

Well, good evening, y'all, and welcome to CenterPoint for our midweek refresh, our study of the book of Nehemiah on chapter two tonight. And after that, our 30 minute time of prayer. If you would like a study guide, there are some available over here on the table with the flowers, and I'm told you may help yourself to a flower as well to take home. First come, first served. They are quite lovely, so grab one if you would like to. In Nehemiah 1, we read briefly about Nehemiah's strategic position as cutbearer to the king for such a time as this. We hear of Nehemiah's wonderful prayer to the God of heaven that he prays day and night for what we found out later on is a period of four months. And in Nehemiah chapter two, we see the answer to Nehemiah's prayer unfolding from the God of heaven. So I'll begin reading in Nehemiah chapter two and read the entirety of the chapter. This is God's word. In the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence, and the king said to me, why is your face sad, seeing 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. Then I came to the governors of the province beyond the river and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen, but when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me, and I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the valley gate to the dragon spring and to the dung gate and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that

had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the fountain gate and to the king's pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the valley gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, you see the trouble we're in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision. And I told them in the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, what is this thing that you're doing? Are you rebelling against the king? Then I replied to them, the God of heaven will make us prosper and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem. This is God's word. The big idea, as I see it from

this chapter, is that after having prayed, after spending adequate time in prayer to the God of heaven, God's people should then expect providential opportunities to act, and to act boldly, and to act decisively, and to act wisely on the grace that they are given. There is a lot of constructive things that we can do after we have first prayed, but there's really nothing effective we can do in God's kingdom, in the church, before having prayed. Prayer is the prerequisite for all effective work. in the church and in the kingdom of God. So we see that Nehemiah puts in the requisite time, and he knows the God to whom he prays. He pours out his heart day and night to the God of heaven, whom it is very obvious he's in covenant with. He knows deeply. He knows personally. He knows relationally. Doesn't just know about him. He knows him as his father. And he pours his heart out for a period of what we find out is four months. Diligent, patient, persistent prayer. He fasts. He prays day and night. He prays all the time. This is prayer without ceasing in the words of the Apostle Paul. And finally, he's given an opportunity. So in the first five verses, we see an opportunity seized. Having prayed, an opportunity providentially drops in Paul's lap, Paul, I have Paul in the brain now, in Nehemiah's lap, and he seizes that opportunity. And then a mission begun in verses six through nine. And then a situation assessed in verses 10 through 16. And finally, a vision cast in verses 17 and 18 to the end of the chapter. So first of all, an opportunity seized. It's been four months after hearing about the plight that's going on in Jerusalem. Hanani, Nehemiah's

brother, has come to him and given him the bad news about what's going on in Jerusalem. The gates have been burned with fire. The walls have been destroyed. Jerusalem lies in ruins. I remember Bruce Springsteen's song, My City of Ruins, makes me think of this passage in Nehemiah. Nehemiah's city, and much more to the point, God's city in Jerusalem has been destroyed, and God's people are in derision, and it breaks Nehemiah's heart, and so he is mourning, and he is fasting, and he is praying, and he's ready to do something about it when God gives him the opportunity. So four months after hearing about all this, an opportunity finally comes. It reminds us of the importance of being patient in prayer. As we are praying day and night, as we're praying persistently, as we're pouring out our heart in prayer to God over a certain matter, it behooves us to be patient, to wait upon the Lord. and to renew our strength and to mount up with wings as eagles. The Lord is seldom on our timetable, on our expected table of events that we hope unfolds, but he is never, ever late. And so Nehemiah is patient as he persists in prayer. We see in verse two that fear grips Nehemiah when his feelings become apparent to the king. Back in chapter one, verse 11, we hear this wonderful prayer of Nehemiah. He says, give success to your servant today. It's a very specific prayer. This isn't just general pious platitudes that he's throwing out there. I'm not sure what I'm doing to make that popping sound. I apologize for it. Let's see. Maybe I'll have better luck with this. Okay, let's try that. Can y'all hear me okay? Okay. So he prays this very specific prayer. Again, not just a pious rote prayer that you may repeat without thinking, but this is very, very specific. And the thing about a specific prayer is you know when it's been answered, don't you? And you know when it hasn't been answered. And so, Nehemiah prays very, very specifically. Give success to your servant today. Now, who is your servant? Well, Nehemiah is referring to himself, of course. He is the servant of the Lord. Today means the present time, right now. Lord, answer this right now. And grant him, grant me, mercy in the sight of this man. Again, very, very specific prayer. Who is this man? Well, we find out in chapter 2 this man is the king of Persia, King Artaxerxes, whom providentially Nehemiah has been appointed as cupbearer to. It raises the question as we consider God's providence, why are you here? And that's just a rhetorical question. And I don't mean here tonight, this very reason, that reason is obvious. But why are you in the station in life you're in right now? Why are you in the church you're in? Why are you in the city, the community that you're in? Why has God given you the specific

vocation or calling or profession that you have right now? If we believe that God is sovereign, which of course He is, either He's sovereign over all, or He's not sovereign at all, right? So He's sovereign over every

detail of our lives, and so there's a specificity to why God has appointed you to the station in life you're in right now.

