A Concerned Cup-Bearer

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[0:00] Well, we're going to read in God's Word now, and if you'd like to turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Nehemiah, we're going to read chapter 1. We began just thinking about this book last week with a kind of overview of the period of history to which it belongs.

And if you weren't here last week, there are some handouts, I think, still at the doors that give a bit of a chart of the different kings and the different books of the Bible, how they all fit together. So it's sometimes a little difficult to piece all this together, and that's just there to help you.
What's the page in the church Bibles? 3-9-8. 3-9-8. Great. Oh, we all know it. You didn't need to ask. Well done. You found it.
Good. Well, let's read together then Nehemiah chapter 1. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah. Now, it happened in the month of Chislev, in the 20th year, that is the 20th year of King Artaxerxes.
I was in Susa, the capital. And by the way, for our Iranian friends, that's modern-day Shush, which, as you probably know, is in the southwest of Iran, quite down near the Persian Gulf and not too far from the Iraq border.
[1:15] So for our Iranians, perhaps some of you have been there. Anyway, Nehemiah was there in Susa, the capital then of the Persian Empire. And Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, the remnant, notice that word, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.
The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. 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. And I said, O Lord, God of heaven, the great, the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.
Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now lay before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants.
[2:28] Confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I in my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you.

We have not kept the commandments, the statutes, the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word you commanded your servant Moses, saying, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.
But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them. Though you are dispersed, be under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.
They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name and give success to your servant today.
And grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now, I was cupbearer to the king.
[3:50] Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, let's turn to Nehemiah chapter 1. My working title for our studies in Nehemiah is this, Battling Builders for the Kingdom of God.

Well, as a church, I think we know quite a lot about building projects. And it was about 10 years ago now that we started really quite a big one. But looking back, I think we can probably see very clearly now that the real building that was going on, and it did involve not a few significant battles, that the real building was spiritual.

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That God was building us into a fellowship more able to stand for him, to serve him, and indeed to suffer for him. So that, in a sense, the actual physical building became quite immaterial.
And, as a matter of fact, those particular stones have been quite superseded for us. Well, just so for Ezra and Nehemiah.
And, by the way, Ezra and Nehemiah is one book in the Hebrew Bible. It's separate in our Bibles, but it was one. These men were great builders, builders of the temple and of the city walls. But, like all the saints of old, as Hebrews chapter 11 tells us plainly, they knew that their true vision was for no mere earthly city, but for a heavenly one.
[5:18] For an eternal city, whose designer, whose builder is God himself. And they, in their particular time, well, they were rebuilding Jerusalem.

But they knew that, along with all God's people, they were but servants of God, building with him for the future of his everlasting kingdom. And they were waiting, and they were preparing for what the prophets had promised.
Namely, that, at last, the great son of David, the great king, the Messiah himself, would come and rule his kingdom to the very ends of the earth. And so, as we saw last Sunday, their battle in building for the kingdom in their day is the same battle that God's people have been engaged in right from the very beginning and will be right to the very end.
And, of course, at last, many centuries later, the Lord Jesus Christ did come. And he announced that his kingdom had begun. And he said, I will build.
I will build my church. And the gates of hell and death will not prevail against it. And Jesus came as the great servant of the Lord, the one long promised to restore Israel to God and to restore the kingdom of God to his true and renewed Israel, to a people called and gathered, indeed, from every nation by the preaching of the gospel and by a response of repentance and faith.
[6:50] That's why the great commission that Jesus gave was this. All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. But you now, you go and make disciples of all nations.

Go on building my church through proclaiming my gospel. And that building language, well, it's used all the way through the New Testament as the great task for all of those who are called to be Christ's people, called to be his servants.
Luke, at the beginning of his gospel, remember, calls himself and all such servants of the word of God. And all the way through Acts, his second book, he shows how Christ's church is built through the servants of the word of God.
Remember the prayer in Acts chapter 4 at the beginning, in the face of great opposition and hostility, the believers prayed, grant your servants to continue to preach your word with boldness. And they did. And the result, we're told in Acts 6, was that the word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly. And so, says Acts 9, 31, the church through all Jerusalem and Judea and Galilee and Samaria was being built.
[8:09] You see, servants of the word of God building for the building of the church of God and the kingdom of God. And that is the story of the whole New Testament.

