

# Nehemiah 2

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0:00] Nehemiah chapter 2. In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king.

I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart. I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, May the king live forever.

Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire? The king said to me, What is it you want?

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried, so that I can rebuild it.

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, How long will your journey take, and when will you get back? It pleased the king to send me, so I set a time. I also said to him, If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so they will provide me safe conduct until I arrive in Judah.

[1:11] And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple, and for the city wall, and for the residence I will occupy.

And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

When Samballat the Hornite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites. I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few others.

I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. By night I went out through the valley gate towards the jackal well and the dung gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.

Then I moved on towards the fountain gate and the king's pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through, so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the valley gate.

[2:29] The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work. Then I said to them, You see the trouble we are in?

Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace. I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, Let us start rebuilding. So they began this good work. But when Sambalat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us.

What is this you are doing? They asked. Are you rebelling against the king? I answered them by saying, The God of heaven will give us success. We, his servants, will start rebuilding.

But as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it. Do grab your Bible and turn to those verses from Nehemiah chapter 2, which were read for us a bit earlier.

[3:41] And you might well be wondering, why are we in the middle of Nehemiah? Ezra and Nehemiah is really one book. And we're kind of jumping in the middle of it here. And why have we

chosen that this morning?

What relevance does some dusty history from thousands of years ago, from many hundreds of miles away, what relevance does that have for us here in Stirling all these years later?

Well, one of the reasons is I just preached through it. So that was something to pull out of the bag. But more seriously, these books, they're not just mere history, are they?

These books, Ezra and Nehemiah, they're all about building for God's eternal kingdom. Ezra and Nehemiah chart three waves of returners who have been in exile.

And they are beginning to return to Jerusalem. And they firstly repopulate, then they rebuild the temple. And then here, they are beginning to rebuild the walls. It's an important period in the life of God's people.

[4:49] And the message for us today is crucial. Because in Nehemiah, we learn about the realities of building for God's everlasting church.

And that is something that all of us, each one of us here, all of us are engaged in that task. We want to see, don't we? We want to see people being saved from sin and death and finding life in the Lord Jesus.

But we want to see more than that. We want to see people becoming Christians, but then growing to maturity as Christians. We want to see a growing church, a growing people of God.

And that is what Nehemiah is really all about, about building God's eternal kingdom. And Nehemiah shows us what is really involved in that glorious task of building for eternity.

We see through Nehemiah reality. We see the nature of opposition to that work. We see the nature of perseverance that's required amongst God's people, if the church, if the kingdom is going to be built.

[5:59] And we see the need also for godly and wise leadership. This return from exile, which Ezra and Nehemiah chart, it was a crucial period in the life of God's people, in salvation history.

This was not an easy time for God's people. They faced intense opposition as they rebuilt the temple, as they rebuilt the city walls. And there was a very real spiritual warfare behind the attacks on God's people, as they go about rebuilding Jerusalem.

And since the very beginning of the Bible, God has been building his kingdom. He's been building his church from the very beginning. That first instruction to Adam and Eve to go and to multiply, to fill the earth, that has been God's plan from the very beginning.

And we are still engaged in that same project now, that building project, as God builds his kingdom through the preaching of the gospel and by the growth of churches all across the world.

That is where we're going. And that is where we will be when Christ returns, his people gathered around him, worshipping together. But we're not there yet, are we? We still await the full consummation of God's eternal kingdom.

[7:14] We await the return of the great master builder himself, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will usher in his eternal kingdom. And until that day, until the day when Christ returns, we are engaged in that building work.

And as we go about it, we can expect similar trials as Nehemiah. We can face similar hardships that God's people here faced.

There is so much for us to learn through books like this. We were so blessed working through this last year at the Tron. There were so many helpful lessons for us to learn about the nature of the building of the church today.

And as we look at this early chapter, chapter 2, Nehemiah, he's based in the capital of the Persian Empire in Susa, thousands of miles away from Jerusalem. But he resolves to go back to Jerusalem. He leaves his cushy job as cupbearer to the king in the palace. And he decides to go to Jerusalem. Why? What so moved Nehemiah that he was prepared to do that?

[8:22] Why was he willing to give up everything and travel all those thousands of miles to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the walls of the city? Well, one of the reasons was Nehemiah had real clarity about the true purposes of God, about the place that Jerusalem had in God's greater purposes.

And so the Lord moved him. He moved his heart to go and to rebuild and to endure all the suffering that he had faced along the way. You see, Nehemiah was very clear.