Why is that? Those are important questions

to ask from time to time. And in God's providence, Nehemiah has been appointed as the cupbearer, the right-hand man, the one who tastes the king's wine before it's handed to him to make sure it's not poisoned, very trusted servant of the king for this moment in time, leads Nehemiah to pray very specifically that God might give him favor with Artaxerxes this very day. Now, when this prayer is answered,

The king notices that Nehemiah is sad in his presence as he approaches him with a goblet of wine. Now some people think that Nehemiah was sort of making a show of being sad in order to get the king's attention. I personally don't think that's what's going on here because we see Nehemiah's response when the king notices that he is sad, and it's a bit of a surprise. He's not expecting to have this opportunity, so it doesn't seem like any of this is premeditated. He is simply sad. He's been staying up all night praying. His eyes are probably bloodshot.

There are probably creases around his face from anxiety and worry. He cannot hide the fact that

he is brokenhearted over what's happening in Jerusalem. And sooner or later, when we're bearing burdens that are overwhelming to us, they're going to seep through, aren't they? People are going to notice when we are burdened and when we're overwhelmed and when we're in sorrow and distress. King is perceptive and he notices that Nehemiah is struggling, Nehemiah is sad.

And so he asked him, why is your face sad? Why the long face? And he says, this is nothing

but sadness of the heart. Then Nehemiah says, I was very much afraid. Now why was he so afraid at this point? Well, for one thing, it was considered

very, very bad manners in the Persian Empire to be sad in the presence of the king. How could you possibly be sad

in the presence of such an important, eminent man as the king of Persia? How dare you? And so kings tended

to take that personally when you were sad in their presence. Also, Nehemiah is very susceptible

at this point of being accused of treason, because why did the rebuilding of the walls stop

to start with? Well, because Artaxerxes, the

same king, became convinced that the people there were guilty of treason against him, that they were guilty of sedition,

that they were rebellious people, that they were going to rise

up in rebellion against Persia and become an independent province. And so to squelch that, Artaxerxes

orders the work to stop. If Nehemiah is deemed to be sympathetic to these people in Jerusalem, then he too could be accused of treason. And that was not looked at kindly in the Persian Empire. They were not given to being kind to those accused of treason. So his life is really in danger here. So he has to play his cards very carefully. So in verse three, Nehemiah answers Artaxerxes. It's a pretty bold response, but it's also a very tactful and careful and prayerful response. He is, after all, very much afraid. It's a loyal response. He shows deference and loyalty to the king, let the king live forever. But it's also rather bold. 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." Notice that he doesn't even mention the name Jerusalem specifically at all. He focuses instead on something that even a Medo-Persian king would relate to, and that is the sacredness of his ancestors' graves. That's something that international kings would be able to understand. At this point, the king says to me, What are you requesting? So this is a second question that the king has asked him here. And Nehemiah adds to his daily habit of fervent prayer day and night. Prayer day and night means prayer all the time. He adds to his habit of prayer, this spontaneous prayer that shoots up to heaven. It's often called an arrow prayer directed to heaven before answering the king's second question. You may call this a text prayer. You send a text when you have just a brief message to send or brief question to send. You don't have time to type out a lengthy email or snail mail. You just send it quickly and you expect a quick response to it. And so this is kind of a text prayer that Nehemiah shoots to heaven very quickly in the spur of the moment between being asked this question by the king of Persia, king of the superpower of the world, and the time when he's expected to answer. So Nehemiah lists this very short, spontaneous prayer. And I think what gives his prayer efficacy and effectiveness is not the fact that he shoots a spontaneous prayer, but the fact that the last four months have been bathed in constant prayer and fasting and seeking the God of heaven and praying very scripturally and acknowledging God for who he is and his sovereignty. So it's the fact that Nehemiah has nurtured a relationship, a covenant relationship with the God of heaven that really gives efficacy to this spontaneous in the moment prayer. And what I'm saying is both are exceedingly important to nurture that daily habit of prayer, to pray without ceasing all the time. And when you're overwhelmed in the spur of the moment, when you need help right now, when you need help yesterday, to lift a prayer and to expect an immediate answer. Because we're told in scripture, after all, aren't we? Before they pray, I will hear