It's what Paul wrote in the letter to the Ephesians. Do you remember that the church is God's ultimate purpose? It's a church built on Christ, the chief cornerstone, on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.
And it's built to display the glory of God to heaven and earth for all eternity. And within the church, remember Paul says, it is the gift of God's word that builds, notice the word, builds this body of Christ.
That's what Ephesians 4 is all about. In fact, in Acts chapter 20, Paul uses exactly that language when he's speaking to the elders, the leaders of the churches of Ephesus. And his last words to them, remember he says to them, you know how I served Christ among you.
With many tears and trials, battles, I taught the whole counsel of God, the whole word of God, he says, as a faithful servant. And I now commit to you that same word of grace, which is able to build you and give you an inheritance among all the saints.
[9:27] So Paul saw himself clearly as a battling builder of the kingdom of God in Ephesus and indeed in many, many other places amid all kinds of battles and conflicts.

So do you see the whole story of history is a story of the Lord Jesus Christ building his church and establishing his kingdom and calling all his true followers to serve him by joining in the privilege of building the everlasting legacy of glory in which we are given the privilege of sharing.

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If anyone serves me, says Jesus in John chapter 12, he must follow me. And where I am, and by implication, what I'm doing, where I am, my servant will be with me.
That means that every true servant of Christ from the beginning has been called to build with him amidst many battles and amidst of much conflict, but to build with him for the everlasting kingdom of God.
And it's that story that's told. And it's the part of God's faithful servants in it that is told all through the pages of the New Testament and also the Old Testament. And those, as Paul says to the New Testament church in Corinth, although we are people now who have the privilege of living in the end times, in the last days, the days between Christ's first coming and his return, he says, all the scriptures of the Old Testament, of this great story, they were written for us.
[11:05] So Ezra and Nehemiah is written for us. So that, as Paul says to the church in Rome, so that through endurance, like them, and the encouragement of these scriptures, we also might have hope.

And we might endure and be good and faithful servants of Christ like they were. And gladly, like them, consider the reproach of Christ as far greater value than all the treasures that this world can afford.
Because we also are looking for the same reward. We're looking for the same share in that everlasting city, that everlasting kingdom, which we're devoted to and serve above everything else in life.
Jesus told an awful lot of stories, didn't he? A lot of parables about the responsibilities of his servants. Remember the ones he told about the ruler who inherits a kingdom and goes away to a far country and puts all of his business, all of his interests in the hands of his servants until he returns.
And the point is very stark in those stories of Jesus. To some of those servants on his return, he says this, well done, good and faithful servants. Enter the joy of your master.
[12:23] In other words, share in the kingdom that you have been so faithfully building for all this time I've been away. But others, alas, hear something different, don't they?

You wicked servant. Because, as the apostle Paul put it later in writing to the Corinthians, because they had not built on the foundation with gold and silver and precious stones, but with wood and straw and stubble.
And as Paul says, a day of judgment is coming when all that we have built will be judged. And he warns the church, doesn't he?
Take care, each one, how he builds. Who then is the faithful and wise servant? That's what Jesus asks.
And it's a vital question that he wants us to contemplate. He wants us to take seriously in our own lives, in our individual Christian lives and in our life as a church. And so here, in Nehemiah chapter 1, here is a chapter of the scriptures written for our encouragement and hope, says Paul.
[13:36] And here is a man who repeatedly in this chapter calls himself, gladly, God's servant. And he's a servant who has a great deal to teach us as would-be followers of Christ.

