

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

04.14.2023 | The Good Hand of God | Nehemiah 2 | Dr. Ben Day, Senior Pastor

If you have a Bible this morning, let's go to Nehemiah chapter 2. Nehemiah chapter 2, as we're continuing in our study through the book of Nehemiah. Last week we began in chapter 1. We started by looking where Nehemiah begins in prayer. Nehemiah opens with some bad news that he receives about what's going on in Jerusalem, how those who have returned from exile are living in destruction, in shame, the walls have been torn down or set on fire. And Nehemiah responds in prayer. For Nehemiah ever makes a plan, he prays. He seeks the Lord. He trusts in the Lord in his character. He confesses how he and his people have sinned before the Lord. He trusts in the Lord's promises, and then he responds in action. Nehemiah's first action is to pray, and I think it's really important that we remember that prayer is an activity. Sometimes we might think of prayer as just inactivity, of just us not doing anything, but it is an action. It's just an action that requires us to remember that we can't do things on our own, that we are dependent upon God. Nehemiah knows this, and so his first action is to pray.

But now we come to Nehemiah chapter 2, in which we see really his next action, and that is to respond in obedience to what God is calling him to do. Nehemiah's first action is to seek the Lord in prayer, but now his second action is to serve the Lord in obedience. And what we're going to see is that for Nehemiah, serving the Lord in obedience required some great risks. It required him stepping out of his comfort zone, really putting his job and his life on the line. And he did so because he saw himself as a servant of the Lord, and he believed that the good hand of God was upon him. This is what I want us to understand and believe this morning, that we would see ourselves as servants of God, and that we would believe that God's good hand is upon us, and it would lead us to first seek the Lord, as Nehemiah did, but now serve the Lord as Nehemiah does.

We're going to go through all of chapter 2, which is a bit of a longer passage, so just stick with me as we read this whole passage. I think it's good for us just to hear what happens next in Nehemiah's story. So Nehemiah chapter 2, starting in verse 1, says, "And the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, seeing that you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.'" Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should not my face be sad when the city, the place of my father's graves, lies and ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father's graves, that I may rebuild it." And the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will you be gone? When will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me, to the governors of the province beyond the river, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah. And a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forests, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." The king granted me what I asked, "For the good hand of my God was upon me." Then I came to the governors of the province beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sambalat, the Hora knight, and Tabiah, the Ammonite servant, heard this, it displeased them greatly, that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. So I went to Jerusalem, and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, eyeing a few men with me. And I told no one what God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the valley gate, to the dragon spring, and to the dung gate. And I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the fountain gate, to the king's pool. But there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall. And I turned back and entered by the valley gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing. And I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. And then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies and ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision." And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build," so they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat, the Haraanite, and Tabiah, the Ammonite servant, and Geshim the Arab, heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper. We as servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

You know, how we see ourselves as people is really instructive for what we do. Where you find your identity, how you understand yourself to really be at your core, I think really sets a lot of place and order for what you are going to do with your life, how you are going to choose your actions. I might be reading into it a little bit, but I think if you go back to Nehemiah chapter 1, we get a little bit of a glimpse into how Nehemiah sees himself. Not only does Nehemiah begin with this prayer in Nehemiah chapter 1, but throughout the whole prayer, he refers to himself as a servant of the Lord. And then he ends chapter 1 by mentioning that he is a cupbearer to the king. We kind of pointed this out last week, but it's almost given to us like an afterthought. That Nehemiah doesn't really see himself as the cupbearer to the king, or at least that doesn't seem to be central to how he thinks about himself. It seems that at core, who he sees himself to be is a servant of the Lord. But he happens to be the cupbearer of the king.

Now, I mentioned last week that being the cupbearer was a really important position. While it might just sound like a kind of a lowly role of serving the king a drink, really it was a very important role because the king placed a lot of trust in you. That you are not going to poison him. That you are going to test the things that might poison him and protect him. You see here that it seems to be that the king and the queen are in this moment when Nehemiah is talking to them. And a lot of people speculate that if it's the queen sitting beside him, it's probably a very intimate setting. This probably isn't a very large gathering. Maybe there's just the king and the queen and Nehemiah, along with a few guards. Nehemiah had close access to the king. I don't know how someone who's of Jewish descent gets to be the cupbearer for the king of Persia. I don't know what Nehemiah had to do, how he had to prove himself, ways that he had to work hard. I don't know what happened to get Nehemiah to the position of being cupbearer to king Artaxerxes. But he finds himself there. But it seems to be that he doesn't see himself primarily as a cupbearer, but rather that is just part of his story of how God wants to use him. He sees himself as a servant of the Lord, and I think that really dictates what happens in chapter 2. You see what happens in chapter 2 is that Nehemiah is willing to put his job on the line, his life on the line, for what he believes God is calling him to do. And that only happens when he sees himself as a servant of the Lord, rather than primarily a cupbearer to the king.

