

The Good Hand of God

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[0 : 0 0] For the Lord's help with us, we come to it together. Father, we thank you for this, your word. We thank you for your good hand. Lord, we pray now that you would speak to us by your Spirit through your words, that we might grow in our knowledge, our love, and our trust of you, that we might repent of our sin and believe wholly in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

I wonder, who do you turn to in a crisis, in times of needs? If you get lost, if you lose your keys, if something breaks and you're not sure how to fix it, if you've had a bad day at work or you're just stuck on a recipe, who do you call?

We all have different people we turn to, don't we? Whether it's mom or dad, a spouse or a friend. For most of us, there is someone in particular that we are quick to turn to when things start going wrong.

Who do you call upon in a crisis? If you weren't with us last week, we have just begun a series in the book of Nehemiah.

And last week, we just set the scene, kind of broad-brushed, big picture. What is this book all about? And we saw, don't we, two things stand out. The walls of Jerusalem need rebuilt, and the hearts of God's people need renewed.

[1 : 3 7] The city of God, where God promised to meet with His people, from where they were to be a light to the nations, that all might come and worship God, that city is ruined. Jerusalem's walls are broken down, and it's all happened because the hearts of God's people are sinful.

So, renewal, restoration, is the order of the day. Now, this week, we're coming back into some of chapter 1, and going on to the beginning of chapter 2, that passage we just read there.

Hopefully not to repeat ourselves, but to just shift our focus, from the big picture to the beginning of the story. If last week was kind of a synopsis, this week we're going to turn our attention to scene 1 of Act 1.

So, let's get into the narrative together, and turn to Nehemiah's response. The walls of Jerusalem are broken. They need to be fixed. Where do you begin?

Where do you begin? Do you start a fundraising campaign? Do you get quotes from the local builders? Do you hire an architect? Well, it's none of that, is it? Not yet, at least. Because as we saw last week, not only are the walls of God's city broken, the hearts of God's people are also sinful.

[2 : 5 7] There are a lot of things to be done. We'll see that through the course of the book. Nehemiah and God's people get cracking with a lot of hard work. But when it comes to renewing the hearts, there is only one place to begin.

And that is where Nehemiah begins. Our first point this morning, God's servant prays. God's servant prays for God's hand to be at work.

Verse 4, As soon as I heard these words, as soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

But for many of us, much of the time, prayer can be a last resort, can't it? When we've tried everything else, when all else has failed and it's not worked, then, right, then we turn to God and say, I'm out of ideas.

Could you step in now? Nehemiah does not, though, does he? He doesn't spend 12 chapters trying to rebuild the walls and then think, that's not worked.

[4 : 08] And then in chapter 13, start praying. No, prayer is not the last resort. It is his first port of call. Immediately, as soon as he hears, here is something gone wrong, I need to pray.

There's something wrong, of course, is the renewal of the walls of God's city and the hearts of God's people. And for either of those things to happen, Nehemiah knows he needs God's hands to be at work.

There is no other way. No other way this will happen. Now, we could, I think, this morning, just jump straight to some application there.

And I think it would be legitimate. As Nehemiah does, make prayer the first priority in every situation, especially in matters of renewal and turning away from sin and turning to God.

That is good and right and true. But perhaps, for many of us here, that is just not where we are. We might well know that is where we should be, but it is not where we are.

[5 : 15] So we might just leave with the slight sting of a rebuke. We might feel a little guilty. But how can we actually change? How can we bring about that change in our life so that prayer is the priority like it is for Nehemiah here?

We want to be, don't we? We want to be a church that knows we should pray. But more than that, we want to be a church who does pray.

Spontaneously, as soon as we see any, just like Nehemiah does here, just like we'll see him do again in chapter 2, without a moment's thought, without any hesitation. That is where we want to be, isn't it?

And I think we can learn something of how to get there, well, actually by looking at the rest, again, of Nehemiah's prayer here in chapter 1. Because there are three things he knows and wholly believes to be true that I think cause him to come so quickly in prayer.

It's not just a good routine Nehemiah has, it's good theology. It's a healthy, a right understanding of God and himself that causes him to come to God so quickly.

[6 : 30] So three things. Firstly, verse 5, he knows who God is. The one he prays to is the Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God.

I wonder, when you see signs of a leak somewhere in your house, who do you call? The plumber, right? Well, when the car starts making some very unhealthy sounds, you call the mechanic.