To teach us about the kind of servant that God can use and does use to build what will endure for eternity. Not just what will perish and turn to dust.
But we meet this servant, first of all, not in Jerusalem, but in faraway Persia, in Iran. And we meet him, first of all, not as a builder, but in fact as a butler. He is the concerned cupbearer to the king.
Let's look at verse 1 of Nehemiah chapter 1. It sets the scene. It's the 20th year now of the reign of Artaxerxes. That's the Persian emperor. And it's the reign in which the book of Ezra ends.
So this is the year 445 BC or thereabouts. It's about 13 years after Ezra came to Jerusalem from Persia. Artaxerxes came to power in 464.
[14:41] Remember, it works backwards in BC. So 464 is before 445. And he came to power after his father was assassinated by one of his courtiers in his bed. Well, we know a little bit about brutal leadership contests, don't we, in politics and so on today.

But they were pretty brutal in those days too. And Artaxerxes had a pretty tough start to his reign because his father was murdered. He took the throne. His brother very quickly led a rebellion against him in one of the provinces right at the very start of his reign.
A few years later, there was a revolt in Egypt. That was another part of the empire. And then about a decade later, there was another revolt by one of the rulers of Trans-Euphrates. That's the whole

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area south and west of the Euphrates River.
So Syria, most of Iraq, and the whole area that includes Israel and Jerusalem. So we had a pretty rocky start. And that may well explain why back in Ezra chapter 4, you remember, we were told that when Artaxerxes got a letter from some of the opponents of the Jews back in Jerusalem saying, watch out, the Jews are re-fortifying this city of Jerusalem, he was pretty quick to send back and say, stop that immediately.
And Ezra 4, verse 23 says, by power and force, the Israelites were made to cease the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Because I suspect Artaxerxes was pretty allergic to any hint of another rebellion.
[16:12] I suspect a little bit like President Erdogan in Turkey today. Well, now, knowing all that history and all that background does help us a little bit. But you will notice in verse 1 and 2 that none of that is actually the focus of the Bible text here that we read.

None of it's mentioned. In fact, the king's name isn't even mentioned. All the focus, instead, is on this man called Nehemiah, the king's servant, his cupbearer, and, of course, on the one whose servant he really is.
As he says in verse 6, above all other things, he is a servant of God. So what is the Holy Spirit who caused these things to be written and preserved for all God's people?
Both the Israelites who first read these things in the generations that came after this, the returned exiles, but also for us who live in these last days. What does the Holy Spirit want us to see about this servant of the God of heaven?
The Lord. The God of our fathers and our God too. The God who is the architect and the builder of the everlasting kingdom. What does he want us to see about this servant?
[17:29] Well, first of all, verses 1 to 4, it seems to me he wants us to see that a true servant of the kingdom is a servant whose passion is truly aligned with God's cause.

When one of his brothers came visiting from Judah, Nehemiah's immediate question reveals his chief concerns. Verse 2, there were the Jews and Jerusalem.
His heart was preoccupied above all other things with a great care and concern for God's people and God's place. Now, he was a man, wasn't he, with high office.
We see that at the end of the chapter. He was the king's cupbearer. That means that he was a highly trusted official. He had access constantly to the most powerful man in the known world.
He was the emperor. He was at every single meal the man ate to serve him his wine. After he tasted it, of course, to make sure nobody poisoned it in order to try and assassinate the king.
[18:32] So high rank came as a bit of a supposedly, I suppose, a high risk, high reward occupation, you might say. And no doubt there were other risks involved.

It was quite easy when you were serving somebody like that, that kind of emperor, to almost on a whim be suddenly vulnerable and lose your place. And again, we see those sorts of things still happening today.
But Nehemiah, it must be said, was in a place of wealth, in a place of ease, in a place of comfort, in a place of protection, the very top of the civil service. He was an immigrant who had made it right to that high office.
And in many ways, personally, he had certainly made top grade. How easy it would have been for Nehemiah's horizons to be totally taken up with his career, with his prospects, with his investments, with his pension, with his hopes for a happy retirement down in the Persian Gulf.
But we can see in these verses that is not where his chief passions lie. His heart is in Jerusalem with God's people, with the remnant, verse 3, that is, the returned exiles.
[19:48] That little portion of Israel with whom, as Derek Kidner puts it, the future of all God's purposes was to lie. And that word remnant, as Bob referred it to this morning in Isaiah, it's almost a technical word in the Bible.