He cared about the unseen reality of God's kingdom. He knew what God was doing. And so he cared about the present manifestation of that unseen reality.

He cared about the physical place of Jerusalem. And in the same way, what we are building for, it is an unseen reality, isn't it?

At the moment, we can't really see the full extent of what God is doing. Yes, we see a physical manifestation here amongst us. We do see the visible church.

[9:31] But we just see a tiny fraction of it here, don't we? A little corner of sterling. It's very encouraging, isn't it, being here. We care about the visible church. Like Nehemiah cared about the physical reality of God's kingdom then.

And Nehemiah, because he cared for the visible expression of God's promises of a people and a place, he was deeply moved.

And he was moved to do something. And what we see happening in Nehemiah 2 is a truly, it's an exciting adventure. Look where it begins.

It begins in the palace in Susa. And where does it end up? He's in Jerusalem. He's galvanized all the people of God to start rebuilding the walls.

That's a lot that's happened in one chapter. He's moved all those hundreds of miles. He's motivated the people of God to get their hands to work, to rebuild the walls. He's an extraordinary man, Nehemiah, isn't he?

[10:31] And there's much for us to learn in his wisdom, in his tact, in his strategy. But the deeper reality, it's not just about Nehemiah being a good man.

The deeper reality that explains this extraordinary chapter is the Lord God. The base note of the Lord's sovereignty underlines this whole thing.

Did you notice, as Emily read for us, the repetition of the glorious hand of God? Look at verse 8. You see it there first. And because the gracious hand of God was on me, the king granted my request.

You get the same in verse 18 as well. I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. That is the source of great hope for Nehemiah, for all those who first read this account for us today.

They, like us, walk by faith, not by sight. Trusting in the hidden, gracious hand of the Lord to do his work.

[11:39] What Nehemiah saw with his eyes, the broken walls burned with fire, what he saw was massively discouraging, wasn't it?

Total mess. And as we look around us, in our city, in our nation, in many ways, massively discouraging, isn't it? But even in the midst of the trials and the hardships and the opposition and discouragements, there is this deeper reality.

That the hand of the Lord is upon his people for good. And Nehemiah is testament to that great reality. Even in the moments of despair, there is hope because we belong.

We belong, don't we, to the God of hope. The God who has acted in history for his people, for the salvation of his people. He has acted, he has done it.

He is the God we can trust for the future. That is Nehemiah's God and it's our God. We can trust him. Here is a chapter to give us real hope.

[12:48] Remember the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 16 where he reminds us the purpose of the Old Testament scriptures. He says, this is what they're for. Paul says, for whatever was written in former days, i.e. the scriptures, it was written for our instruction.

That through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

That's what the scriptures are for. To give you and I and our church hope.

Nehemiah too gives us hope. Hope. Hope that God's hand is with us. And that will give us the strength to endure, won't it? But as well as reminding us so clearly of God's sovereignty, this chapter also shows, alongside that, the necessity of human responsibility.

See, God's great sovereignty, it never undercuts our responsibility. It never undercuts the need for us as his servants to exercise wisdom.

God's sovereignty ought not to render his servants passive. Quite the opposite. Nehemiah, as we're going to discover, is an excellent example of confident action in the knowledge that God is sovereign.

[14:10] So we're going to look at this story. Three things to note particularly about Nehemiah.

Now, we see in chapter 2 here, we see Nehemiah's wise preparation as he prepares to go on this great journey.

We see his winsome persuasion. But none of that can avoid the wicked persecution he's going to face. And that's a twice-repeated pattern.

You get the same pattern in the first half, verses 1-10. And that's repeated in the second half, verses 11-20. In each case, there is careful preparation. There is successful persuasion.

But then there comes the inevitable persecution. Let's look at the first half of the chapter.

Nehemiah, he's before the king and Susa here. Verses 1-10. And these verses describe Nehemiah's audience with King Artaxerxes and what then takes place.

Now, the histories tell us that Artaxerxes, he was on the less autocratic, less severe, less ruthless end of the spectrum in terms of the emperors of the reign.

[15 : 17] But that's relative. He was a pretty mean man, one to be feared. And years before this event, he had ordered the rebuilding work in Jerusalem to be stopped.

He put an end to it. And for years, nothing had happened in Jerusalem. What chance does Artaxerxes reverse that policy? The sort of backwater of Jerusalem.

He doesn't care about that. Why is he going to do anything about that at all? Why would he even countenance for a second a request from a Jewish exile, Nehemiah, his cupbearer?