them. As the words are being spoken, I will understand and I will answer. How does God answer prayers before we ask? Well, because God is outside of space and time. These things boggle our minds and are beyond our capacity to understand. But we need to understand only this, that when we ask, we will receive. When we seek, we will find. When we knock, the door will be open unto us because God knows what we need even before we think to pray. He's already answering prayers that we have yet to ask. That is an awesome thought to consider, and it should give great fervency and immediacy to our prayer lives. So what does Nehemiah, after having prayed to the Lord, request? He prays to the God of heaven, and then he says to the king, after believing that he has received this answer from the Lord, 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. Now this is a very risky request. Why is that? Well, because it directly goes against King Artaxerxes' edict. We read about that in Ezra chapter 4, verse 21. That's where Artaxerxes says, in response to the accusations of treason on the part of the Israelites, that the city not be rebuilt. until, and this is a great and providential loophole that Artaxerxes puts in himself, until a decree is made by me. Now, if you know anything about the laws of the Medes and Persians, they're very much like words that have been engraved in stone or brick. They do not change by definition. If a law of the Medes and Persians has been made, it's permanent, it's forever, it cannot be changed. So the fact that Artaxerxes made this decree and says the city will not be rebuilt until a decree is made by me, It means that in God's providence, there's a loophole there that can allow Nehemiah's prayerful request to be answered. It's an amazing thing. So in verse 23 of that chapter, we're told that Artaxerxes made the builders cease in their building. And so Nehemiah is asking him to reverse his policy and to allow the work to continue in Judah. So an opportunity is seized here because we see that Artaxerxes quite miraculously is favorable to Nehemiah's request because he knows Nehemiah, he trusts Nehemiah. Nehemiah's character speaks very, very highly and he implicitly trusts his cupbearer and answers him favorably. So next we see a mission begun. This opportunity is seized and now a mission is begun. Artaxerxes' responses show that Nehemiah has carefully and meticulously planned for this very moment. Have you ever prayed to the Lord and then wondered, hmm, what if God actually answers this prayer? What am I going to do then? Well, Nehemiah has thought that through, and he's considered the contingency of God actually favorably answering this prayer. He expects Him to answer it favorably, and he's prepared for the next step. And so he expects opposition to come, and thus he sees the

need for official authority. In verses 7 and 8, he says, if it pleases the king, let letters be given to me to the governors of the province beyond the river. He knows those governors. He knows their opposition to the work. the first time, he knows that they will also resist it this time, and he knows that only official documentation from the king will convince them to allow it to be rebuilt this time. So he requests that. He also is familiar with a man by the name of Asaph who is somehow in charge of the King's Forest. He realizes that lots of timber will be needed in this construction project. And so he says, documentation needs to be sent to this man as well to allow him to give us the timber we need to continue the work. So he shows just meticulous attention to detail. Nehemiah has done his homework. It's very obvious. And he is prepared for the Lord to favorably answer his prayer. And though the king responds favorably, Nehemiah attributes this successful breakthrough to what? To his impeccable cup-bearing skills? No, not really. To his powers of persuasion? No, not at all. To whom does he attribute the success here? very clearly he attributes it to the Lord. In verse 8 he says, the King granted me what I asked for the good hand of my God was upon me. So he gives all the credit, all the glory to God Almighty. The King granted me what I asked, but he doesn't even give props to the king, he gives glory and honor to the Lord, who again we see is able to turn the heart of the king any way he pleases. This is the third or fourth time in Ezra and Nehemiah where that phrase or that concept is repeated. Proverbs 21 verse 1 says, the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever he will. So the good answer that the king gives, Nehemiah says, really comes from God who is sovereign over the heart even of this Persian king, this idol-worshipping king. That is no obstacle for the God of heaven to use in a mighty way to further his kingdom purposes, to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and to rebuild the people of Judah so that one day that community of faith could be rebuilt so that his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity could be sent to be among those people to grow up in that community and to grow up and live a perfect life and die a perfect, atoning death. to wash away the sins of the world. That's ultimately what God is about here. And that's why, again and again, despite what seems like overwhelming odds, the people of Judah, the Jews, survive. And not only that, thrive. And it's because of the seed of Abraham that God intends to send at His due and proper time, when the time is exactly right. Nehemiah, when he goes back to Judah, we see is accompanied by a military escort. And you might remember from the book of Ezra, Ezra was also offered a military escort when he went back to Jerusalem, but Ezra refused

