

# How Do You Make a Difference in Times of Crisis? sermonaudio.com

*Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

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**Bible Text:** Nehemiah 2:1-8  
**Preached on:** Sunday, April 5, 2020

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I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles now to Nehemiah 2. We are continuing to exposit Ezra/Nehemiah and a couple of weeks in Nehemiah already and we come to the second chapter this morning. Last time we looked at the question, the title of the message last Sunday was "How Do You Respond To Crisis?" We saw Nehemiah's response was an example to us that we should respond to crisis in prayer, and so this message today, though, different title as we look into the second chapter we're gonna see the effect of Nehemiah's prayer, the result of it, and what I want to title the message is, you know, "How Do You Make a Difference in Times of Crisis?" How do you make an eternal difference in the lives of people around you as we were just thinking about as Jess was leading us in prayer to think about in Spurgeon's sermon. Think about the people beside you, in your home, to think about your neighbors, to think about your family members, to think about other church members that you may be spending time with, on telephone, or through Zoom calls and how can we make a difference for God in the midst of this difficult time but is really an opportune time. This is the kind of time God does great things. God uses times of crisis to do great work, deep work in his people, a deep work for his kingdom.

So the question, the title of the message is how do you make a difference in a time of crisis and we're gonna see that Nehemiah is a man who made an incredible difference. As we read through the book, we're gonna see again and again just the kind of man he was and the way God used him, but we're gonna come in contact this morning with a clause that was very important in the book of Ezra. If you remember as we studied the book of Ezra and we looked at chapter 7 to 10, the life and ministry of Ezra. Remember the first six chapters of Ezra were about the first return of the exiles, the people who had been cast out of the land of Israel under God's judgment, the Babylonians had taken them captive to Babylon and basically virtually the whole nation. I mean, there were still some that were there but the majority of the people have been exiled, and so they begin to return to the land and Ezra/Nehemiah recounts three distinct returns, three separate times where groups of exiles return to Judah and Jerusalem, and it happens under the leadership first of Zerubbabel and Joshua, that's Ezra 1-6, and the focus of that first return, if you remember, was to rebuild the temple. And so that happens in those first six chapters and then that's around 538-515 BC, those first six chapters cover, and then we have a time gap between chapter 6 and chapter 7 from 515-458, about 57 years, and it picks up with

the namesake of that first book, Ezra, Ezra the priest, Ezra the scribe, and he leads a second return, a second group of exiles that returned back to Judah, this time to restore the law of God. The temple was the first return to focus now it's the law of God, to restore the law of God, to rebuild the people and the city, and something happened shortly after that return that the work is stopped and then 13 years later we come to where we are now in Nehemiah 1-2 where Nehemiah is about to lead a third return, smaller in number but no less impactful than either of the first two returns. He's going to lead a return that will result in the building of the walls of Jerusalem.

So Nehemiah encounters crisis in chapter 1 when he learns about the state of Jerusalem, that the Jews who escaped captivity are living in great distress and reproach, the walls are broken down, the gates are burned with fire. He mourns and he fasts, he prays, and then what we see in chapter 2 is he takes action. He makes a difference by taking decisive action and we're gonna see this again and again. Nehemiah is a man of action, a man of exemplary skill and wisdom; a man of extraordinary leadership qualities; a man of unshakable courage. And yet what we see underneath all of it and we're gonna see again is that these things were all fruits of a prevailing prayer life; that what made Nehemiah such an excellent leader, such an effective man of action, a man of exemplary wisdom and skill was that he communed with God continually. You're really gonna see in this he is a man who exemplifies that command in 1 Thessalonians 5 where Paul says, "Pray without ceasing." Nehemiah is a man who exemplifies that.

He was an Old Testament saint who prayed without ceasing, in fact, as we read through the book and I encourage you to read it even in preparation each week, just read through the book of Nehemiah. I was talking to David Hancock and he was talking about how he had been reading through Chronicles leading up into Ezra and Nehemiah and has read through them this week, and that's a great way to prepare for the preaching of the word and to pray for the preaching of the word because you're seeing the text unfold, pray for us as we work on it to bring it to you each Sunday, but as you get the sense of the flow of the book, what you see is Nehemiah was a man of continual prayer. No less than 10 times in the narrative Nehemiah stops to pray and he records those prayers in his book. I'm sure he prayed a whole lot more than he's telling us, he just tells, he felt led of the Spirit as he writes this book to tell us 10 different times where he stops and sometimes it's something as simple as, "Remember me, O Lord." We're gonna run into one of them here in the second chapter, some people call it arrow prayers. I've used the term flare prayer. You know, sometimes you feel like you pray out of distress, you're shooting a flare for help. But Nehemiah's arrow prayers or his flare prayers, we see from the first chapter, are grounded in a deep persevering prayer life. He's not a person who just prays in the moment when crises happen, he is a man who is devoted to prayer as Colossians 4:2 says, "Devout yourselves to prayer. Devout yourselves to prayer and then pray without ceasing."