It would be a bit like someone who manages the prime minister's logistics weighing in on matters to do with Iran in the Middle East. It might actually be helpful, I don't know. But that's the kind of dynamic we've got here.

Nehemiah, he's a pretty low-rung civil servant. Why would the king listen for a second? From the outside, it seems very, very unlikely that Nehemiah is going to have any sort of success as he goes to bring his request to the king.

[16 : 20] In chapter 1, we see that Nehemiah has been moved to go and do something about Jerusalem. But we note here, Nehemiah's wise preparation.

He didn't rush in and make his request to the king. As we see from the date marker in verse 1, the month of Nisan, four months have gone by since chapter 1 when Nehemiah first kind of brought this to the Lord and prayed.

Four months have gone by. Nehemiah's been patient. He's been persistent in his prayer. He didn't know when the moment to speak might come. God hadn't told him that it would come during the month of Nisan.

He didn't have that insight. And I imagine that's the sort of insight we would like. Isn't that right when you and I face a difficult thing and we're praying to the Lord for help?

We want our sort of writing in the sky to tell us when to take the moment. When's it going to come? What am I going to say? We want precise guidance from the Lord, but that's not how he works.

[17 : 20] That's not how faith works. The Lord doesn't tell us, does he, who to marry? Or where to live? Or what school to send our children to? No, no. He gives us his word, doesn't he?

He gives us the framework to understand. He gives us one another to talk to, to get wisdom. We're to obey his word and trust him as we make these sorts of decisions. We're to trust him and to trust that he will provide what we need when we need it.

And that's what Nehemiah does. When the moment comes, he's ready. He's prepared. And he was in the court, bringing wine to the king, verse 1.

And the king noticed something different about Nehemiah. Why does your face, verse 2, look sad when you're not ill?

Now, it was not the done thing to be sad in the presence of the king. Can you imagine going to see King Charles and sort of walking in like this, looking grumpy and sad? You wouldn't do it.

[18 : 21] You'd put your best face on, wouldn't you? You'd be in your best behavior. But Nehemiah just can't hide the reality of his grief for what's happening in Jerusalem. He's visibly upset about it.

Now, maybe it's the wine in his hand or his wife at its side that has made the king notice what's going on. Maybe his wife gave him a dig in the ribs saying, you know, she's got some emotional intelligence.

You can see something's going on with Nehemiah. And so the king asks him, what's going on? Why are you sad? Are you all right? But look at the end of verse 2.

Nehemiah was very much afraid. This was a major moment. You are not to be like that in front of the king. This could all go very wrong. He's fearful. But even in the midst of his fear, he's prepared to speak, isn't he?

This is perhaps the moment that the Lord has been preparing him for. This might well be the answer to Nehemiah's prayers. And so he speaks. And this is the moment of real courage, isn't it? [19:22] He's trembling. He's fearful. And yet he speaks anyway. That is courage, isn't it? Courage is not the absence of fear.

No, no. Courage is faithfulness in spite of it. It's speaking what we know needs to be said. Even if we're trembling on the inside. To speak.

Trusting the Lord will give us the words. Jesus says to his disciples in Mark 13, Do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

And that is something of Nehemiah's experience here, isn't it? In that moment, the Lord gave him the words. Perhaps you've known that yourself. There's an opportunity that's come up to say something about the Lord with your friends at work or at school or in college.

Your heart's pounding. But the moment has presented itself. It's an absolute golden opportunity to say something for the Lord. You fear how people respond. But you remember the Lord is with me. [20:27] He's with me. You remember that there's more to the world than we see. You remember that the greatest need for those around us is the gospel. People need more than anything else to hear about the Lord Jesus.

And so you speak. You say something. It's maybe clumsy. It's not perfect. But you say something. That's courage, isn't it?

Courage is saying what needs to be said, even when you're scared to say it. And that's what Nehemiah does. He speaks despite his fear. And he speaks with respect, doesn't he? He makes his request very carefully.

Verse 3, May the king live forever. He's being very respectful. And he's wise in what he says. He doesn't divulge more than he needs to, at least initially.

He keeps it pretty vague. He says, look, verse 3, Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?

[21:29] He doesn't specify what city it is. He doesn't go into the details. He just says, my heart's grieving for my hometown. And Nehemiah's grief would be understood immediately by the king, wouldn't it?