Right? Well, when you've got a lingering cough that won't go away, you pick up the phone, don't you, and ring the doctor's surgery. But the point is, we know, don't we?

We know to turn to the people who understand the problem and who we trust can do something about it. We automatically, instinctively turn to the people we believe know what needs done and are able to do it.

That is who we turn to. Why is Nehemiah so quick to turn to God in prayer? Because he knows, he wholly believes that God is able. He is the great God of heaven.

[7 : 44] He is the great and awesome God. He's not just externalizing his thoughts as some kind of therapy. No, this is him really and truly bringing his request before the living God, who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.

So, Nehemiah prays because he knows who God is. Secondly, Nehemiah prays because he knows who he is. Nehemiah is quick to go to God because he knows going to himself or to any other person isn't going to get the job done.

I asked a minute who you call in certain situations when there's a leak, when the car engine is working, when you're feeling unwell. I said, didn't I, we phone the plumber, the mechanic or the doctor. That's what you should do. Let me tell you what I do.

I think most men in the room will know exactly what I'm on about here. You see a leak in the roof and you think, don't you, I reckon I can fix that. The car starts making a few sounds that don't sound very healthy and you think, a five-minute YouTube video, right?

And I'm a qualified mechanic. You start feeling unwell, you Google a few symptoms, you're like, I can deal this with this here myself. Again, what's the point?

[9 : 05] Well, the people, the people we go to are those who we believe are able to deal with a situation. Well, we won't go to anyone, will we? If we think we can do it ourselves.

Maybe you do believe that God can do everything, but if you believe you can do most things apart from God, you're not going to turn to Him very often, are you?

Now, we absolutely can, I think, apply these things to every area of life. We really cannot do anything apart from God. In Him, we live and move and have our being. But here, specifically, aren't we? We are in the context of renewal, restoration, a life that is turning away from sin and turning to God for the good of His kingdom.

That is what these walls are preaching. God's kingdom on earth, the nation of Israel then, the church now. Right?

But for us now, we don't need to see that the modern-day walls of Jerusalem restored, but we do, just like them, need to see the hearts of God's people renewed. That it's the same renewal of heart that we need and in exactly the same way as Nehemiah, we are utterly helpless on our own.

[10 : 26] There is nothing I can set about doing myself to fix the problem of my heart. That is what Nehemiah confesses about himself and all of God's people in verse 6 and 7.

We are disobedient. We are sinful. We are very corrupt. Lord, if this depends on me and my goodness, this is not going to go well.

We cannot do this by our own strength and so Nehemiah turns to the great and awesome God. Do you see the connection there between an awareness of our own sin, our own inability, and our quickness to pray?

Nehemiah turns immediately to prayer because he knows the strength, the goodness, the obedience needed to get the job done does not lie in himself. He cannot rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

More than that, he cannot renew his own heart. But when we believe God can bring about renewal and when we know we cannot, that is when we will go to him.

[11 : 36] But there is, I think, one more aspect of Nehemiah's prayer that is just worth bringing out. Nehemiah prays because he knows who God is, he knows who he is, and thirdly, Nehemiah prays because he knows God hears.

He knows God hears. God's ear is attentive to the prayers of his servants. We can think, can't we? Certainly I do, that the more important, the more powerful a person is, that the less they'll want to have to do with me, that the less I should trouble them with the small problems of my life.

But Jesus teaches us, doesn't he, to pray to our Father in heaven for our daily bread, for the most basic provision of all. Take it to your Father in heaven.

Perhaps you do truly believe that God is great and awesome, and perhaps you properly understand how sinful, how helpless you are on your own. Maybe you need reminded this morning, though, that God wants to hear you.

He is not just a king sitting on a throne. He is a father calling out to his children to come to him. Nehemiah prays to the God whom he trusts will be attentive to his prayers.

[13 : 01] We can do the same, but in fact, with far greater confidence. Jesus has said that when we come to the Father in his name, God will hear us.

John writes it in 1 John 5 that when we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. That there's no need to kind of hope for an attentive year when praying for God's will to be done in our lives.

We are guaranteed it in Jesus. Unrestricted access to the God of heaven who beckons us before him as his own children.

So if we want to see the same heart renewal in the church, in God's kingdom today, we must begin here with prayer. prayer.