This is the way that the Christian life is to be lived and so how do you make a difference in times of crisis? We're going to see how Nehemiah made a difference and we're gonna learn from him and his example this morning how we can make a difference in the lives of people around us even as we go through crisis. We don't know what tomorrow holds.

Many of us are already dealing with great difficulty. Some of you have, as Jess mentioned, we've had illness in the church related to families, Vorpahl and James family. Ginny James and Becky Vorpahl, lost their dad to the coronavirus this week. Frankie Gilmore's step-father is sick with it right now. She's taking care of him in a 14-day quarantine herself with her step-dad and her mom. So this virus has begun to touch our congregation more directly and I know some of you have lost jobs or you've lost income, and so we don't know what's ahead. We know that we're already seeing some of the impact and it appears likely that there's more to come. It's very likely that there's more suffering to come, so how do we prepare our hearts, how do we set our minds, prepare our minds for action? How do we do that in days like this so that we cannot waste this adversity?

John Piper wrote an interesting title for the book he wrote when he had cancer. I think it was "Don't Waste Your Cancer." Don't waste your cancer. That's a really perceptive and attention-getting title, isn't it? Don't waste your cancer. Don't waste the adversity. Don't waste the crisis that comes in the sense that God can do something in our hearts. We're supposed to do everything we can to try to soften the blow. We should be about praying for the people who are doing the research to heal this virus. We should be about supporting them in any way we can, and we should be about supporting the efforts that are being made to stem the tide of the spread. This is why we're meeting as we are but online. We're doing what we can to promote the blessing and welfare of people because we love all men, and we also are protecting each of you by doing that and it's good and right for us to oppose the virus in itself at the same time knowing God holds it in his hand because the pestilence does come from God, but yet this is the beauty of the Christian worldview, we understand that even though the pestilence comes from God, the pestilence itself is an evil thing and it is good and right to oppose evil wherever you find it, and so we should try to do what we can to eradicate this disease. We should rejoice greatly when a cure is found, a vaccine or whatever treatment options that are shown to be effective. We should pray diligently for that, but that's one side of it, the natural side, and we stand with every other person that's thinking correctly in the world who wants to protect life. But as Christians, as Bible-believing followers of Jesus, we have another way of looking at this that gives great encouragement to our souls, and that is that the God of heaven is reigning and ruling over this and he has a purpose in this. He has spiritual purposes that are actually far more important than the natural issues. The natural issues are very important, life is precious, it is to be valued, God created human life, he values human life, and so those things that promote blessing and the well-being of people and their physical well-being are good, and yet the Lord has a reason for allowing judgments like this to come for opening up his hand and allowing America to experience the humbling that we are, to let people all over the world, think about this, this is a worldwide crisis. Everyone is being shaken and one of the things we know that God is always doing when he allows shaking like that, he is shaking the world so that that which cannot be shaken becomes evident in contrast, and that which cannot be shaken is that which is eternal, eternal life living in you if you know the Lord Jesus Christ. You have inherited a kingdom which cannot be shaken. You have an anchor of the soul that holds you secure even as the world trembles and we stand aware of the suffering around us, yet

there's an inner strength and there can be that inner strength, and what we see in Nehemiah is a man who in the midst of crisis made a difference.

So how do you make a difference in times of crisis? And the phrase, I don't know if I got to it, the hand of God is gonna come up in this passage. That was the clause that we saw in Ezra 7 and 8. Ezra said, "The hand of the Lord was upon me. The hand of the Lord was upon the people." We're gonna come to this same phrase in Nehemiah 2 twice, once in our reading this morning. And so again, when we saw it before, the hand of the Lord is the mighty power of God and how do you lay hold of the mighty power of God? That's one of the teachings of this book, one of the messages, the themes of this book is how do you experience the power of God at work in your life? How do you have God's good hand upon you? Ezra had God's good hand upon him because he set his heart, Ezra 7:10, to study the law of the Lord, to practice it, and to teach it, to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. He immersed himself in the word of God. That's one of the key ways that you have God's word, God's hand upon you. What we're gonna see is Nehemiah adds, he complements. It's not something, it's not either/or it's both/and but Nehemiah as we look at his life what we see is that what put the hand of God upon him was that he was preeminently a man of prayer. He clung to the Lord in prayer.

So let's read Nehemiah, we're gonna read actually, start reading in verse 11 of chapter 1 and we're gonna read chapter 2, 1-8. I want to read verse 11, the last verse of chapter 1 to get the context set for us. So Nehemiah 1:11,

11 "O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

1 And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. 2 So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid. 3 I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?" 4 Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." 6 Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time. 7 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, 8 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 which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and

for the house to which I will go." And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.

Let me pray for us again.

*Father, we ask that You might by Your Spirit open the eyes of our hearts, teach us, impress Your word upon us, O Lord, make us new, make us like Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.*

Now what I want us to do is to consider this under two headings. The first is to really just the drama, and you might say behold just the drama. You don't want to miss the story. Sometimes when we put a message together, if I'm working too hard on alliteration or the points sounding right, I can miss, get in the way of the story, and when we read the Bible, we need to read it as God has given it and the Lord has told this story in such a way that it is meant to have great dramatic impact, and so when that's the case, make sure you let that impact hit you because that's part of God's intention is for us to feel the impact and the force of this story. So we're gonna, the first part of the message is gonna be really trying to feel that dramatic impact. So behold the drama, that's point 1, and there's four subpoints under point 1 to help us do that. I'm gonna use four observation questions to help us really observe this carefully and hear what Nehemiah is saying to us and how he describes this event.