How do you see yourself? When you think about who you are, how do you define that? How do you answer people when they ask who you are? I mean, do you primarily define yourself by the job that you have, by the roles that you have as a husband, a father, a wife, a mother, a teacher, a student? Do you see yourself primarily in your career, the ways that you spend your time in what you enjoy doing? How do you see yourself? I think the way Nehemiah sees himself is shown to us by his prayer in chapter 1, but I think it's revealed to us in his actions in chapter 2. Because Nehemiah sees himself as a servant of the Lord, and because he believes that the good hand of his God is upon him, he is willing to risk his job and his life for what he believes God is calling him to do.

This is where I would love for us to be as individuals and as a church, that we would see ourselves not primarily by our careers, by our hobbies, by our interests, by the roles that we would play, but we would primarily see ourselves in our relationship to God, the son or a daughter of the king, as a servant of the Lord. I pray that we would not just see ourselves as servants of God, but we would believe that the good hand of God is upon us, that we might take action in what God is calling us to do in the work of rebuilding and renewing. And I think Nehemiah gives us an example of what that looks like in our lives. What that looks like to really believe yourself to be a servant of the Lord and to act as if the good hand of God is upon you.

I just want to follow Nehemiah's example in chapter 2 as we study this chapter, and I just want to lay it before you, will we live this out in our lives? Will we follow Nehemiah's example? So kind of just three steps of Nehemiah's example that we can follow in terms of application. How do we live this out in our lives? The first is that we trust in the sovereignty of God. The first step in really seeing ourselves as servants of the Lord and believing that the good hand of God is upon us, and then thereby taking action to serve the Lord, the first step in that is to trust in the sovereignty of God. We already saw that Nehemiah believes in the sovereignty of God through his prayer in chapter 1. He talked about how God is great and awesome, but now we see him act on that belief. We see him actually put into faith what he has been praying about and the fact that God is over all things. And primarily we see it in a few different ways that I want to point out to you. And so I'll just give you kind of a few sub points of this first idea that we are to trust in the sovereignty of God. What is trusting in the sovereignty of God look like? Well, for Nehemiah's life, and I think for our lives, one, it looks like patience.

If you trust in the sovereignty of God, then you will believe that God's timing is always perfect, and thereby you will show patience when you have to wait on the Lord and his timing. Where do we see that Nehemiah's life? Well, you go back to chapter 1. Nehemiah told us that he received this news in the month of Kislev. Now, in our calendar, that would fall sometime around November, December. Now go to verse 1 of chapter 2. It says that in the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, the month of Nisan would be sometime around March, April for us. So here's what you need to know. Between chapter 1 and chapter 2 was four months. Nehemiah didn't just pray to God for a few days and then go to the king and make his request. For four months, Nehemiah has been wrestling with this news that he has heard, that Jerusalem is destroyed. For months, this has been weighing on him, he has been seeking the Lord, and he is waiting for the right timing.

You know, it's really hard for us to wait. We live in a day and age in which we often don't have to wait for anything. We can get food, we can get groceries, we can get anything we can really imagine, probably off of Amazon just delivered to our door the next day. Like we live in a culture and a time in which we often don't have to wait, and therefore we don't often wait well. But don't we all find ourselves waiting on things that are outside of our control? On those things we can't order online? Like haven't some of you been waiting on a job for a while? It just seems like nobody's hiring. Haven't some of you been waiting for the right guy or girl to come along? Haven't some of you been waiting for a long time for your kids to come to faith? There's so many things that are outside of our control that we have to wait on. Do we trust in the sovereignty of God? Do we believe that God is over all things? Do we believe that his timing is good? If so, we will be able to be patient in times whenever his timing doesn't match ours. When things are out of our control and we have to wait on him.