And it does mean precisely that. Those in whom the future of God's promise lies. If you go right back to the beginning of Genesis, you'll find in Genesis chapter 7, Noah's little company who survived the flood were the remnant who remained.
Genesis 45, do you remember, Joseph says to his brothers later on, he said, God sent me ahead of you to preserve a remnant on earth for God.
In Elijah's day, remember, God said to Elijah, it's not just you, Elijah, I've preserved 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal. And Paul in Romans 11 says God had preserved a remnant then just as he has today by grace.

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And concerning the terrible, terrible judgment of the exile, the prophets had spoken of a remnant who would return to the land so that God's promise would not fail or falter but would go on.
[21:06] Isaiah 10, verse 21, a remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob to the mighty God. And the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 37, verse 32. Many, many other similar promises all through the prophets. And Nehemiah is a servant of God whose passion is utterly aligned with God's cause that his people, that his church should be where God has called them to be, bearing witness to the world as God has called them to do.
And with God himself dwelling powerfully among them in his temple. Look at verse 9, the temple which is the place where God's name dwells, that is, where God's very presence is encountered on earth as Isaiah encountered it this morning.
Well, not this morning, but you know what I mean. But verse 4, you see, Nehemiah is full of grief because God's people, because the remnant is in great trouble and because God's city is in a state of weakness and neglect chaos.
And so despite his own personal success in life, he simply cannot be at ease, cannot be at peace. He cannot be happy and content in his own life when the cause of God's church in the world was in such distress and in such need.
[22:36] In fact, it caused him deep pain. He tells us it made him weep for days and days and mourn, verse 4, and then to go on mourning and on mourning for months and months, in fact, because in chapter 2, verse 1, we're told it was the month of Nisan, which is our April, and chapter 1 begins in the month of Chislev, which is our December.

It's three to four months of praying and weeping. God's true servant has his heart aligned with God's heart.
He's grieved at the consequences of sin in God's people, and he's weeping at their frailty and their weakness. And that's something that so often marks out God's servants as we read of them in the Bible, isn't it?
Think of Moses who wept for the many calamities of God's people. Or just remember back in Ezra, chapter 9 and 10, when Ezra was weeping and full of distress at the people's sins.
Or remember the apostle Paul, full of grief about the rejection of his own countrymen, Israelites, rejecting the Christ. And all of them, of course, reflecting the Lord Jesus himself who wept over Jerusalem, who looked out with compassion at the people walking in darkness like sheep without a shepherd.
[23:55] And Jesus says, where I am, my servant will be also. Where my heart's concern is, so will the heart of my servant's concern be.

And Nehemiah's heart was so aligned with God's cause that he grieved and he wept. That after so long, that after nearly a hundred years since the first exiles had begun to return from Babylon, that the remnants seemed so small.
And that after so long, God's cause still seemed on this earth so, so fragile. That was the same kind of passion, wasn't it, that moved the heart of men like William Carey in the 19th century.
to go to India with the gospel, to urge others to take the gospel to the furthest ends of the earth because God uses means to convert the people of the earth and that means is the preaching of the gospel by his people.
That was the passion that led to the formation of the great missionary societies of the 19th century. so long since the great commission and yet so many the world over still have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and a man like William Carey could not live at peace knowing that to be true.
[25:20] We have to ask today, don't we, is the place of God, the place of the name of God, where it should be in our world? Is the scope or the health of the church of Jesus Christ as we would long to see it in this world?

And not all of us are called to go to India like William Carey. Not all of us are called to go on missionary journeys but Jesus says, if anyone serves me, he must follow me.
It means something. And a real Christian is someone who has truly repented. It's somebody who has changed his mind and his whole life from self-service to serving God, to being aligned with God's cause, which is to build the church of Jesus Christ worldwide.
So if somebody's got no passionate concern for Christ's church, for its health, for its growth in this world, they've got no identification with his great love for its cause, I guess one must assume that

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they can't really be a Christian at all.
And if they do, of course, share in that heart and passion of Christ, then of course that will be real, won't it? It will be visible, it will be tangible, as Nehemiah's passion was tangible, such as in the same kind of committed prayer, and costly prayer.
[26:47] Notice, by the way, in verse 4, it involved fasting. In other words, what that means is that Nehemiah had to give up other things in order to pray for the cause of God in the world.