The first point, subpoint under behold the drama is the question what. 1A is what, what is this about? What's the issue? That's the way he started in verse 11 of chapter 1. Nehemiah is ending his prayer time with a specific prayer that seems to be being prayed on the same day he's about to go in to see the king. "O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." As we noted last time, you don't know who this man is until the next sentence, "Now I was cupbearer to the king." Cupbearer to the king, and so what, it's a request he's going to make of the king. Nehemiah is going to make a request of the king that will deal with this crisis that he described in chapter 1, that he learned about in chapter 1, that the people are in great reproach and distress; that they are experiencing tremendous suffering and tremendous shame and scorn, and so that the people of God are under this blight and Nehemiah, as we saw in chapter 1, was brokenhearted, he mourned and he fasted and he prayed over this for days. He mourned for days when he heard that and he's been praying now for some period of time.

Now the next thing, that's the what, it's the request. He's gonna make this request. This already begins to heighten the dramatic tension, especially when you think about it from the terms of the original audience. A key part of interpreting the Bible correctly is to understand that though all Scripture is profitable for every single person who ever reads it throughout history, and that the word of God is eternally valid, it is helpful to understand that God gave it at a point in time through a particular man, to a particular audience of people. So this means that the books Ezra/Nehemiah were given at a particular point in

time, to a particular group of people, and they were intended, and we understand their circumstances, it helps us understand the intended impact of that.

So this is helpful to remember here because Ezra/Nehemiah, the finished work was probably written sometime between 430 and like 410 BC, I tend to think 430-425. We don't know for sure when it was written. We know the precise dates of the events that are described but we don't know when the final form was given to God's people. Most people think Ezra compiled it before he died, gave it to the people and it became part of the Canon of Scripture. So 430-425 BC is a good guess, and remember, BC you're counting down so 430-425 is after 445 where these events are happening. Actually 445, April 445 BC is where chapter 2 takes place.

Now I say that to remind you, then, if this was given to the original audience and it was the people of Israel who are just a couple of decades away from the ministry, the beginning of the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, I mean, they're hearing this like 25-30 years away from the events. Only 15-20 years away from this particular part, but Ezra 13 years before. So they're hearing it with a freshness that's instructive. They know very well who the kings that are being described are. In fact, this King Artaxerxes is still ruling over the recipients of the letter as well as he was over Nehemiah and Ezra and the events of the letter. You following the difference between the recipients? His reign, Artaxerxes' reign went from 464-425 BC, about 40 years. And so now also remembering that the Jews who were receiving this, they're under Persian rule. They know what the rules of the Persian court and the etiquette of the Persian kingdom is. They know what a monumental task it is for anybody to go make a request of the Persian king. They feel that in a way you and I don't.

I mean, in one sense, if you have to go, maybe the closest thing I can get to it is I remember when we first were trying to put up one of the modular units. I didn't say trailer. It was a trailer but modular unit, it's such a better way to say it, isn't it? That's why that's not the bunch of trailers over there, that's the education building, the modular building. Anyway, sorry about that. But the first trailer we had since I've been pastor here we got in the late '90s, mid-late '90s and I had to do all of the, you know, we were on a shoestring budget. I went over to the county again and again to take drawings to them to get approved, and I was amazed how hard that was to get done. I would go in, give the drawings to the county person, they'd say, "You gotta change this and this and this." Three or four things maybe, and no approval. Okay, so I take it to our architect, he makes those changes. I take it back, they say, "Well, you've gotta change this and this and this." Wait a minute, I was here three weeks ago and you said this, this, this, and this and we did that. But you can't say, "Why didn't you tell me about these other three things," because that guy has all the power. The bureaucrat holds all the power over whether you get this building or not, right? So you have to be as respectful as possible.

Well, that really isn't a worthy analogy but it's something of you can't fight city hall in the sense of you have to understand what you're up against. Until you experience it, it's hard to imagine, you know, and so is it really this unreasonable? Sometimes it is. For those of you who are maybe watching that are county government officials, you know, I say that

bless you in your endeavors and be perhaps counseled to the struggles that regular people experience when you, they come to you.