And by the way, being patient doesn't mean being passive or not doing anything. We see that Nehemiah has been active in these four months. One, we see that he's been praying. We saw that back in chapter one. We'll talk about that more in just a minute. Two, we see that he's still been serving. He's been showing up to work every day as the cup bearer of the king. And apparently he's been serving with a smile because the king hasn't noticed that he's sad until four months later. Nehemiah is still working in the job that God has given him even while he is devastated by this news. He's been planning, as we'll see in just a moment, how he is going to act in obedience to God. In this time of waiting, Nehemiah has been patient, but he's not been lazy. He's not been inactive. He has been seeking the Lord. He has been serving faithfully where God has placed him. He has been planning for the future. If you find yourself in a season of waiting, trust in the sovereignty of God. Believe that his timing is always perfect and be patient. Don't be lazy. Don't be inactive, but seek him. Trust him, serve faithfully where he has called you, and wait well on his timing. If we believe that God is sovereign over all things, we will be patient.

Secondly, we will be prayerful. If we believe that God is sovereign over all things, if we trust in God's sovereignty, we'll be patient for his timing, and we will be prayerful. Now, I won't spend a lot of time here because we talked about this a good bit last week. But we've seen that Nehemiah has been seeking the Lord in prayer. But then we see this moment comes. Right? So Nehemiah has been serving for months with a smile on his face, but now he is sad. And the king recognizes this isn't a sad that just means you're sick. That's good news because if Nehemiah is sick, it might not be good news for the king. So the king recognizes this is the sadness of the heart. Nehemiah, something has gotten you down. Nehemiah says that he is very fearful in this moment. Because he knows that what he's about to say is going to risk his job. It's going to risk his life. So he says, King, live forever. I want you to know I'm still on your side. I'm still your servant. But I do want you to know Jerusalem, where my grandfather is buried, where my family is from, it's lying in ruins. Why wouldn't I be sad?

Listen to what the king says to him in verse four. The king said to me, what are you requesting? Nehemiah says, so I prayed to the God of heaven. Let me ask you, how long do you think this prayer was? Probably pretty short, right? I mean, when the king asks you a question like that, you don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. We see in Nehemiah chapter one that there are times when our prayer lives should look like extended periods of fasting, seeking God, spending long periods in prayer. There are also times when our prayer life should look like quick, short prayers in the moment. Here's what Paul means when he says pray without ceasing. There are times when we're going to spend an extended period of time on our knees before the Lord seeking him in prayer. There's other times when we're just going to pray really briefly in the moment because we recognize he's sovereign, he's in control. I'm fearful in this moment, but I'm going to trust him. And so I pray, even if it's just brief, if you trust in the sovereignty of God, you'll be patient and

waiting on his timing. You'll be prayerful even in the moment whenever it's tested. And then lastly, you will leverage your position for the glory of God. If you really believe that God is sovereign, you'll be patient, you'll be prayerful, and you'll be willing to use your position in life for the glory of God.

Nehemiah here is the cup bearer to the king. And he is willing to use this position in a way that serves God. So the king asked him, "What are you requesting?" And this is what he says after he prays. "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 Nehemiah says, "I recognize that I have this position, being right next to the king of Persia. I can make this request of him, and right now, rather than protecting myself or my position, I'm going to leverage it for the obedience to God and his glory." Nehemiah's whole goal in life was not to be the cup bearer to King Artaxerxes. His goal in life was to serve God, and it shows in He sees himself primarily as a servant of God.

Listen to me. You are not primarily a tech worker. You are an ambassador for King Jesus, and you happen to work in tech. You are not primarily a financial planner, a doctor, an attorney, a teacher, a student, a researcher. You are a son or daughter of the king. You are a servant of God, and he has got you in a particular position. He is the one who placed you there. If you really believe in the sovereignty of God, you have to recognize you're only in the position that you are in because of God. I know you worked hard. I know the school you went to. It's very impressive. God puts you in this position, right? God has put you in this position if you believe in the sovereignty of God, leverage that position for the glory of God.

So what do we see from Nehemiah? We see here that he is trusting in the sovereignty of God. Patient, waiting in God's time, and prayerful, seeking God in the moment, and willing to use his position for the glory of God. And that's really what leads us to the next part. That as Nehemiah begins to leverage this position, he works and he serves using the wisdom of God. This is the second part that I want to just draw out for you this morning in Nehemiah's example. If you primarily see yourself as a servant of God, and you believe that the good hand of God is upon you, then you will not just trust in God's sovereignty, but you will serve using his wisdom. Now we'll talk in just a minute of why I would call this the wisdom of God. But first I just want to point out how much intentionality and planning and wisdom Nehemiah seems to use here. Because we could just kind of falsely think that if we really trust in God's sovereignty, then that just means it doesn't really matter what we do. I mean if he's the one that puts me in this job, and he's in control of everything, then it really doesn't matter what I do. But all throughout the Bible, God's sovereignty and man's responsibility go hand in hand.

