

God's Hand and Ours

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 July 2016

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now and to our reading this evening, which is in the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah chapter 2. Somebody tell me the page again in the church Bible.

3-9-8, ah, it's on the screen, 3-9-8. So Nehemiah chapter 2, and you'll remember last week we read chapter 1, which introduced us to Nehemiah, the butler soon to become builder.

And that last line of chapter 1 hangs there as if to entice us into the story and what's going to happen next. Now I, this exiled Jewish Israelite man far, far away in Susanna in the capital of Persia, I was cupbearer to the king.

In the month of Nisan, that is around our April time, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up his wine and gave it to the king.

Now I had not been sad in his presence, but the king said to me, why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick?

[1 : 15] This is nothing but sadness of the heart. Then I was 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 in 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, 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 and 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 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 forest, 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.

[2 : 38] And 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 Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite's servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare, to seek the good of the people of Israel.

So I went to Jerusalem. I was there three days. Then I rose in the night, I and a few men with me. I told no one what my 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.

[3 : 46] If you know the geography of the city of Jerusalem, he's starting in the west and going down towards the south and then round and up following the city walls round. You can see it on a Bible atlas.

Then I went on to the fountain gate and 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 didn't know where I had gone or what I was doing. I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials and the rest who were to do the work.

Then I said to them, You see the trouble we are in. How Jerusalem lies in 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.

[4 : 57] So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem 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. And we his servants will arise and build.

But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem. Amen.

May God bless us. His word. Well, you turn with me to Nehemiah chapter 2.

A chapter all about God's hand and ours. It's often hard, isn't it? And discouraging for Christians and also for churches.

[6 : 05] Living as we do, still waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise for the future. Our experience often seems so lacking in comparison to that.

And the church's cause often seems so weak, especially in our Western world today, where certainly the church is deemed to be largely irrelevant to the world and to our society. That's the truth.

And the Bible never tries to play let's pretend. The Bible just confronts reality. And in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, the Apostle Paul says, Yes, we do have a building from God.

Notice the language. An eternal home in the heavens. And yes, we do have the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of that eternal real estate. But, he's just as clear.

Despite all of this, he says, now we groan in this bodily life. A life which he calls a life in these earthly tents.

[7 : 08] Because this bodily life is but a shadow of that greater solid reality that is to come. But Paul says, for now we walk by faith and not by sight.

As we sang in that song. And of course the problem is that sight seems so much more real. So much more real than what is not yet seen. And therefore often it seems more valuable to people. And the struggle of faith, by contrast, is very hard. And that is why, sadly, some people do slip back and even give up on the Christian faith.

But of course the Bible tells us that is the way of disaster. And we're not to be those who shrink back and are destroyed, as the Hebrews writer says in Hebrews 10.

We are to be those who have faith and preserve their souls. We need to endure, he says, so that we will receive what God has promised.

[8 : 10] But of course to do that we need encouragement. Of course. And the apostle knows that very well. And so in Hebrews there, he encourages believers, doesn't he? To look back. To look at those who taught you the faith and who led you and spoke the word.

And follow their faith. What an encouraging thing that is, isn't it? When we do that, when I was in training for ministry many years ago, one of the things that encouraged me most was going to conferences.

And looking at those who were 20, 30, 40 years ahead of me in Christian ministry. And seeing that they were still doing it and still believing in it. What a great encouragement that was to me to keep going.

It still is today. Not quite so many who are 40 years ahead of me. There are one or two, like Dick Lucas. And what a great encouragement it is to look at such. But even more importantly, the writer in Hebrews says, we're to look back to what he calls a great cloud of witnesses.

To all of those people of faith. All through the Bible's history. Represented by that sample in Hebrews chapter 11. And he urges us to follow their faith.

[9 : 14] Because their faith leads us always to the great source of the great perfecter of our faith. The Lord Jesus Christ. The one who is alone, able to make us run with endurance.

The race marked out for us. Just as he did for them. And of course, Paul too tells us, doesn't he, that the very reason that we have the whole Old Testament.

Instead of just a summary of it tacked on to the beginning of the New Testament. The reason we have it is because all scripture is God breathed. And it's useful and wonderful not only to lead us to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, says Paul.

But also to equip us for every good work. So that we too might serve him faithfully today. And that's why right from the very beginning, God has always given his word to his people.

And these books, Ezra and Nehemiah, we've been studying, they were written also for a people. Those who lived in the decades following on from the events that we read of in these books. And they were a people in need of great encouragement and hope just as we are today.

[10:17] Because they had not yet seen everything that the prophets had promised. They were still not utterly liberated after the exile. They were still part of an empire.

And they were still, most importantly of all, awaiting that promised Messiah King and his everlasting kingdom. They didn't yet see it. They had to walk by faith.