Anyway, but so what happens is the people, though, back to the days of Persia, they understood what they were up, what Nehemiah was up against when he went to the king. It was fresh in their minds what had happened in the time of Esther. Esther, the events of Esther happened between like 484-473 BC, so that's about 40-50 years before the book is written, 483-472, about 30 years before Nehemiah is appearing before the king now, and so they can think back and they know what happened. They know Artaxerxes, they know what happened with Ahasuerus, his father, the Persian, king. Remember what happened in Esther? The king on a whim basically, at the behest of an evil man, Haman, was enticed into signing an order to exterminate the entire Jewish race. He signed an order and that order could not be changed. Once a decree is given, it cannot be changed. The only thing that happened, God worked through Esther risking her life, remember she went in to see the king, she had her uncle Mordecai who challenged her, told her what's going on, "You've gotta go to the king. You've gotta try to stop this. Perhaps you've been placed in the position you are for such a time as this." And so she says, "Fast for three days, you and all the Jews in Susa. Do not eat or drink for three days and I will do the same and my maidens, and then I will go into the king." Basically saying, "You know that when I go in, it's a death sentence because it's unlawful, it's against the law for the queen to enter into the king's presence unsolicited." So when she walks into the court of the king, he can have her killed instantly. This king that she's now married to, remember, banished one wife for not showing up when he summoned her, Vashti. The reason Esther was chosen to be queen, remember if you read the early chapter, Ahasuerus, he never let, well, he said, he wanted the wife to come to him in the middle of a banquet for the people that were there to see her beauty, and she said no for whatever reason, she couldn't come maybe, maybe she'd taken her make-up off, you know? I don't know, but anyway she said no and she never saw his face again. He didn't kill her but she never laid eyes on the king again.

Now Esther knows that the penalty is greater than that, it's death but she goes in and the king shows mercy to her, extends the scepter to her, and then she's able to effect, the Lord uses her to effect amazing deliverance, and then the king, Ahasuerus, issues another decree. Can't cancel the first decree that says the Jews are to be, anybody can attack the Jews and take their property on this set day, that was the first decree. The second decree was the Jews are free to defend themselves and avenge themselves on their enemies, and those who are the enemies, they can even attack. And the Jews experienced a great deliverance that day and that's where the feast of Purim comes from. So they were celebrating the feast of Purim now 50 years after this. They know real clearly about the stakes of going to talk to the king unsolicited. In fact, I think this is even heightened when we move on to the question of, well, first of all, the second question: when. I said what. We went a long way on what. We're looking at the drama as it unfolds. What. It's a specific request. Secondly, when. It's in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of King Artaxerxes, the month of Nisan, that is April. Chapter 1 took place in December, November/December of 446. This has taken place March/April, around the first of April from the first of December would be a good guess, four months later.

So Nehemiah has been praying for four months before he makes his request. This is not something he entered into lightly. It's not that he had a moment of indignation as he hears this mistreatment and he goes to the king, you know, in a fit of concern and even anger and indignation. No, no, he goes to God and he prays to God and he realizes that the good hand of God is going to have to be upon him to effect what is almost a reversal of policy. It's not exactly. The king is able to change the decree he made and he doesn't change the decree, he's able to amend the decree and actually allow for the rebuilding to happen. The decree he made in chapter 4 to stop the building, Ezra 4 recounts a decree of Artaxerxes when he, after Ezra is sent in 458 to build, to continue building the city and to restore the law of God, and there is this wonderful decree from this man, Artaxerxes, gives this decree. He says, "Go," you know, "take all the money that we've given you. Get more money there. I want everything to succeed in the building of the house of God." It's like he comes into Jerusalem with the wind behind his sails, the Imperial decree. That's Ezra 8, you see this decree laid out, I mean chapter 7. Sorry. Verse 12 to 26, this decree is laid out.

Well, what has happened between then and now is Artaxerxes has made another decree and that's back in Ezra 4, ironically, but the people reading it, they didn't have so much trouble as you and I do even as I say it and I've been studying it, I get turned around in my head a little bit. But they knew it, it was much easier for them. It's like for them it was like for me to tell you to be talking about the World Trade Center, the destruction of the World Trade Center, September 11. And then if I talk about the Kennedy assassination, and then I talk about, you know, the Oklahoma City bombing, and I go back and forth between those, you know exactly what's happening if you know any history at all. You know what's going on, right?

For them it's like that, and so they know as they read into this chapter, wait a minute, he's going to the guy who gave Ezra this blank check, it seemed like, to go restore Jerusalem, and then a couple of years later, not sure exactly how long but probably within two or three years he gives a contradictory, almost contradictory decree. In chapter 4 of Ezra that is recorded where some people in protest of what the Jews are doing, send a letter saying, "Listen, this city Jerusalem that's being rebuilt is a rebellious and evil city." This is these wicked people saying this about Jerusalem. They're calling Jerusalem this evil rebellious city. "Search in your records and you'll see that this city had a long record of obstinance and disobedience to the king, and if you let these walls be rebuilt, you're gonna lose everything." And so the king sends an order, he checks out, "Yeah, hey, there is some record of Jerusalem being kind of a rebellious place." You go back to what happened under Nebuchadnezzar, he had to attack it three times, they kept rebelling against him though Jeremiah was telling them, "Stop rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar. I've sent him, God says." But they kept rebelling. So he checks the records, he sends word, "Stop the work immediately," and by force of arms he sends soldiers, Artaxerxes, to stop the work Ezra was doing.

