing what we understand to be God's will.

And in this, prayer, let me use that word for the moment, prayer plays a large part. Nehemiah shows us how prayer and faith, with commitment to God's will, turns yesterday's disasters into tomorrow's successes.

Throughout this book, there are many references to prayer. And many that help us to correct the misconceptions we can have and the errors we entertain about talking to God.

The book itself begins pretty well with Nehemiah's longest and most comprehensive prayer. And it's very interesting to note that it takes less than a minute to read it.

That's Nehemiah's longest recorded prayer. Chapter 2, here in verse 4, records something very, very much shorter. The king said to me, What is it you want?

[5 : 06] Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, If it pleases the king and your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah, and so on. What do you want?

I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king. In the space of time that it takes to say it. These short prayers of Nehemiah's, sometimes called arrow prayers, have a lot to teach us about engaging with God in the rough and tumble of everyday life.

So I want us to look at some of the principles that we discover in these verses, three or four of them, general principles, and the context as well that guide us in talking to God.

And I would rather talk about talking to God than prayer. And I'll explain that in a moment or two. But the first thing that we discover here is that Nehemiah realizes, and has understood at some point earlier in his life, that talking to God is necessary.

It's necessary. It's a very simple thing to say, but it's absolutely, profoundly true. It's necessary. Nehemiah's recorded prayers in this book are mainly very short.

[6 : 29] Prayers, so he lifts his heart to God. Some of the shortest, perhaps, recorded anywhere in the Bible. But we do have evidence that there were other times when his prayers were not so constrained and not so compressed.

Indeed, in chapter 1, in verse 4, when he hears the bad news from Jerusalem, that its gates are broken down, and that the walls are broken down, rather than gates have been burned, we discover then that he sat down and wept.

For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed. So his longest recorded prayer might be read in a minute. Many of his other prayers are almost instantaneous.

But there were other occasions when we discover that he spent much time praying. And the fasting is connected to the praying, of course.

But whether his prayers were long or short, Nehemiah saw that talking to God was absolutely necessary. And the reference to fasting simply tells us this, that he did not allow other things to get in the way.

[7 : 54] He was self-denying in that sense, depriving himself of food and perhaps sleep in order to talk to God. Prayer and fasting historically, biblically and historically have often gone together.

A couple that Elizabeth and I knew, he was an assistant minister in our home church back in Northern Ireland. He and his wife, they used to take a day out every week and commit themselves to praying.

And they prayed throughout the day and there was no interruptions for food. That's what the fasting was. See, there's nothing super spiritual about the fasting.

It's not a way of kind of trying to bend God's arm to do something for us. It's simply a way of rescheduling your life to give priority to talking things through with God.

And in any other area of life, we're perfectly used to doing that kind of thing. We have to schedule our priorities. Some things have to go in order that other things can be done.

[9 : 05] The meal, the party, the concert, some other thing might be set aside so that we can spend time with our spouses, our family and our friends who particularly need us at that moment.

Or perhaps we need them in a special way at that moment. And so those other activities just go. They cease to be the priority. They're dropped in favor of what is more important.

So fasting is no more really than making time to spend with God, to sort out with Him whatever is of paramount importance at that particular moment.

And it all underlines this fact that emerges that prayer is necessary. So as Nehemiah's opportunity to speak with the king approached, he grew increasingly nervous and increasingly conscious that thousands of Israelites depended on the outcome of what he might say.

Even more important, he saw tied up with all this, the restoration of Jerusalem. He saw tied up with that, the glory and the honor of God and the destiny of his own nation.

[10 : 27] And that was a big burden of responsibility for someone like Nehemiah to carry. And he needed help. He needed help at all kinds of levels.

But above all, he needed God's help in that situation. And therefore, he needed to ask for it. He needed to talk to God.

You know, sometimes people will say to us, well, yes, prayer is important. But we need to do more than pray.

Okay, I can go with that. We need to do more than pray, but we can't do more than pray until we have first prayed.

Prayer is necessary. The second thing we learn about talking to God in this context is that talking to God is immediate.

[11 : 30] It's direct. It's one person talking to another person. It tells us that when Nehemiah was talking to God in an emergency, it wasn't necessary to stop what he was doing and find a quiet corner and say a set formula of words.

He didn't have to find a holy place, holy space, or holy time, or adopt a holy posture. He knew that we always have direct, immediate access to God in whatever situation we find ourselves.

There's no better time to pray than then. There's no better place to pray than where we are. There's no better posture in which to pray than the one we find ourselves at that moment of need and emergency.