Nehemiah trusts in the sovereignty of God, and that's what leads him to use the wisdom of God as he serves. Now for the sake of time, we'll just kind of go through this quickly. I won't read every verse for you. But in verse 6, Nehemiah asked, excuse me, the king asked Nehemiah, "How long are you going to be gone? When are you coming back?" And Nehemiah, which just shows he likes Nehemiah. Like he wants to know, "When are you coming back to serve me again?" He's not just writing him off. Nehemiah has a time frame in mind. He says, "I told him a time and that pleased him." Nehemiah has been thinking about this. "How long is it going to take me to get to Jerusalem? How long is it going to take us to rebuild this wall?" He's been planning. Verse 7, he talks about, "Give me the letter so that I can go and get the approval of those governors beyond the river so that I can make it to Judah." He's thinking about the logistical issues.

Listen, I hope you'll join our team as we go to London in the fall, as our church sends a team to London, or maybe you'll go with us on another global trip. One of the best ways to prepare for one of those trips, get your passport. We don't just send people out saying, "Well, we trust in the sovereignty of God, so I'm sure he'll take care of it." No, we plan accordingly. We take care of the logistics. He's thinking about the papers that he needs. He even asked for a letter so that the keeper of the forest would give him all the resources he needs. And he says that the king does all of this. Why? Because God is in control. He's directing the heart of the Persian king. Even if our Xerxes doesn't know God, God knows our Xerxes and he's in control. And so he's answering all these Nehemiah leaves. He starts to head to Jerusalem. He meets Sanballat and Tobiah. These are two characters that will come across in this story who are kind of adversaries for Nehemiah.

Just to keep going, when he arrives in Jerusalem, look at what Nehemiah does next. In verse 11. He continues on in talking about all the areas where he goes and inspects and sees how bad it is. He's not told anybody that he's there. He's not told anybody about what God has placed on his heart or his plan to rebuild the wall. He's just getting a survey of

what's wrong. Getting an understanding of what needs to be rebuilt. Some ways he's counting the cost. He's using the wisdom of God. He's not just going in with his plan. He is seeing what the situation is like. Then he recruits others to join him. Once he's surveyed, verse 17, he goes to the people. He says to them, "You see the trouble we are in. How Jerusalem lies and ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision." He recruits other people to join him because he knows this isn't a work that he can do alone. All of this planning, all of this resources, all of the recruiting, all of the surveying, all of it is him using the wisdom of God as he seeks to obey God. It's not just going out and doing what he just feels is right. He is seeking the Lord and using his wisdom. Now, you asked me, "How do I know this is the wisdom of God and not just Nehemiah's wisdom?" Better yet, how can we know we're relying on the wisdom of God and not the wisdom of the world or the wisdom of ourselves? That's a big question and one I probably can't fully answer in these few moments.

There's a few things that I think we see here that kind of give us some good guiding principles. One, I think when we're leaning on the wisdom of God, it will come because we've been seeking God. I mean, Nehemiah has spent time in prayer seeking the Lord. This isn't just something he is doing flippantly or in his own thoughts. He has been seeking God. You are more likely to be directed, guided by the wisdom of God when you've been seeking God in prayer, in his word. I think we know that he's being led by the wisdom of God because he is living out in obedience to God. He's not doing what would make sense in the world's eyes. I think most people would say, "Let the people in Jerusalem take care of their own problems. You've got a good position there next to Artaxerxes. Stay in that role." But no, he's doing the hard thing and obeying God. If you are obeying God, there's a good chance you're being guided by the wisdom of God. Or I could put it like this. If you're not living in obedience to God, I guarantee you you're not living by the wisdom of God.

How do we know we're being guided by the wisdom of God? Are we seeking God? Are we obeying Are we leaning on the people of God? Nehemiah is not doing this alone. He's recruiting the people of God with him and there seems to be this affirmation. They strengthen their hands for the good work. They join him in it. If you feel like you're called to do something and no other Christian affirms it, that probably raises some red flags. You may not be living by the wisdom of God. Wisdom of God will often be affirmed by the people of God. So seek God, obey God, bring in the people of God to make sure you're living by the wisdom of God and live for the glory of God.