So he's just blowing in the wind and now you're going to this guy that is like that, and they understand that. In fact, I think it's heightened. If you observe the passage carefully,



one of the things you'll see is that the word "king" occurs 17 times from verse 11 of chapter 1, that last word in chapter 1 is the word "king, I was cupbearer to the king." Now in the first nine verses you have 16 more occurrences of the word "king." Is that significant? I think it really is. I mean, you have to be told a few times that he's King Artaxerxes, chapter 1. "I took up the wine and gave it to the king," chapter 2, verse 1. "So the king said to me," chapter 2, verse 2, "Why is your face sad? Surely this is sadness of heart. I said to the king, 'Let the king live forever.'" Four of the times, four of those 16 times it's on the lips of Nehemiah speaking to the king, and obviously he says things like, "O king, live forever." That's appropriate protocol. He says, "If it please the king." You don't say if it pleases you, you say, "If it pleases the king." But that's only four of the 16 times in the second chapter in those first eight verses. Twelve times he adds "king, king, king." In fact, you will find there is no pronoun "he" or "him" for the King Artaxerxes in the chapter. He doesn't say, you know, if you're telling a story, normally you would say, "I said to the king, 'O King, live forever,' and then he said to me," and he said whatever he said, and then I said to the king, "O King," you know, "I need you, let me send, let me go back," and then he said to me or I said to him. There's none of that. It's always, "The king said to me. I said to the king. The king said to me. I said to the king." King, king, king, king. Don't forget he's talking to the king.

The emphasis of that is to say, "Look at this, this is a monumental task. This is no easy light thing." And you see that even more clearly when you look at his response, Nehemiah's response when the king, he determines to go in and show that his sadness is there. This is what he's done, he's prayed and he's come up with a plan and the plan is to let the king see his sadness. He's transparent with the grief that he feels over what's happened to the city of God and the people of God. The king sees his sadness, the king says, "Why is your face sad and you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart. Then I was very much afraid." Why is he very much afraid? One of the things, there's a death penalty is to be sad in the presence of the king. The king has enough to worry about without you bringing your cares to him, and this is the kind of thing that many people have died for, and that's why he says, "Then I was very much afraid." He's counted the cost. He knows what, but when the moment comes, he is terrified, very much afraid. He had reason to be.

So we looked at what, when, this is who, the King Artaxerxes. So 1A, what. 1B, when. 1C, who. Then, how, how does Nehemiah make this request? As we saw, he's determined to let the king see his sadness but he has put together a really impressive plan. When you look at it carefully, there is some very precise and careful planning has gone into this. One of the things that you see, an interesting, this is and you're reading the Scriptures, you look for phrases that seem out of place at first.

Look at verse 6, "Then the king said to me," this is after Nehemiah said, "I said to the king, if it please the king," verse 5, "and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah to the city of my fathers' tombs that I may rebuild it. There's the request laid out, right? "Then the king said to me," and here's the surprising thing, "the queen sitting beside him." Why is that relevant? It's the kind of thing as you're studying the Scriptures you need to look for these things. Why did the author want us to see that? Why did he

want the original audience to see that? Well, it was unusual for the queen to eat with the king and this implies it was a private dinner, just the king and the queen. Nehemiah has chosen a time when the king and the queen are there, and I think it's reasonable to infer that I believe he thinks that the queen is more favorably disposed to him even than the king, and then if the queen is there, the king will be more apt to hear his request.

Now think about that. If you're the queen and you love your husband, you want people around him that he can trust, especially the cupbearer who tastes his wine and tastes his food and guards his life, and I think it's reasonable to infer that she knows Nehemiah is on his side and there she is, in a sense, she's on Nehemiah's side. So he's planned the moment. He's thought about the circumstances and then look how he proceeds. Look at the wisdom and skill with which he unfolds the request. First of all, he can't say anything to the king, you can't speak to the king unless spoken to. He can't say, "I'd like, king, may I, can I say something?" No, he has to show in his sadness so that the king will ask him a question, "Why is your face sad?" And then he explains why. "How can my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?" I think in that you actually have a prepared script of what he was gonna say.

Now one of the things that you notice if you look carefully as you read through this passage, there's one word that is missing from Nehemiah's responses and it does not occur in this chapter or in these eight verses, this interchange with the king, and that is the word "Jerusalem." He does not use the name "Jerusalem." He says, "Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate?" verse 3. Verse 5, ""If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." I think this is a wise man who realizes that there's no need to use potentially inflammatory language that's not essential to the argument. Jerusalem may ring a bell in the king's and awaken some of that previous antipathy he had, so he doesn't use the word.

Now it's clear he's talking about that town. "I'm going to Judah, to the city." But it implies a wisdom and a skill even to know how to present what he's saying. This is a biblical principle. I mean, in fact, he shows respect and reverence throughout. This is one of the things that you see in the Old Testament as the era of God's kingdom being Israel and him working through a nation, David and Solomon, when that's over and the kingdoms are destroyed, you have Daniel, the exile, exilic prophets, post-exilic prophets, what you see is there's a new order and God's never going to restore and work through a nation like he did in the same way again. He's showing us something that his kingdom is not of this world, it's spiritual, and now the faithful of God are gonna have to live in a world where they're under other ungodly authorities.