He prioritized that prayer over a whole lot of other things, including eating. And obviously, the servant of God who does build for him, and builds what has lasting values, unlikely to be somebody who won't make any time or any sacrifices in order to pray and to think about God's kingdom work in the world.
No, likely am I. They'll make it an absolute priority, won't they? Praying. Praying with other like-minded servants, as he was clearly doing, as verse 11 says, with all who delight in his name, and therefore devoted to pray together for the advance of Christ's kingdom.
A real servant, who is where Jesus is, will instinctively determine to play their part in just that kind of corporate prayer, for Christ's kingdom, for Christ's church.
If they never do, I can only assume that it's very likely they don't really understand God, don't really understand the gospel at all. But Nehemiah clearly did understand God and the gospel, and that's why we need to think about the second thing which we see so clearly in verses 5 to the first half of verse 11, because God wants us to see, I think, that a true servant is one whose prayer is aligned with God's covenant.
[28:20] That is the true gospel with all its privileges and all its demands that come from knowing the one true God. First of all, look at verse 5, note that a true servant knows the true God of the covenant.

Nehemiah prays to a God who is utterly sovereign. Oh Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God. It's just like in Acts 4, isn't it, when all the church together prays to God, oh sovereign Lord who made the earth and the sky and the sea and everything in it.
He prayed to the sovereign God. Now that's really important to notice because some Christians think that God being a sovereign God is somehow a problem for our prayers.
So they'll say, well if God is sovereign, if God will do what God wants to do anyway, what's the point of us praying? And that might seem a logical question but it isn't the way that the Bible views that question at all.
The Bible understands quite differently that unless God is sovereign, unless God can do what he wills, well there is no point in prayer because he may not be able to answer.
[29:32] Only the sovereign God is a God worth praying to. We have to petition the one who has the power to grant the petition. Now just a fortnight ago, Mrs. Merkel and Mr.

Orland and all these other European leaders, they weren't the least bit interested in having a coffee with Theresa May, were they? But this week, they've certainly made time in their diary to see her because now she is our Prime Minister and she represents the sovereignty of the British Parliament and people.
I guess most of us would be quite intimidated by meeting any sovereign, even our own gracious Queen, but how much more intimidating do you think it would be to meet the sovereign, awesome God of heaven?
And Nehemiah knows that's who he is, but look at verse 5. He is also, he says, the God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him. He is the covenant God.
So those who know him truly and those who love him can approach him because he has promised, he's covenanted to be faithful in love to those that he loves.
[30:41] He is awesome. But to those who know and love him, he is the God who is approachable because of that promise of covenant love. The promise that's sealed in the blood of the covenant since Sinai onwards, the blood of the covenant that Moses sprinkled on the people that bound God to his people in that steadfast love.

God to know and love. Well, if Nehemiah could have that confidence, how much more can you and I have confidence in the blood of the everlasting covenant sealed in Jesus Christ, which assures us forever, as Hebrews chapter 4 tells us, that we can with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we can with confidence receive mercy and help in time of need.

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So the servant, you see, who knows God truly can approach him, not with flippancy, not with familiarity, of course not. He is the awesome God. But we can approach him with reverent fear and with real faith.
Yes, with real reverence, but also with real rejoicing because we have access to the one who is truly the sovereign God of heaven. It's a common mistake, isn't it, that people think consciously or unconsciously, that prayer, prayer is all about somehow aligning God with our purposes for our life so we can get from God what we want.
But Nehemiah shows us that that is absolutely upside down. No, a real prayer to the real God of heaven is about us becoming aligned more and more with his purposes so that he will do what he wants with our lives.
[32:26] And that's what it means to know the true God of the covenant. And tied up with that, of course, is that Nehemiah, like all the servants of God, he knows the true gospel of the covenant, which is all about God's grace that covers sin.