And so they were easily prone to discouragement and despair and even disbelief altogether. But the book of Nehemiah says, no, look back and see what God can do.

And indeed what God has done. In far worse situations. Far more unpromising situation than even you're in today. When is chapter 2 verse 17 in our chapter here?

It tells us when God's city lay in absolute ruins. Its gates burned. Its walls collapsed. Its people moved out and leaving it desolate. Look and see that when men put their trust and their hope in the God of heaven.

[11:23] They discover that their situation is not hopeless. And nor are they themselves helpless either. But they can and they will achieve great things for the kingdom of God.

Because his mighty hand is upon his people for good. And that means that their hands can also be strong and effective.

So this book was a book of great encouragement for those subsequent generations of returned exiles. But Paul says it was written also for our encouragement. For our instruction.

So that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures. We might have hope as well.

So what does this chapter, Nehemiah chapter 2, have to tell us about the working of God's hand and ours.

When the outlook for the kingdom seems at best to be pretty bleak. Well look first at verses 1 to 8. Where the dominant focus is surely on the sovereign hand of God's providence.

[12:27] But we'll see that a sovereign God never ever has passive servants. Because the big message here is to see that when like Nehemiah you know that your God is the God of heaven.

And that his hand is upon you for good. Then you will engage in strategic planning. Precisely because you know and you trust in his sovereign providence.

You will engage in strategic planning. Because you trust his sovereign providence. Verse 1 tells us it's the springtime.

It's four months or so after the events of chapter 1. That is four months of committed and urgent prayer. Like that vocalized in verse 11. Lord give your servants success today.

So they were patient weren't they? And persistent in their prayer. Just like the persistent widow in Jesus' parable in Luke 18. Do you remember? God may well seem to delay in his answer.

[13:29] But no. He will answer speedily the prayers of his people. Remember that's just what the angel told Daniel in chapter 9 in his prayer. From the moment you started praying.

An answer went out. Didn't look like it. But that was so. And Nehemiah and his associates know that God had been at work. Even before their praying began.

By his marvelous providence. That had given Nehemiah a unique position in this kingdom. He was cup bearer to the king. He has access to the most powerful man in the world.

And that last line of chapter 1 just hangs there as a portent of great significance. God clearly has a job for Nehemiah with the king.

And Nehemiah knew it. But there's still mystery. Because he didn't know how or when God was going to open that door for him. He just had to trust and obey and pray. That Christians often want, don't they?

[14:27] We want and we expect sometimes. We want God to give us guidance exactly about the future. We want him to tell us exactly what's going to happen in our life. And when and how we should do it.

But that wouldn't require any faith and trust, would it? That's fortune telling. That's actually the essence of paganism. Which is the very thing that God condemns. No.

Trust and obey is the biblical way. Trust in God and do the right. As the old hymn says. And a man of the faith who does that.

Will respond rightly when the time comes. Because he trusts that God will provide what he needs. When he needs it. At just the right time. Not necessarily before.

When you go on holiday with your little children. You're going on a plane journey. You don't really give them the boarding pass the day before. If they're five years old. Do you? Well, you'd be very foolish if you do. Let me tell you. What you say to your little one is.

[15:29] Daddy will keep this. And give it to you just when you need it. Which is about one second. Before you go through the boarding gate. That's the only way that you'll actually make it to the plane, isn't it?

Well, we can trust God to lead us. And to give us into our hand. Exactly what we need. At just the right time. Not before. In case we mess it up. Well, at last the time came here in verse one.

And it wasn't, I think, an event manufactured by Nehemiah. Some translations add in the word before. I hadn't been sad in the king's presence before. Implying that Nehemiah put on a sad face at this time to provoke the king's question.

I think that's very unlikely. It was probably an offense to look sad before the king. Because the king was meant to be the light of your life. He was meant to make you happy in all your life. And to deny that would be rather an insult to him.

Actually, that's what your employer probably thinks too. So probably remember that tomorrow morning when you go in. He thinks you are the light. He is the light of your life. So don't look sad in his presence. Anyway, the text just says, I had not been sad in his presence.

[16:41] But verse two, despite that, the king did seem to see something that made him question Nehemiah. Perhaps it was the queen, actually, who spotted it. You notice in verse six, we're told that she was there.

And I don't know, women tend to have better emotional antennas. Or perhaps it was there. But at any rate, verse two, when the king did notice, Nehemiah was very much afraid. Because it wasn't done to be sad before the king.

But real courage and real faith means that you speak out for God, even when you are afraid and you're trembling. I was with you, says Paul to the Corinthians, in weakness and fear and much trembling.

But what did he do? He testified to the gospel of the cross of Jesus. And Nehemiah here spoke out. He spoke out respectfully and carefully.

May the king live forever. He gives him his proper respect according to custom. He's not rude. And he's careful. Do you notice how he frames it as a personal issue first? It's the place of my father's graves that is in ruins.