And what you see in Daniel and the way he speaks to Nebuchadnezzar and the way that Nehemiah speaks to Artaxerxes is they use the customs that are appropriate there. When he says, "Let the king live forever." That's the first thing he says to the king, "Let the king live forever." I mean, after he says about the city, when he realizes he's got to answer. "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad?" He's pronouncing a blessing

upon this ungodly king. The Christian is not an enemy of even the ungodly rulers because our, God, Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. This is why Christians, godly, Bible-believing Christians have been the most faithful and obedient citizens throughout history, and this is how we should be living in this present time. Our disposition is to obey the authorities and that's correct.

Look at Romans 13, "Obey every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." 1 Peter 2, "Submit yourself to every institution of man for God's sake." The Lord wants us to obey unless they tell us to not worship Jesus Christ or they tell us to worship anyone other than Christ, and then we say we will obey God and not man. But it's our disposition and you see this in Nehemiah. I mean, he even, he's a very respectful person. He says, "If it please the king." He didn't just say, "Let me go." You know, when the king says, "What would you request?" I prayed to the God of heaven and I said to the king, 'If it please the king,' verse 5, "and if your servant has found favor send me to Judah." Verse 7, "And I said to the king, 'If it please the king.'" So here's a man who knows how to work within the system because he knows that God is the one ruling over this king and that's what Romans 13 says, "Obey every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake," and he basically goes on to say that he who resists the ordinance of man, resists the ruler, is resisting God.

So this is why we are doing what we're doing, a good big reason. We've been asked by the governor to do this. We also agree that it's a prudent step. It's wise and it's a way to fight this disease, but we should be disposed to submit and not to be unsettled much. I mean, you can still be unsettled by wickedness around you, of course, you should be, you should be grieved by it, but we can know that even as different things are happening in the political realm, that we're not all bent out of shape over that. We don't have to be. We can still be a good citizen, we can vote, we can do what we can, yes, I'm not saying that, of course. You don't just sit there and do nothing but underlying it there's a sense that God is in control and we have peace. We're not fretting.

Nehemiah shows this as he answers with great skill and wisdom. Verse 4. So he prayed to the God of heaven. As he is getting ready to specify the request, he stops and he offers up one of those quick prayers I was talking about. This is one of the examples. "I prayed to the God of heaven." The king asked him a question, so this is obviously a quick prayer because you don't make the king wait long. He prays and then he speaks but it shows his continual dependence upon the Lord. He makes a very clear request. I think he had worked out the wording and he's ready for it. "If it please the king and your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah to the city of my fathers' tombs that I may rebuild it." It's short, sweet, it's concise, it's clear and it's comprehensive.

"Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, 'How long will your journey be, and when will you return?'" He knows he's gotten a yes. "So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time. And then I said to the king, 'If it please the king,'" and here you see his wisdom, "let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah." "Listen, it's not just that the king is sending me, I need letters from you because I know I'm gonna deal with opposition and I need a letter to Asaph." He's already done the

research. He knows that the guy who's the keeper of the king's forest is a guy named Asaph. He's already found that out. "I need a letter to Asaph." You see how this inspires confidence in the king that he knows as he comes to him. This isn't a flighty request. This is a carefully thought out, worked through request.

Now it pleased the king and the essence is, he summarizes it in verse 8, "And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was upon me." The mighty hand of God moved the heart of the king to give Nehemiah exactly what he requested. So that's the drama and the people as they're reading it, you're to feel that and then to see the relief. Yes, look at the mighty hand of God.

So that's the first point was the drama, behold the drama. The second point is consider the implications. Consider the implications and here we get really more at the question why. Why was the good hand of God upon him? Why was the good hand of God upon Nehemiah? I mean, we see the hand of God and it's clearly there in his exemplary courage. He risked his life for the kingdom of God. He could have just continued to pray, couldn't he? He could have kept praying and kept praying and kept praying and never acted, and just kept thinking, "Lord, You've got to change his heart. You've got to change his heart. You've got to change his heart. You've got to change his heart." No, he didn't just pray, he prayed and he acted. Now he didn't pray and act precipitously. He did it for four months. There's sometimes where you need a lot of prayer before you act. There's sometimes where there is no time for that prolonged prayer so you pray earnestly and you act.

But he was a man of exemplary courage and extraordinary wisdom. His courage shows the hand of God upon him and his wisdom shows the hand of God upon him. He is a man of eminent skill in communicating and in planning and we're gonna see this in the rest of the book, but we saw it here in this conversation, the way he handled that conversation in the best way possible. He's exhibiting wisdom. Remember God's wisdom is he has the right goals, the best goals, and he has the best means to get to the best goals, and so when he gives us that, we start to have the right goals and we have better and better means to get to those goals.

Now so why is the hand of God upon him? How can we be people who will have courage and will have extraordinary wisdom and skill? Three things I want to share as the implications that Nehemiah, that led to him being that kind of man that God could use, a man of courage and wisdom. Three things that, I think, that we can infer from the passage and the first is Nehemiah feared the Lord. When you fear the Lord someone has said you will fear no one else. If you truly fear the Lord, you'll fear no one else and that is, even though he was human and he confessed he was very much afraid, he still pressed forward and did this because he feared God and that's really where wisdom comes from, isn't it? Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And knowledge comes from knowing the Holy One."