But also, notice, it is about grace that demands response. And that response is real repentance, real turning from sin and turning to the obedience of faith.
Because the true biblical gospel offers no cheap grace. Look at verse 5 again, the second half. Great covenant love and grace demands great and real loyalty and love that issues in obedience. Real love to God involves affection, but also allegiance. It involves, says Nehemiah, loving God and keeping his commands. The great privileges of being called God's people confers great responsibilities upon us.
And therefore, Nehemiah understands that the true gospel and understanding it means taking confession of sins seriously. Look at verses 6 and 7. He prays, doesn't he? Confessing the sins of his own and also of all the people Israel.
[33:41] And it means taking the commands of God seriously. Verses 8 and 9. If you are unfaithful, if you are disobedient, I will scatter you. Disobedience means banishment from God.

But if you return to me and keep my commands, I will gather you into my presence. Obedience means blessing. And Nehemiah knows that that was God's word to Moses.
Verse 8. That was the true gospel of the covenant preached in advance. As Paul says, it was preached to the Israel of God. And as Paul explains in Romans chapter 10, it is exactly the same word of faith, the same gospel, that he as the apostle of Christ was preaching to the whole world. The true gospel is a word of both promise and command. Paul in Romans calls it the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith.
That's my gospel, he says. That's the preaching of Jesus Christ. The command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith. It's the eternal gospel that John the apostle sees on the island of Patmos in his vision in Revelation chapter 14.
[34:55] It's a command to all the world to fear God and give him glory and to worship him. That is to wholeheartedly serve and obey the one who made the earth and the sky and the sea.

My friends, that is so important for us to understand. Because there's a great trend today in evangelical circles want to speak about grace, grace, grace and only grace.
But it gives no place for the response that the grace of God in the Bible always, always demands. And where grace is effectual, always, always evokes.
And that is true and real repentance. A turning away from sin in true confession. And a turning to God in real devotion to his command.
In real surrender to his kingly rule. And that is what Nehemiah is praying here for God's church. And his prayer is all based on God's word, his covenant promises to Moses.
[35:57] He's quoting from Moses here. He's quoting directly from Deuteronomy chapter 30 where God does promise that even after the horror of exile which will come because of the disobedience of Israel, when God promises that there will be restoration, that there will be renewal and return.

Even after something as drastic as the exile. We cannot overestimate how terrible and how traumatic the exile was for Israel. Think about the absolute horror of the Holocaust of the 20th century and multiply it by a hundred times.
It was so unbelievably, indescribably terrible that God's people should be utterly destroyed out of the land, the kingdom of God.
But God said, if you return to me because of a real work of spirit and renewal in your hearts, I will bring you back.

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And a real work of God's spirit in renewal always brings a real consciousness of the appalling seriousness of sin. and a real work of the spirit of God always brings that deep repentance.
[37:12] If you read in Ezekiel chapter 36 where the prophet is speaking about the promise of the new covenant and the promise of the new heart and a new renewed experience of the spirit of God within, he says, then, then when you have that experience of the spirit of God in its fullness, then you will remember your evil ways, your iniquities, your abominations with deep shame.

That's the promise of the filling of the Holy Spirit of God. And real servants of God know deeply and viscerally the true gospel of the covenant with all its promises but all its commands.
Because the mark of true and real renewal in the heart by the spirit of God is that real recognition of the magnitude of sin. Because only that brings rejoicing in the magnificence of God's grace in the gospel.
And only people who are truly humbled by that gospel will ever be real servants of God who can build truly the everlasting kingdom. That's why Paul wrote the letter of Romans.
You remember when we studied it, it's a whole letter expanding the covenant gospel of God and replying it relentlessly to the churches in Rome. A church that was full in all its factions of rivalries and pride and conceits and prejudice.
[38:36] He preached that word to them to humble them so that humbled in obedient faith they could be used by God to build his church all over the world to magnify the grace and the glory of God's name.