We do not need to postpone prayer until we find an undisturbed and an unhurried moment. So here's Nehemiah and he's standing in the presence of a great king, an absolute monarch, power of life and death over him, in the midst of what was almost certainly a pagan celebration of some time.

And yet, in that context, which was perhaps anything other than Nehemiah really wanted, he knows he is also there at God's footstool.

[13 : 26] That's also the place where heaven touches earth and he's in the presence of the almighty God. Archbishop Francois Fenelon once wisely remarked, one moment will suffice to place yourself in God's presence, to love and to worship him.

If you wait for more appropriate moments, you run the risk of waiting forever. And Fenelon teaches us to catch the fleeting moment, to speak with God.

Standing at the bus stop, on the train, airport queue, traveling by car, walking or cycling, to and from our work. All these places provide us with those chance and choice moments.

To lift our hearts to God. To intercede for others. To obtain fresh grace for ourselves. And renewed strength to face what lies ahead.

In a few short seconds, because we have that immediate access into God's presence. In a few short seconds, that gulf between heaven and earth is bridged.

[14 : 41] Nehemiah knew he was not talking to a distant and disinterested God. He was a God, he knew something about God. And he knew that he stood always in the presence of God.

He was in touch with his Father. And when there's little time for words, even a sigh becomes a supplication.

A great early church preacher, Chrysostom, what a marvelous name for a preacher, golden mouth. That's what it translates as. Chrysostom put it like this.

He said, where angels are present and archangels throng around, where cherubim and seraphim encircle with their blaze the throne, a mortal may approach with unrestrained confidence and converse with heaven's dread sovereign.

In the words of Scripture, we as Christian believers can draw near in full assurance of faith.

[16 : 00] Talking to God is immediate. And the third thing that comes out of this, we see it in Nehemiah's whole demeanor here, is that talking to God is natural.

It strikes me he's more comfortable, we would say, Christians would say, understandably, but it doesn't perhaps strike others that way. He's more comfortable in the presence of God than he is in the presence of his employer, King Artaxerxes.

And his communication with God is exceedingly straightforward and uncomplicated. complicated. And I think we complicate it even when we speak about prayer, when we use that word.

I sometimes wish we could abandon that ancient and now obscure English word altogether. You see, originally it was not a religious word.

And it referred to anything that you obtained by an entreaty to someone. And in its secular sense, it's more or less dropped out of the language, apart from legal language.

[17 : 24] And I think that little word is too contrived. And it's too religious. And it's too churchy. And it's too formal to express the simple, natural truth of talking with God.

And Nehemiah shows us here that for a believer, talking to God is the most normal of activities. Although, as we read in chapter 1, he may have spent hours talking to God during the previous weeks, he now just spontaneously and instinctively does so again, and this time seeking help in the practical issue of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Verse 4, the king said to me, then I prayed to God, and I answered the king. The king said to me, I prayed to God, I spoke to God, and I said to the king.

Nehemiah's habit of talking to God I think underlines and endorses these wise words. I don't know who said them and I don't remember where I came across them, but I noted them down and I've used them on other occasions, but this is, I think, sums up Nehemiah's approach to God.

Ask in simplicity. True need forgets to be formal. Set phrases, stretched out sentences, long words, find little favor with a soul thirsty for God and his grace.

[19 : 16] Do you desire to lead others in prayer? Do not use words that they don't understand. Express their need as clearly as your own, and then it concludes with this, do not go to the mercy seat on stilts.

keep your feet on the ground. And please, don't have the temerity to try to teach the almighty theology.

James Montgomery's very fine hymn also teaches us of the naturalness of speaking to God, how ordinary and how simple and straightforward it is.

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, unuttered or expressed, the motion of a hidden fire that trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh, the falling of a tear, the upward glancing of an eye when none but God is near. Prayer is the simplest form of speech that infant lips can try.

[20 : 24] and the fourth lesson I think that comes out of this is that talking to God is effective. Talking to God is effective. We're not talking to space, we're not talking to the walls, we're not talking as we're accused so often by our aggressive atheist friends of talking to an imaginary friend, we're talking to the Lord of the universe, the creator of all things, the God and the father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Talking to God is effective. And we see that from this because Nehemiah's very short lifting of his heart to God, his short petition was answered promptly.

Now, not all our prayers are going to be answered immediately as his was, but this just underlines for us that however long the timescale may be, God hears, God answers and God adds.