He feared God and a couple of things that show you what the fear of God is, I think, in this example in the first two chapters of Nehemiah. If you fear the Lord, you know, what

does the fear of the Lord look like? Fear of the Lord is one of the most important concepts in all of Scripture. It's an Old Testament and a New Testament concept and the idea is not to fear in a sense of terror, running away. No, there is an element of terror in it but it's a terror that runs to God and it's a terror that reverences God. It doesn't run away from God, it runs to God for mercy, but it's to see God as the one with whom we have to do and that compared to him everything else is small.

So how does that look in practice? I think we see a couple of evidences of it here in Nehemiah's life. If you fear the Lord as Nehemiah did, you will be grieved by what grieves God. This is an example of what fear of the Lord looks like in your life. If you fear God, you will be grieved by what grieves God. That's what we saw in chapter 1. When he heard about the distress and reproach and the wall broken down, its gates burned with fire, he sat down and wept and mourned for days. He had the heart of God for this. You see, when you fear God, you're on God's agenda becomes your agenda, and so he sees that the distress of the people of God is not just the sadness for them as people, that is bad and that's worth grieving over but more than that, it's the name of God is being dishonored; that this people is being scorned means the God of that people is being scorned.

So the fear of the Lord leads us to be grieved by what grieves God, and another example of the fear of the Lord in Nehemiah's life is if you fear God, you will be committed to what God is committed to. You will be willing to sacrifice for what God sacrifices for. You'll be committed to what God is committed to. This is why he's willing. He's counted the cost, he knows very well what happens, he's been sitting by the king probably when the king condemned others, he's seen the king at times, you know, movement of emotion. He knows this man well. He knows the stakes but he knows the most important thing that he can do is not to preserve his life but is to advance God's kingdom and glory and he's committed to the purpose of God, having counted the cost, he steps out.

So part of what fear of God means is you take time to even count the cost. Nehemiah through these four months has been praying for, "Lord, what are You gonna do? What are you gonna do?" And somewhere along the way it became clear to him, I think he probably heard the same word, he might have, that Mordecai spoke to Esther, "Is it not possible that you have been placed where you are for such a time as this?" And so as he's prayed and thought about this, he has come to the conviction, "Yes, I have an opportunity. I must take it. The Lord has put here. I must act. I can't just pray. I have to take action. But what's the right kind of action to take? Applying wisdom to the situation. Applying the true knowledge of what I know that God's sovereign over the king but yet I'm in this system. What do I do?" And so he works out the plan and he knows that the plan at its very essence is going to risk and could cost him his life, but he fears God so he's willing to do that. He's grieved by what grieves God and he's committed to what God is committed to.

So the fear of the Lord was that first implication. The good hand of God is upon men who fear him. God's hand works mightily in people who fear him. Secondly, the second implication is God's hand works mightily in those who work to prepare, through the work

of preparation. We've kind of talked about this some already but he had really spent time preparing and I think this is really important. We're going to, you know, we see that under it is prayer but often what happens in our Christian lives is we can sort of gravitate to one extreme or the other. We are doers who are always planning and always doing or we may be people who pray and pray and just with resignation, a sense of, you know, "Well, I've been praying but God hasn't done anything. I keep praying. You know, if God's sovereign and He's sovereign, I've been praying for their salvation and the Lord's sovereign, He's gonna have to do it. I know I can't save them." No, strictly speaking you can't but you're called to go and to speak. So it's not an either/or. He was a man of preparation, thoughtful preparation. He considered all the issues. "What am I gonna need?" He thought through it. I'm sure he worked it out on paper and as I said, I think he even scripted what he was gonna say so he said exactly what, he had one shot, it's a life or death situation and it's a one-time chance. "If I don't succeed, then God's gonna have to raise somebody else up because I'm gonna be done."

So he prepared. So people who make impact are people who do the hard work of preparation. They're not people who merely pray and read their Bibles. Those things are the foundation, that's the key part of preparation but it's not only. There's also practical preparation that needs to be done. But then finally, the third thing and the most important thing, it's not just fearing God and it's, secondly, doing the hard work of preparation, the third implication of a person who's gonna be used by God's mighty hand is they're a person who's committed to the work of unceasing prayer. This is what separated Nehemiah and this is what, this is truly where God does prepare us is in prayer. When you do prayer rightly, when you're willing and prayer done rightly is basically prayer that is surrendered to God, so that when you're praying about a situation, you're willing to get involved in the situation. If you're praying and you're not willing to be a part of the solution, then God's not gonna work through you, but if you're willing, "Lord, I'll do whatever You call me to do. This needs to happen. I'm praying that it will." You may not be the person that's going to be directly involved but if you're willing, then the Lord is able to work through your prayers in a deeper way.