Not a program, not a plan, those aren't bad things, but here is where we must begin. Because God is great and awesome and able to renew us.

[14 : 02] Because we are not able to renew ourselves and because God hears. God hears all the prayers of his people in Christ Jesus.

prayer is not to be our last resort, it must be our top priority. And as we grow in that knowledge of God's greatness and our sinfulness, I trust prayer is more and more what we will do.

And if renewal is what we are praying for and what we want, renewal is what will happen. John continues in 1 John 5, and if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

When we pray for God's will to be done in our lives, it will happen. And the heart renewal is his will for the lives of every one of his people. He will provide the way for those prayers to be answered.

That is exactly what we see here as we go into Nehemiah 2. God's servant prays for God's hand to be at work, and then God provides the way for God's servant to work.

[15 : 21] Our second point this morning, God's hand provides the way for God's servant to work. We learn there, it almost feels like a footnote, doesn't it, at the end of chapter 1, that Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king.

Now, that is a remarkable thing. One of God's people, one of those who was exiled, or his forefathers were exiled, he was one of the Persian king's most trusted men.

The cupbearer was originally someone who would test any drink given to the king, the point being if the cupbearer dropped dead, he should probably order another drink.

but by the nature of being constantly in the king's presence, the cupbearer naturally became a high-ranking official. And I think that gives us kind of a moment of high hopes here, doesn't it?

Here is a man who has unrestricted access to the man that the king of Persia who rules over that the biggest empire the world had ever seen.

[16 : 30] Right? Time to pull a few strings, Nehemiah. But the first words of chapter 2 feel, well, I think almost anticlimactic. In the month of Nisan.

Now, we all knew it was spring of 445 BC last week, don't we? We all as well know, of course, that Nisan is a few months after his life. Commentaries are very helpful. Right?

Months have passed since the beginning of chapter 1. that Nehemiah is cut bare to the king. You know, great, he's got a foot in the door. Let's get moving. Things can happen. But nothing's happened.

Months have gone by and there is no change. Is Nehemiah kind of chickening out? Is he using prayer as a diversion tactic? You know, I'll pray, but I'm not going to get my hands dirty.

Well, I think we learn very quickly that all Nehemiah is doing is wisely trying to keep his head on his shoulders. Because unlike in chapter 1, we are now told explicitly that this is the 20th year of King Artaxerxes.

[17 : 43] Nehemiah was cut bearer to King Artaxerxes. I wonder what is the most nerve-wracking conversation you've ever had?

Giving someone some really bad news, telling something something they really don't want to hear, admitting to something you hoped no one would ever find out. There are lots, aren't there, of different kinds of conversations where our heart is in our mouth.

Well, I think, bundle them all into one, all those heart-in-your-mouth moments. Pile them all together and I think you might get a sense of where Nehemiah finds himself in verse 2.

Nehemiah tried his best to kind of put a brave face on things. He didn't want to show his emotions but when we know someone well, we know when something's not right, don't we?

Words don't have to be said, you can just tell by the way they look, by the way they carry themselves. King Artaxerxes sees Nehemiah every day so he notices something's up and so he asks him, why is your face sad when you are not sick?

[18 : 52] Now that sounds, doesn't it, like a kind question from a concerned boss but look at Nehemiah's response there at the end of verse 2. Then I was very much afraid.

It's a bit odd, isn't it? Why? Why would Nehemiah be so afraid? Well, to answer that question, I think just turn back with me just for a moment a few pages to Ezra chapter 4.

Ezra's, the book right before Nehemiah, it's page 391 in the church Bibles. Ezra 4, it records a number of occasions when attempts to rebuild Jerusalem were made only to be thwarted by various Persian kings and one of those occasions was when the walls were being rebuilt but when that was happening, some of those who did not like what was going on sent a letter to the king at the time.

We see the end of it there in verse 16. Verse 16 of Ezra 4, we make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province beyond the river.

No possession in the province beyond the river. If these walls are finished, you will lose a huge chunk of your kingdom. And so, the Persian king responds and says, jump down to verse 21, king says, therefore, make a decree that these men be made to cease and that this city is not rebuilt until a decree is made by me and take care not to be slack in this matter.

[20 : 35] Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king? You must make sure these walls are not finished because my kingdom is at stake.

Who is this king? Verse 23, then when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read, they by force and power made them cease.