For from him and through him and to him are all things to God be glory forever and ever. Amen.
That's Paul's prayer in Romans 11. He is utterly aligned isn't he with God's covenant purposes in Christ just as Nehemiah was here.
Because he knows the true God of the covenant he knows the true gospel of the covenant and therefore he knows like Nehemiah the true goal of the covenant which is the honor and the glory of God's name.
That's Nehemiah's concern. Look at verse 9. That God's name should be exalted in its proper place in this world. That's his motive for all the prayers in verse 11.
Verse 10. They're your people. You redeemed them. They're yours. So your honor your name is at stake here Lord. Your temple bears your name.
[39:47] All of this is about your honor and glory in the sight of the world. The God who's promised and covenanted steadfast love to them is the great God of heaven.

And the world must know that he is the great God of heaven and that God truly is great that he's not defeated. And Nehemiah is zealous for the name of God for its vindication in this world.
But notice notice that his zeal for the name of his God does not lead him to shout God is great and go and attack people on a train with an axe or go and blow himself up on an airplane or go and drive a lorry through crowds of holidaying people.
Nehemiah's zeal for the name of the true God issues in a deep identification with his people. Prayer for them. Longing for their blessing.
Longing for their salvation. Like Moses. He's quoting Moses right here in verse 10. After that terrible rebellion, remember, in the wilderness of the golden calf. When as Psalm 106 says, Moses stood in the breach to plead for God's people.
[41:00] They're your servants that you redeemed. They're your heritage. Your honor and glory are at stake, O Lord. Hear my prayer for them. Psalm 106 says, God said he would destroy them.

Had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to turn away his wrath from destroying them. It's hard to hear those words, isn't it?
Without our thoughts being led immediately to Calvary. Where the Lord Jesus Christ, his chosen one, stood in that breach for us forever. To turn away God's wrath.
Not postponing it as Moses did, but bearing it in his own body on the tree for our salvation. Yes, for our great salvation, but above all, as Paul says in Romans chapter 3, for the vindication of God's holy name.
To show God's righteousness, he says, because in his forbearance he had passed over former sins. Seemed like God didn't care about sin, but to show that he is both just and also the justifier of sinful man through faith in Jesus Christ.
[42:19] And yes, as Hebrews tells us, Moses was faithful in God's house as a servant to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, as was Nehemiah.

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And that's why as true servants of the Christ who was to come, that's why they shared in the desires of his heart, in the deep motivations of his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ in them.
God's God's God's God's God's God's kingdom. And so like every prophet, every apostle, every believer today, who is a true servant of Christ and his kingdom, their passion was aligned with God's cause.
They longed for the blessing and for the advance of the church. And their prayer was truly aligned with God's covenant. They were zealous for the fruit of the true gospel of transforming grace that brings glory alone to the name of the true God of heaven.
They were the kind of servants who reflected the servant of God, the Lord Jesus himself. And where he is, says Jesus, building his church, there his servants will be also.
[43:29] There's one last thing briefly to mention. I think the Lord wants us to see that when a servant of Christ has his passion aligned with God's cause, not his own, when his prayers are truly aligned with God's covenant, that is the true biblical gospel and its ultimate goal, which is the glory of God in this world.

Well, it's then that we can see that a true servant's perception will become aligned to God's call. And many Christians today find themselves in all sorts of confusion about guidance and about God's call on their life.
What's God's will for my life? Well, whenever anybody asks me that question, I say to them, well, that's easy. God has given me a specific word that I can give you unequivocally to tell you exactly what God's will is for your life.
Sit down and I'll tell you. And I don't ask for the credit card for this word of knowledge or anything like that, but I just take the Bible and I turn them to 1 Thessalonians chapters 4 and 5.
Just listen. This is the will of God for you. Your holiness. For God has not called us to impurity, but to holiness.
[44:48] And in chapter 5, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

And I just say, follow that guidance and everything else you'll find will fall into place. And that's true, friends. Because the Bible teaches us that it is not special words of guidance that we need from God.
Rather, it is a sincere walk of godliness that we need. And that is what we've just seen in Nehemiah's story, isn't it? His life was truly aligned with God and his gospel and his glory in real life, not just in theory.
He was living for the kingdom of God. He was seeking first the kingdom of God. His was a life truly consecrated to his God.
That is a vital C word. And there's a few more words beginning with C about to come. But today in the evangelical church, let me say, in big events and big conventions and the like, often the top billing is given to the worship leaders.
[45:55] People all want to know who's leading the worship. And that is because the focus so often today is on celebration in big Christian gatherings. But there was a day when at such gatherings the overwhelming focus was not on celebration, but on consecration.