The king said to me, what do you want? He was in a difficult situation with Nehemiah. He really was. He was the king's cup bearer, kind of butler, but he was also there to cheer up the king.

That was part of the role of a cup bearer. You're not supposed to look sad and downcast and depressed in the presence of the king. You're supposed to lift him out of his depression and his dark moods.

[22 : 12] And here's Nehemiah for the first time in the king's presence and he's got a long face. And the king's sensitive, he's a sensitive soul is Artaxerxes. And that strikes me as quite remarkable.

And he says to Nehemiah, he says, this is really something to do with your heart. This isn't just immediate circumstances. This is a deep issue with you.

This is nothing but sadness of heart. I was very much afraid, Nehemiah tells us. But I said to the king, may the king live forever.

Why should my face not look sad when the city my fathers are buried, where my fathers are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?

So there's fear, real fear. fear. And yet, he's conscious of God's presence. And in that context, speed, of course, was important.

[23 : 24] It isn't necessary for us to be careful in forming our words when we talk to God, because he does know the thoughts of our hearts. But it is important to say the right thing when we're appealing to people.

the king said to me, what is it you want? And, Lord, give me wisdom. Give me the right words. And without much hesitation, if it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city of Judah where my fathers are buried, so that I can rebuild it.

You know, potentially, that was a rebellious act. And you notice Nehemiah doesn't mention Jerusalem. Was the name of Jerusalem to be expunged?

Was he not supposed to mention Jerusalem? He doesn't. It's the city in Judah. He's really on thin ice here.

And then he hears that God has directed the heart of the king, and the king says to him, how long will your journey take?

[24 : 40] You can imagine the sense of relief that comes to Nehemiah in that situation. And we could go on through the whole of the king's response, but we see here the simple point that prayer is effective.

Prayer is effective. He needs words from God, and he gets words from God. And his petition to the king is answered.

The unfailing Lord was by his side, in his mind, moving his lips and on his heart. And this experience of Nehemiah teaches us that we have every reason to expect God to answer, because prayer is productive.

James teaches us that in a marvelous little verse. The prayer of a righteous person, that's someone who's been made right with God through Jesus Christ.

Not a good person, not someone who deserves God to answer them, but a righteous person, someone who's been made right through faith in Jesus Christ. Their prayers are powerful and effective.

[25 : 55] And if you've been made right with God through Jesus Christ, you may think, my prayers are rubbish. And nothing seems to happen.

But that's absolutely wrong. Absolutely wrong. Working in God's way into God's time scale and giving eyes to see what he is really doing, James is absolutely right.

the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and it accomplishes. It's productive. It's effective. The eccentric early free church leader, John Duncan, known as Rabbi John Duncan because he was so well acquainted with Jewish things, he once very wisely commented two things, he said, make us stunted in prayer.

Either little feeling of need or little hope of supply. And that's what holds us back, isn't it? We can cope.

We can get by. After all, we've got God-given brains and abilities. We don't need him. In the humdrum and the routine and the normal.

[27 : 25] Little sense of need. So we don't pray. And so God doesn't answer. Or alternatively, we sort of pray, but we don't really pray because we don't think it's going to make any difference.

Little hope of supply. And that may be a kind of negative temperament that says, well, I know God answers prayers for other people, but why would he answer my prayer? You combine those two things together, a feeling of need and confidence that God hears and answers our prayers.

And that makes prayer come alive, talking to God come alive and real. Nehemiah knew his need and he had great confidence that God could and would meet it.

And he did. and he knows our needs too. But like every mom and every dad, God wants to hear it from us, his children.

And then he works. And he doesn't always work dramatically. And things are not always turned right around and made altogether different. but he's with us and he strengthens us and he guides us.

[28 : 58] And he brings about the remarkable when he needs to bring about the remarkable. And we see him at work and we rejoice in his goodness. Paul had that kind of confidence and he had it not only for himself, but on behalf of other Christians.

So he writes to the Christians in Philippi and he says, and my God will meet all your needs. according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

That's a good place to end. My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

That helps to see something of our own need. It helps us to see something about how God will supply. And it helps us to talk to him about whatever the situation is that we're facing, whatever challenges come our way, and to rejoice in his presence and to give thanks to him for all the good things he's given to us too.

May he bless his word to us this morning. We didn't mention it this morning, but one of the main reasons why prayer is effective and we have immediate access to God is through the work of the Lord Jesus.

[30 : 21] He lived for us, he died for us, he rose again, he ascended into heaven, and he's there as our mediator now, linking us with God.

And so we're going to sing. . . .

. . .