His hometown in ruin, the grave site of his family in ruins. He would understand that. The king wants to know more. Nehemiah's been very wise, doesn't he? Very persuasive. He's thought about this. He's thought about what he might say should the situation arise.

And so he delivers a pre-thought-out response. Look at verse 5. He prays to the God of heaven. He's not a sort of pious, oh, let me pray about this sort of prayer, is it? No, no. This is a heat-of-the-moment prayer. He's right there. He's got seconds to respond. He prays the Lord, help me, Lord.

He's utterly dependent, isn't he, on the Lord in this moment. And having prayed, he speaks. And he makes his request. And it's a bold one. He says, let me return to Jerusalem.

[22:43] I want to rebuild the walls. He's asking the king to reverse his decades-old policy about the walls in Jerusalem. And not only that, but he's been asked to be released from his present duties.

Amazingly, the king seems okay with it. Look at verse 6. The king, with the queen sitting beside him, how long will you be? How long is it going to take you?

And again, Nehemiah's prepared. He's thought about it. Should the opportunity arise, what would I say? He knows what he needs for the task.

Look at verse 7. He asks for letters from the king, which will ensure a safe passage for his journey, for the building materials he's going to need. See, Nehemiah's thought this through, hasn't he? He's thought about what is required. He's prepared for this conversation. He's got a plan. And that's one of the things you see about Nehemiah through this book. Nehemiah was a man of great and effective strategy because he knew the hand of God was upon him.

[23:47] He knew the hand of God was unstoppable because he was the sovereign God of heaven. Because God was sovereign, Nehemiah was all about planning and strategy.

He made wise preparation, didn't he? He was winsome in persuasion of the king. But all of that arose, not only in a sort of self-confidence thing, no, no, his confidence was all in the Lord.

Because God was sovereign, Nehemiah planned, he prayed. And friends, we too can be confident in the sovereign hand of God. And because of that, we must pray, we must plan.

We don't just sit back and say, oh, God's going to sort it out. No, no, we use our heads. We plan, we use wisdom. We do need to look at our circumstances through the lens of gospel priorities. We've got to make plans so we're ready to go when things come up, when opportunities arise. And for Nehemiah, he was able to testify, look at end of verse 8, that the king granted me what I asked for.

[24:55] For, here's the reason, for the good, gracious hand of God was upon me. That's the great explanation for this amazing result.

It is the Lord. Yes, Nehemiah did all he could. He planned, he strategized, all that. But the glory goes to the Lord. He's the one who's done it. So, Nehemiah's got the go-ahead.

And off he goes. We've got no details about the long journey to Jerusalem. He went to the governors, verse 9, and the trans-Euphrates, gave him the king's letters, he got the materials. And then he arrives, verse 10.

And this is the big kind of but. And you get a lot of these moments through Nehemiah. Things look great, then there's a but. Look at verse 10.

When Sambalat the Horonite and Tobiah, the Ammonite official, heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

[25:59] Yes, Nehemiah knew the hand of God was upon him. Yes, he planned, he prepared. But none of that means that God's servants can avoid wicked persecution.

Verse 10 is an indication early on in the book of Nehemiah that things will not be easy for Nehemiah. A man who is seeking the welfare of God's people in Jerusalem.

It was not going to be an easy ride. And as you read on through Nehemiah, it was not an easy ride. It was hard. Opposition from without, opposition from within. Opposition really, really hard.

You see, a man like Nehemiah, a man who seeks the welfare of God's people, will always be a target for the enemy. Always. Sambalat, you get to know him quite well through the book of Nehemiah.

He was the governor of Samaria. And he seems to have dabbled in the worship of the Lord. His daughters were given Jewish names. He wanted to sort of be seen, to be in.

[27:03] One of them married into the family of a high priest. Tobiah, likewise, had a Jewish name. But he's probably Sambalat's lackey, his partner in crime. But that toxic mix of politics and religion, it hardened them to real gospel work.

Look again at verse 10. Notice their attitude. They were very much disturbed. Why? That someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites. Sambalat and Tobiah, they were utterly opposed to God's people.

And therefore, utterly opposed to any effort to champion the welfare of God's people. Their attitude was simply, God's people must not thrive.

They were utterly against God and his people. They were worried about their own power, perhaps. A threat. And it's very sobering, isn't it, to read about Sambalat and Tobiah.

But the existence of such people is not confined to this brief period of history in God's people. There have always been, and will always be, enemies of the gospel like that.

[28:20] And many of them will wear religious clothes. They'll have the right names. They'll look good. There will always be Sambalat and Tobiah.