And that's because our forebears knew that real worship of God is not about singing choruses, but it is about serving Christ. As Jim Packer has put it, consecration is repentance renewed and sustained.
Just as repentance is consecration begun. There's no separation. That's where some of the old holiness movements did are. They said there were two separate things, the first and second work of grace.
No, we're saved to serve. Real repentance is always something that issues in ongoing renewal. Real salvation is always something that issues in ongoing surrender to the Lordship of Christ.
So God's call to us to life is a call to serve. It's to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. But then you see it is natural that a life that is consecrated to Christ's service will have a wholly new outlook on all the circumstances of our life.
[47:15] Because we'll see the world and the church and its needs and Christ and the goal of the kingdom through Christ's eyes, not through our own. And that will awaken our own personal consciousness that we have a part to play in whatever particular needs there are in our own day and in our own life.

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And it will lead to a growing conviction in our own hearts of what that place in service might be or could be or even must be for us. And that comes, of course, at its best with a thorough assessment of our own particular competences.
That's something that's always best done, not in isolation, but in community with others who know us and whose sound judgment helps us to reveal the difference between what is real and realistic about what we might do and what is just foolish and fanciful.
It's been said that the difference between vision and fantasy is what you can share with others and find their support for, not their despair over. And that's true. And that was Nehemiah.
He shared his prayers and his vision with others who shared that same commitment as him, verse 11. They feared, they delighted to fear in God's name. And it all brought them ultimately to the utmost clarity.
[48:32] God had given this man access to the king who alone could reverse a decree from years before. And so it became clear to everybody what his job was. He must approach the king.

And they must all cry to God to open the way. Somehow, they didn't know how, that something would happen to allow them to follow the conviction of his heart that he could go and help rebuild Jerusalem.
And because he knew God, his plan and his purpose, and he knew God himself, he had confidence that it could happen.
Even the immutable laws of the Medes and the Persians could be reversed by the God of heaven. Because before him, the king, notice verse 11, was just this man.
Just this man. He was confident. And he prayed, God, give us success today. But he was humble and he was content, you notice, to wait until the Lord did open the door many months later as it happened.
[49:37] And next time, we'll see just how courageous he was to follow through on something that could have led to summary, dismissal, and even execution. But do you see how natural, even how inevitable, it was that Nehemiah's perception and that of his friends came to be aligned with God's particular calling on his life.

It came not from some word of special guidance, but it just flowed out of a life lived in sincere godliness for the kingdom. Because he wasn't thinking, Lord, am I called to serve, to minister in your kingdom?
No, he was thinking, of course I'm called to serve. How can I do any other? But how and where and where best can I serve the need of this particular hour? Where I am, says Jesus, my servant will be also.
And friends, if we as Christian people, if we as a church have our passion today aligned with Christ's cause, if we are truly consecrated to his service, not just in theory, but in reality, and if our prayers together are aligned with his purpose, the great goal of the gospel for this world and for all eternity, then together we will be convicted about how and where to serve in any of the circumstances that we face, with all our particular competences.
And it's within such a community of a living gospel church that each of us will find clarity and confidence and courage in ourselves.
[51:19] So that we also can step up with Nehemiah and say, Lord, give success to your servants today. Grant me, grant us mercy. Grant us all that we need in the task that you have assigned to us in our day, in this place.

So let that be our prayer. That our hearts might be aligned with him. Our prayers for his kingdom. And our part, the one that we can play and must play for the kingdom of Christ today.
Let's pray. Lord, from whom all good things come, grant to us, thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration, we may think those things that be good.
And by thy merciful guiding may perform the same. Through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

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