King Artaxerxes, whose cupbearer was Nehemiah, he was the one who said, for the sake of my kingdom, make sure those walls are never finished.

Come back to Nehemiah 2. Nehemiah is sad because the walls of Jerusalem are not finished.

King Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the world, in an age when kings are not exactly known for their gentleness, says, tell me what's wrong with you.

[21 : 45] Do you see why Nehemiah is so afraid? It's heart and mouth time, isn't it? What do you do? Do you lie to the king and say it's all right and fine when he knows it isn't?

Do you make up something else? My dog's not well. In a worldly sense, that's probably wise, isn't it? Do whatever you can to get out of there in one piece.

But this, I think, is where we see Nehemiah's theology shape his actions. We've seen it shape his prayer life. Now we see it shape his professional life because Nehemiah knows that Artaxerxes of Persia, the man who is ruling over the largest empire the world has ever seen, he knows that he is not the king.

He serves Artaxerxes, but more than that, he serves the Lord. So he goes bold. Not stupid, but bold.

He starts with wise words, doesn't he? Let the king live forever. Right, please, king, don't think I am here to start an insurrection. I'm not one to start an uprising, but, but he lays out on the table, doesn't he?

[23 : 06] 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?

I'm not against you, king, but the reason I'm sad is because of your decree against the city of my father's which you made to protect your kingdom.

It's not an easy thing to say to the most powerful man on earth, is it? But Nehemiah trusts, believes, knows that the most powerful man is not the most powerful king.

Artaxerxes responds, what are you saying? What are you requesting, Nehemiah? What do you want? Look at what Nehemiah does, end of verse 4.

What does he do? He prays. He prays. He's talking to the king of the earth. He prays to the God of heaven, to the great and awesome gods.

[24 : 18] The great and awesome gods who provides the way. Do you see here how great and awesome gods opens the doors for Nehemiah?

God's hand provides the way for God's servant to work. Prayer does not replace action, does it? Prayer paves the way for action.

God is opening the doors, Nehemiah has to walk through them and he does. Verse 5, 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.

can I go and rebuild a fortified city which you perceive as a serious threat to your kingdom?

Let's be clear, that sentence, verse 5, really could have been the end of Nehemiah, the book and the person, if the good hand of God was not on him.

[25 : 37] The God who hears the prayers of his people now provides the way for his people to be restored. We're expecting, I think, to hear the guillotine fall in verse 6, but instead the king just asks when he'll be back.

How long will you be? So Nehemiah goes all in, right, at no particular invitation. He now asks for the way to be prepared and the materials to be procured for him and he gets it.

Right, so 60 seconds ago in verse 2, he was very afraid. He really was thinking this could be it. Now he's marching to Jerusalem with the king's blessing, the path cleared before him and the timber for the walls on order.

A bit of good fortune? No, verse 8, the king granted me what I asked because the good hand of my God was upon me. God answered my prayer.

Now this passage is not teaching us to go and find a way of putting our life at risk for the sake of God's kingdom, nor is it saying God will directly kind of answer every one of our prayers in the way that we expect him to.

[26 : 55] I'm pretty sure this was not what Nehemiah was expecting. It clearly wasn't, was it? He was very afraid when the king asked him what was wrong.

But I think what we do see here is God's servant willing whatever the personal costs to work for the good of God's kingdom.

God's people should be willing whatever to do whatever it takes to see restoration and renewal amongst God's people. Nehemiah was so bold here because his heart was so broken by the state of God's kingdom.

The walls caused him to weep because more than his own comfort, he longed to see God's kingdom restored. To put it in our context today, right, he would have had such a heart for the church, for the health of the church, for the body of Christ that he would have willingly put his neck on the line to see the church grow and flourish.

He was willing to risk it all. And he knew that. He was willing to do that because he knew he was not called to serve himself, but God's.

[28 : 22] I wonder when we read through chapter 1 earlier, did you pick up how Nehemiah constantly referred to himself and to all of God's people? Verse 6, chapter 1, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servants, that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants.

Verse 8, remember the word you commanded, your servant, Moses. Verse 10, they are your servants. Verse 11, let you really be attentive to the prayer of your servants and to the prayers of your servants who delight to fear your name.

Did you get it? whose will is Nehemiah living to carry out? If we ask according to his will, he will hear us.