So don't be surprised. Don't be surprised when they strike out at you because you care for the welfare of God's people. Don't be surprised when enemies come and oppose the work.

How could it be anything other than that? You see, we sometimes think that, you know, wise planning, being winsome in our persuasion, that's going to avoid difficulty.

We're going to dodge the difficult things. But no, no, that's not it at all, is it? In Nehemiah, wise preparation, winsome persuasion led directly to persecution. Wise planning.

Even God's hand upon you will not prevent the enemy's attacks. It actually tends to attract them. But we know in the end, don't we, that such attacks are futile.

[29:21] Consider the Lord Jesus. A man utterly perfect. Who could be wiser? Who could be more perfectly planned? Who could be more winsome in their persuasion?

And yet, what did they do to him? They crucified him on a cross. They put him to death. It's the pattern of our saviour. It's the pattern of the church. It always will be. Until the end.

There will always be wicked persecution. Even when we are wise and winsome. Let's look on to the second half more briefly. We've seen Nehemiah before the king and Susan.

Now he's arrived in Jerusalem. He's made that great journey. He's arrived. And we see Nehemiah now before the people. God's people there in Jerusalem. And Nehemiah is clear about his task. He's there to rebuild the walls. The question is, how is he going to get it done? How is that going to happen? How will he mobilize the people to build?

[30 : 18] Just cast your eye to verse 18. At the end of verse 18. The people replied to Nehemiah, let us start rebuilding.

So they began this good work. How did Nehemiah achieve that? How could he motivate a whole people to start building? How did he manage?

Well, again, God's hand was upon him. And Nehemiah was wise in his preparation. He was winsome in his persuasion. He wise to prepare. Look at verse 12. He set out during the night with a few others.

I had not told anyone what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. So he goes out by night and he's inspecting the walls of Jerusalem, which are in a total ruin.

So he's gone out at night to have a look, to scout out the reality. He wants to see with his own eyes what's going on. But he didn't tell anyone. Why the secrecy? Why the lack of transparency? Well, Nehemiah needs to undertake a proper appraisal of the situation.

[31 : 23] He's got to see the walls firsthand. And without what I'm sure would have been very helpful input from all the locals. What Nehemiah does not need is 50 people weighing in with their own assessments about what's wrong and how to fix it.

No, no, he's got to see it for himself. He's got to make his own assessments before he makes a public plan. And that is very often necessary in church life.

There will be times when the leadership will need to take time to assess, to observe, to consider before going public with plans.

And that can be pretty frustrating, can't it? When you're not in on the know, you want to know. You want to be in on the action. You want to know what the plans are. We all feel like that sometimes. But there is a time for quiet planning and assessments.

The time for public sharing comes, of course, but not before the plan has been carefully formulated. But having observed the situation, having thought about how to approach rebuilding these walls, Nehemiah now goes public.

[32 : 29] He's got to rally the troops. He's got to mobilize the people. And that's not an easy task. But he achieves it. Notice how Nehemiah goes about his winsome persuasion here.

Look at verse 17. He's addressing the people who are in Jerusalem now. He says to them, you see the trouble we're in? Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire.

Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace. I also tell them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

How does Nehemiah do it? Well, number one, he is clear on the reality. He's also clear about God's abundant grace. He's also clear about what they must do.

He puts before them a very clear objective. We must rebuild the walls so that we no longer suffer derision. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind about what had to be done.

[33 : 26] His conviction arose from months of prayerful preparation, his careful analysis of the situation in Jerusalem. He knew the place that Jerusalem had in God's plans. He cared deeply about God's plans and purposes.

And so the next step was abundantly clear. The walls must be rebuilt. Now, it's one thing for a leader to be clear.

But how does a leader motivate a whole people? How does a leader who is clear on the gospel building projects that need to be done, how does it move a church to rise up and build?

It may be a literal building project. It might be a new church building. It might be a church plant. It might be a new ministry. How do you motivate? You've got a clear plan, but how do you motivate? Well, not simply by telling people to get to it.

That's not what Nehemiah does, is it? How does he do it? Well, first, he is clear about the reality of God's judgment. But he's also equally clear about the reality of God's grace and his help and his sovereign hand.

[34 : 39] And grasping those two things will move a church. It will move God's people to sacrificially serve the purpose of God's church.

Let me just speak about those two things, the reality of God's judgment and the reality of God's grace. The first thing that he says, verse 17, he says, look at the reality, guys.