Nehemiah was a man of unceasing prayer. He communed with God. He was like Daniel, often on his knees, and when he wasn't on his knees, continually praying as he walked through life. That's the work that we need to be committed to, to becoming men and women of prayer and that's the one thing that is most urgently needed today and as you're separated from one another, you're at home more, how much more time you have for Scripture and prayer.

Last week, the week of prayer and fasting, I've heard from several of you who were really blessed by that and I'm glad. I know I was and our family was blessed by the time of prayer and fasting and the prayer guides that Jess sent out were super helpful to get our hearts lined up with God in prayer. That's one of the things that I think that is the biggest challenge. So often our prayer lives can be a list, just going through a list of things that we're concerned about. You pray through your prayer list and you can end up not really accomplishing much in prayer because you approach it the wrong way.

Don Whitney in his book "Praying the Bible" says that we tend to in prayer, one of the biggest hindrances to prayer for Christians is we fall into ruts and we say the same old things about the same old things. That's actually a real challenge. I know it's easy to say exactly the same thing when you start a prayer, when you end a prayer, you know, "In Jesus' name" doesn't really mean in Jesus' name anymore, it's just the way you end a prayer, and it's good for us to try to shake up the way we pray. Well, the best way to do that is to pray the Scriptures. That's what Whitney's saying, the way to not say the same old things about the same old things is to pray the Bible; to pick up the Psalms and to read them and to pray in line with that, to read any passage of Scripture and to pray in line with that; to let the word of God direct your prayer life. And to not just read the word of God to learn, but to read the word of God to meditate and to pray it back to God. As you read something, you're not just learning something that you're gonna try to apply to your life, you are doing that but it should be in an attitude of prayer. "Lord, help me with this. Help me be like this." So that Scripture reading and prayer become two parts of one whole.

The Lord's Prayer is a great guide to prayer. That's why Jesus gave it. The disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray," and he said, "Pray in this way." And it starts off with God and his glory, "Our Father which art in heaven." The first three requests are for God's glory. "Hallowed be Your name." So you pray in line with that. "Lord, what I want in this circumstance, I want in this day in America, I want Your name to be revered. And we think about how Your name is dishonored, Lord, how grieved You must be by the way people despise Your name and the way that too often even we and I despise Your name. I don't revere it as I ought to. We get caught up in the thinking of the world too much. I'm like Isaiah, a man of unclean lips. The things I say about You are not worthy and adequate. The things I say about life are not worthy and adequate of You."

So the first request, "Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Lord, I want Your reign and rule to come to more people. I want Your reign and rule to come in my life to more of the areas in my life, that every area of my life would be conformed to Your will. I want Your will to be done. I want to do Your will more joyfully, more actively, and so in this area, help me, Lord." And so that we're praying God's, we're not just asking the Lord to help us because we're uncomfortable, we're unhappy, we're afraid. No, those are things we're going to be able to take to the Lord in proper time but we start with God and his glory and that, then, gets our heart ready to bring our request to him about our own lives.

So, "Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done. So Your kingdom and Your will being done, now I'm ready to say, 'Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts. Lead us not into temptation.'" Now we're ready to then ask him about all of the requests and he wants to hear those things but we align our hearts with him.

So praying the Scriptures, devoting ourselves to prayer, and so now thinking back to people we want to make an impact on. Why are we not making more impact on people for the Gospel? Is it because we don't fear God? Is it because we're not really doing the

work of praying for them? We may pray kind of just a brief prayer for their salvation but we don't really labor in prayer over them? If we want to see God do great things, it takes laboring in prayer like Nehemiah did over time, pleading with him, because in that the Lord changes us and makes us a worthy instrument, then, to be used to reach people. And then we prepare. Think about the person. How can I turn this conversation, how can I look for an opportunity to minister to that person so that they'll be open to asking me a question or they'll be open to me following up and asking them about their soul?

These are incredibly opportune times. God is willing to use whoever will submit themselves to him. One of my favorite verses is 2 Chronicles 16:9, "The eyes of the LORD run throughout the whole earth." Look at this imagery, "The eyes of the LORD run throughout the whole earth, searching for a man whose heart is perfect toward him, that he might show himself strong on his behalf." God wants to use people. He wants to put his hand upon people and show himself strong on their behalf, those who truly fear the Lord and who are surrendered to him. Let us be people like that in this day. May God help us.

Let's pray together.

*Our Father, we thank You for the privilege of knowing You through the Lord Jesus Christ and becoming Your children through faith in Him. We acknowledge, Lord, that we have nothing in and of ourselves to commend ourselves to You but we understand that You are a great God and You are able to use weak vessels to accomplish great things. Nehemiah was a man, as James told us, Elijah was a man of like nature like us, and he prayed and for three years the earth did not give rain. James was encouraging us that we can be people of prayer who can move history through our prayers and we look at Nehemiah, he was a man like us. He was afraid when the king asked him about his sadness, but he was a man who was willing to believe that You can move history. Lord, make us like that. Give us faith. Help us to cling to You in Your word and in prayer until we become people who can truly make a difference for Your kingdom, people who can stand out in the midst of whatever crisis may come in our lives and shine with the brightness and brilliance of Jesus Christ. We pray this in His name. Amen.*