it, whereas Nehemiah accepted it. And it makes good sense because these are two men, and both are men of their time, and these are two very different times, two very different sets of circumstances. Ezra, you remember, went back as a spiritual reformer, a religious reformer, a priest, a scribe. Nehemiah is going on a different mission, although a related mission, also a mission from God, but he's going as a royal emissary of the king of Persia. He's really on a mission from the Lord, but he's going as a representative of the Persian king. And so it makes sense that he would accept this military escort to go back, as we're told he did in verse 9. Next, we see a situation assessed. See this in verses 10 through

16. Not surprisingly, trouble begins almost immediately. We're told about this trio of terror, sort of this axis of evil of Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab who stand in opposition to any effort to rebuild Jerusalem. So these local political leaders are threatened by Nehemiah's presence. And so we see here that the spiritual very quickly becomes interwoven with the strategic as Nehemiah goes back. And he arrives in Jerusalem after a long journey. And he's very, very patient in both his action and his words. And before he does anything, he waits for a period of three days. Now you can bet that he didn't spend that three days in idleness. He spent them in prayer and strategizing wisely. And then he arises in the night and goes on a midnight ride on his horse. might make us think of the midnight ride, the very famous midnight ride of Paul Revere, who had his own mission that was very, very public and loud, warning the people that the British were indeed coming. Nehemiah's ride, while no less significant, was clandestine and was under cover of darkness and no one knew about it, but it was extremely important because before he engaged in any sort of leadership campaign to get the people motivated and equipped and mobilized to rebuild the walls, he first needs to see the damage for himself. He's got to assess what's wrong and what to do about it. So he takes this midnight ride that we hear about in verses 13 through 16, and he traces his path very carefully through the city, illumined possibly only by moonlight, and he's seeing it for himself and noticing what's needed. He goes from the Valley Gate to the Dung Gate, which apparently, I've read, was about 500 yards or so, so about five football field lengths and then back. So a pretty lengthy ride on his horse and the ring of realism to this ride. Some places along the way, he has to get off his horse and lead it carefully through. It's accompanied by just one or two other men as he assesses exactly and specifically what will be needed for this building project. And then finally we see a vision cast. Once he has gathered all his information, once he has bathed this in prayer, once he has strategized carefully and assessed what the needs are, then and only then he casts this vision about what needs to happen. He appeals to



shame as a motivator. He basically tells the people, aren't you people tired of being laughed to scorn by the people around you who are poking fun, not just at you, but at the holy name of God? Doesn't that motivate you to do something about this? And so Nehemiah finally shares the good news of God's grace, which really was the key motivating factor here. Verse 18, he says, he told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also the words that the king had spoken to me, which must have been hugely encouraging to them. Not just that the king Artaxerxes had favorably responded, but more than that, that providentially God was paving the way for them to renew their relationship with Him, to renew their worshiping community, and to rebuild their land. And we see that this was a very encouraging to them and did motivate them to sign on and to get busy right away. They strengthened their hands, we're told, for the work. So there's an enthusiasm, there's an eagerness to jump in and get the work done. But as you all know, there are always some who resist. So not everyone is excited as

the majority is. Some of them resort to mocking and ridicule, which if you don't have any opposition to what you're trying to do, it's probably not a worthwhile goal to start with in the Lord's work. But Nehemiah demonstrates his faith in God powerfully, and he pretty boldly rebukes those who oppose not just what he's doing, but what God is quite obviously doing. Verse 20. So it's a great passage that reminds us of the importance of prayer, the absolute necessity of prayer. We can do many things very effectively after we pray, but we can't do anything effectively until we have prayed. So we see Nehemiah combining in a powerful way here the spiritual with the strategic, giving feet to his prayers, as we say sometimes, and allowing himself to be part of God's answer to his prayer, much the way the prophet Isaiah says, here I am, Lord, send me. Make me part of the answer that I'm asking you to give us. And it's a great example for us as we pray together. So let's transition now to a time of prayer. If you need a missionary, if you need a prayer sheet, there are some on the table up here. I welcome you to come up and grab one. Why don't we spend some time as we think of Nehemiah's prayer life, recognizing the sovereign God that we pray to, the one who works all things out in conformity to His perfect will, the one who works all things for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Let's praise the Lord for both His general and specific providences in our lives. Let's do that for everyone to hear. Let's pray.