You see the trouble we're in? Look at the broken walls. He helps the people see afresh the reality of their situation. Maybe they become desensitized to the reality.

They become so used to walking over the rubble of the city walls, they didn't see it anymore. But Nehemiah says, look again.

Look again. Do you see that we are sitting under the judgment of God? This is meant to be the place where God dwells. This is meant to be his home. Jerusalem is meant to be a light to the nations.

[35 : 37] Look at it now. It's a mess. And sometimes we do need to be shaken, don't we, by the reality of our situation. As a nation, we have rapidly abandoned the gospel.

Now we're encouraged, aren't we? As we gather here this morning, this is really encouraging, isn't it? To be together, to see all these folks, see all the kids running out for Sunday school. Isn't that so encouraging? What a joy to be together.

Church. It's been mentioned already. It's the highlight of the week. This is the most important thing happening in your life this week, the gathering of God's people. This is it. This is where the action is. Sundays are amazing.

What an encouragement. But remember those beyond our walls. Remember all the folk living in Sterling who are without Christ. Tens of thousands who don't know Jesus.

See the reality. See the need. See the trouble our nation is in. We've got a job to do. We've got a gospel to proclaim. There are friends and families and contacts we need to speak to, to bring along, to hear the message of Jesus.

[36 : 46] So we've got to be reminded, haven't we, of the reality of God's judgment. The reality of our situation. But alongside that, yes, Nehemiah points to the reality, but he also points out the wonderful grace of God.

Look at verse 18. I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. He's just pointed out the rubble all around them.

The wall and ruin. It seems insurmountable. It's a big problem. The task seems too big. Impossible. But what does Nehemiah do? He doesn't point to himself and his great plans.

No, no, he points to the God of all grace. He points to the one who is sovereign over all the kings of the world. Proverbs 22 says this, The king's heart is a stream in the water, in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever he will. The Lord holds every king in his hand. And Nehemiah says, look at what the Lord has done so far.

[37 : 52] Be encouraged. Can you believe that King Artaxerxes gave me permission to come and do this? That he gave me all these resources to come and rebuild? Can you believe it? Can you believe he sent me these letters to go to these kings and get access to all the materials we need?

Can you believe it? Well, you're better. Because God is sovereign. And you can trust him. God can do the impossible.

He's done it with you, hasn't he? How does Ephesians describe us? Dead in sin. And yet now made alive in Christ. That is a miracle. That is impossible for you or I to do. God can do it.

God can do the impossible. And so we can trust him as we go about our task of gospel proclamation. Of telling men and women the good news about Jesus. We can trust him. We can trust him with that message of salvation and eternity.

And it's clarity, isn't it, on the reality and the clarity of the task and God's help in that task that motivates God's people here to get up and start rebuilding. And that is what motivates us today, isn't it?

[39 : 01] Seeing the reality, but also remembering God's grace that he's with us. And when opposition arises, as it always does, look at verse 19.

But when Samballot, the Horonites, Tobiah, the Ammonites, Ophishal and Geshem, the Arab, heard about this, they mocked and ridiculed.

What are you doing? They asked. Are you rebelling against the king? They threaten the legal action, don't they? We're going to write to the king about this. You're breaking the law.

Note Nehemiah's response to the jeering from Samballot and his company. Look how he answers. I asked them saying, the God of heaven will give us success.

See, Nehemiah is utterly confident, isn't he?

[40:09] Jesus is building his church. The gates of hell, they will not prevail against it. Samballot and Horonites, they are not going to stop what's going to happen. They will have no share in Jerusalem.

The gates of hell will not prevail as God's people go about his building projects. There are many adversaries, but the gospel opportunities abound.

They often go together. God's gospel kingdom is growing and there's nothing that can stop us. The God of heaven, he will make us prosper ultimately.

His hand is upon his church. His hand is with us as we go about our task. Wisely, winsomely, yes, but undeterred by the opposition that will come.

That is why this chapter gives us hope, friends. God is with us. Let's get about the task. Can I pray?

And then we'll sing. Father God, we do thank you how your word speaks, how it brings us hope.

[41:19] Even as we face difficulties, as we go about your task here, there is much to discourage us, much to distract us, to weary us. But Lord, what a comfort to know that you are always with us, that your hand is upon your people for good.

So help us, Lord, not to walk by sight, but to be a people who walk by faith. And because we do that, we are prepared to work hard, to use all the wisdom you give us, to build your kingdom here and for eternity.

Help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.