One thing that's really clear in scripture is that when we're relying on our wisdom, we will get the glory. I mentioned this last week, but if we as a church are doing things that are only by our own strength, our own money, our own resources, then we're setting ourselves up to get the glory and that's a bad place for us to be. If we're living according to our own wisdom, if you're doing things in which people will think that you're smart, you're astute, you're strong, you're impressive, you're probably living by your own wisdom. But if you're living in such a way that only God would get the glory, you're most likely living by the wisdom of God. Serve using the wisdom of God for the glory of God and this is where we're going to end off. What's the last part of Nehemiah's example? He trusts in the sovereignty of God, he serves works using the wisdom of God and then he testifies to the glory of God.

This is where I would just call us to consider Nehemiah's example for our own lives, testifying to the glory of God. One thing that's just worth pointing out is that Nehemiah and this whole story I think is seeking to work for the glory of God. When he talks to the people in Jerusalem about their derision or their shame, I don't know if he's just concerned about his ethnicity, his kind of cultural people living in shame. I think he's really concerned about the name of God because God had said he was going to redeem his people and put them there. Nehemiah believes that when the people of God are living in shame, it is bringing reproach upon So what Nehemiah is seeking to do in all of this is live for the glory of God but he's not just living and working for the glory of God, he's recognizing he can only do it by the grace of God. So he's not just aiming for the glory of God in his work but he is testifying to the glory of God in his life.

It'd be very easy to read this book and just be impressed with Nehemiah. He's a good leader, he's a good planner, he recruits all these people, they build the wall in like 52 days. I mean you can easily be impressed with Nehemiah but I think when you read Nehemiah's words, he does not want you to be impressed with him. He wants you to see that it is only by the grace of God that he is able to do this. Just point out to you twice here in this chapter, verse 8, as he goes and he gets the resources that he needs and he sees all these good things that are happening. He says, "The king granted for me at the end of verse 8 what I asked, why, for the good hand of my God was upon me." He says, "It's only by the grace of God. It wasn't because I was savvy enough, it wasn't because I knew the right people, I had enough business since."

He says, "It's because God's grace was upon me that all of this worked in my favor." He's testifying to the glory of God. What happens is he goes to recruit the people and begin this work. What does he tell them in verse 18, "And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good." He doesn't say, "Hey, I've got this great plan, follow me because I'm an exceptional leader." He says, "I've been experiencing the grace of God, so let's do this work." He testifies to the glory of God.

I've been saying this morning, I want us to see ourselves as servants of the Lord and believe the good hand of God is upon you. You say, "Well, how do I know the good hand of God is upon me? How do I know the grace of God is upon me? Is it if I follow Nehemiah's example close enough? If I serve well enough? If I pray hard enough? How will I know if God's grace is upon me?" The answer is, you can know that the good hand of God is upon you when you have been united by faith to Jesus Christ. When you place your faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible says that God's grace covers you. And you can know for certain that God's good hand is upon you. About 400 years later, another man rode into Jerusalem on an animal. This man was also concerned about the shame of the people of God and their approach that it brought upon. But the answer wasn't to recruit a team and to rebuild the city. The answer was actually to be brought outside the city and take on the shame that we bore. Jesus came into Jerusalem, was brought outside the city, bore our sin and our shame. He was not just in Jerusalem quiet for three days. He was in the grave, conquering sin.

The Bible says that Jesus has come that you might know God's grace upon you always. That you don't have to wonder, "Is the good hand of God upon me?" But you can know that it is always upon you by your faith in Jesus Christ. Do you know that God's grace is upon you? Have you placed your faith in Jesus?

The answer in all of this is not to just follow Nehemiah's example by our own strength, by our own willpower. The answer is, by God's grace, we can do what God calls us to do. By God's grace, we can follow Nehemiah's example. And we can rely on God's grace because of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You think about how the grace of God towards you in Jesus empowers you to do the very things we've been seeing in this chapter. That when you look to the cross and you see that God's sovereign plan meant not withholding his own son, but giving him for your sake, you can trust in the sovereignty of God. You can trust that God's timing is good even when it doesn't feel like it in your life because you know that his timing worked out the fact that Jesus was going to die for your sins. You can leverage your position for the glory of God when you realize that your position is secure in Christ. You can serve using the wisdom of God when you recognize that the world looks at the wisdom of God, the cross of Jesus Christ, and says it's foolishness and it's weak, but God uses his wisdom to shame those who think they are wise in the world.

That when using the wisdom of God causes people to question you, why would you give up that position? Why would you serve God in that way? Why would you risk that? You can trust the wisdom of God because you've seen it work in the cross of Christ. You can testify to the glory of God because you know that his good hand is always upon you. Don't just look to Nehemiah, look to the greater Nehemiah. Look to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. See the good hand of God is upon you and serve him faithfully.