Nehemiah is out there, isn't he? Not to serve himself, but to serve God. And so, he will boldly do whatever it takes to see God's will done, to see God's kingdom restored.

and renewed. He prays for God's will knowing that he is the one as his servant who will carry that work out.

[29 : 49] Let's just pull all this together and maybe perhaps ask a probing question as we do. When you pray, or actually perhaps let's put it a slightly different way, if someone were to have listened in to your prayer life this last week, who would they think is serving who?

Who would they think the servant is? Because our prayer life can very quickly, can't it, take the shape of God becoming our servant.

Lord, will you do this for me? Can you make this happen? Could you sort this out? As if prayer is about getting God to do our will for us.

Nehemiah comes and says, I am ready to do anything for you, God, because I am your servant. I'm not asking you to do my will, I'm here to do yours.

Whatever it takes, whatever it might be, whatever it could cost me. I'm ready to do anything for you, kingdom. If you open a door, I will put my neck on the line for the sake of your people because I'm not in this for myself, I'm in it for you.

[31 : 16] God will answer our prayers not by serving us, but by providing the way for us to serve him. If we pray for the path of renewal to be open before us, God will open it.

Whether or not we then choose to walk down that path will I think reveal what we really want. If renewal, spiritual renewal, whether a new birth in Christ or a constant renewing of a sinful heart, if that is what we really truly want, we will go boldly.

Maybe not in the same circumstances as Nehemiah does here, but we will not shrink back from an opportunity to turn away from sin and turn to Jesus, to trust in him as the king of all the earth, to look to Jesus as the one who reigns above every power and authority.

Nehemiah went down that path knowing that the good hand of God was upon him. Similarly, we go, don't we, in the same way, but we go with even greater confidence because as we were thinking about with the children earlier, the king of heaven and earth has promised to be with us wherever we go.

As we go about serving him, carrying out his will, Jesus says, I will be with you always. my good hand is always upon you.

[32 : 53] The one who has been raised far above every other ruler and authority, he is over all and he is with us. To renew us by his spirit that dwells in us, that we might put to death sin and live to righteousness, that we might be renewed, restored, made new in Christ Jesus.

beginning with prayer, by coming to him, not for our sake, but for his.

The road to renewal begins here, by coming to God in prayer and with a will that is ready to do God's will, whatever we might have to put in line to do so.

So let us, as a church family, let us pray. Let us make prayer a priority, knowing that while we cannot do it, God can, and he will hear our prayer for renewal in our own hearts and this church.

Let us strive to serve God, boldly going forward to follow the path of renewal that he opens before us, knowing that the good hand of the Lord Jesus Christ is with us always.

[34 : 16] Let us pray. Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, we come before you now as your servants, confessing that we have no strength or ability in ourselves to renew our own hearts, but knowing and rejoicing that you are the God who hears us, that you are the God whose will it is in the Lord Jesus Christ to renew us.

So, Lord, we pray that we would go forth to do that work, Lord, that you would open the path before us and that we would go through it. Longing to do your will, not our own, longing to serve you for the good of your kingdom and your people.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen. Well, in light of what we've just heard, what we've been thinking about, we're going to sing the hymn, Lord, from sorrows deep I call.

Nehemiah cried out, didn't he, from the pits of despair, and he cried out to the Lord, who was his rock and his salvation, that he would put his hope in him alone for rescue.

So, let us stand as we sing these words together to God's praise. song of sorrows deep I call, when my hope is shaken, strong and driven part of fall, in my desperation.

[36 : 21] Lord, for all my bread and praise, I'll come to my rescue, even so the glory may, so my heart will praise you.

From within my troubled soul, questions may not answer, for my faith these billows who beyond my shelter, why are you not found my soul, for women who saved you, and that lives come home, home, home, cause it's hard to pray to.

And for my soul, which are holy God, my hell, my love, I will praise him.

Sing, oh, sing, through the raging storm, who still my love, my salvation.

Should my life be poured for me, every worldly! pleasure, pleasure, when all I possess is free, copy, let my treasure, be my nation in the night, be my hope and refuge, so my faith is turned to light, for my heart will praise you.

[38 : 05] O my soul, which you're hoping for, by hell my love, I will praise him.

Sing, oh, sing, through the raging storm, you're still my love, my salvation.

And the love, my soul, which you're hoping for, my health, my love, I will praise him.

Sing, oh, sing, through the raging storm, you're still my love, my salvation.

Remember the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, both now and forevermore. Amen.