[17:50] It doesn't actually mention Jerusalem by name yet. That may or may not be significant. But he's being careful, I think, because he's dealing with a powerful despot, a ruler whose whim could see his head chopped off.

But the king obviously picks up the hint in verse four because he says, what are you requesting? And suddenly, I think Nehemiah knows this is it.

This is the moment. This is the moment we've all been praying for. And he's afraid. And he prays again, Lord, help me. And then he takes the plunger.

And he says to the king, send me to go and rebuild this city. It's a very, very unlikely request to be granted. Somebody of that stature in the Persian court to be released to go off to a foreign country for who knows how long.

But in verse six, when the king says, how long will you be gone? He knows that that's a green light. He's assuming he'll go. And again, by the way, notice that's where we're told the queen is sitting next to him.

[18:58] I wonder if the queen was giving him a nudge and saying, go on, just let him go. Probably easier for the king to be magnanimous, isn't it? With a glass of wine in one hand and his lovely queen on the other hand, giving him the nudge.

Maybe he was in a good mood. Who knows? But verse six, it pleased the king to send me. Now here's the thing to note.

Nehemiah prays to his God, the sovereign God of heaven. It was all in God's hands. And Nehemiah knew that. And he prayed for God to open the way because only he could.

But that did not mean that Nehemiah was passive. Please note, he was also highly strategic in his planning. And so when God opened the door and the king said to Nehemiah, what do you want? Nehemiah didn't say, oh, well, oh king, I'll have to go and think about that. In fact, no, I'll go and pray about it because I'm a Christian. I'll come back in about a fortnight with some suggestions. Not a bit

of it.

[19 : 59] He was ready to seize the moment as soon as the king asked. Why? Because he was a man of prayer and because he understood that God was sovereign. Not despite that. And that's why he had a strategy.

He was expecting God to work. And when the king said, where do you want to go? He knew immediately, I want to go to Jerusalem. When do you want to go? Well, he knew that as well and gave the answer.

How are you going to achieve this? Well, he knows that too. I'll need letters of passage to get through. Verse 7. How about the finance? How about the furnishing of all that has to be done? Well, he's thought about that as well.

Verse 8. I'd like you, by the way, king, to donate some of the timber from your forest and give me all that I need. It was an audacious request. But I suspect, no doubt, Nehemiah remembered that many years ago, Cyrus, when he first sent the exiles in the first return, had given them all sorts of provisions and all sorts of money.

And then years later, when Ezra had come back, Darius the king had given all kinds of money and provisions too. And he knew that God could supply all his needs and could even manipulate the purse of the king.

[21 : 13] Well, maybe we could do a little bit more audacity like that in today's church. John Newton's hymn is right, isn't it? When he talks about our prayers, you are coming to a king.

Large petitions to him bring. But the point is, you see, when you really do trust God's sovereign providence, you can and you must, therefore, be engaged in strategic planning for his kingdom. Because the Bible, when it drives our thinking truly, and when it drives our prayers truly, and when our prayers are kingdom-seeking prayers, then they can never, ever just lead us into passivity, into just reflection and discussion.

No, it must lead us to action. Some Christians are very, very pious. They want to say, oh, we must just pray. We must just pray.

We mustn't do anything. We must just pray and see what God will do. That's not right. Certainly not what Nehemiah did. Because in the Bible, the sign that God is at work, the God of heaven at work, the sign that his hand is upon his people, is that his people are likewise hard at work with their hands in his enterprises.

[22 : 33] Nehemiah was a man of great and effective strategy precisely because he knew that the hand of his God was unstoppable because he was the sovereign God of heaven. That's the anchor, as you see, to the whole chapter.

The God of heaven begins it in verse 4 and ends it in verse 20. And his good hand is doing everything that Nehemiah does.

Verse 9 and then again, verse 18. That's a phrase that if you look back, you would have seen all through Nehemiah chapter 7 and 8. When Ezra came back to Jerusalem with his people, the good hand of my God was upon us for good.

God's providential control over this world towers over every empire and every emperor and every so-called immutable edict that they bring out.

Even the laws of the Medes and the Persians, which as you know, it's a stock phrase. They can never be altered. Well, Artus Ertzi's reversed his previous decree in a moment. Just as Daniel's plotting courtiers were utterly thwarted even though they thought they had him by the laws of the Medes and the Persians.

[23 : 50] Friends, the hand of our God is still sovereign in this world. He really does have the whole world in his hands. That's why extraordinary things can happen just like even this past week.

Our government's edict being overturned by the Supreme Court in London and some of the sinister provisions of the named person bill have been done away with and we're going to be protected from.

And when we feel helpless, when we think, oh, things are getting so difficult, things will never change, we need to remember that, that our God is still the God of heaven who is sovereignly in control over every ruler, even our rulers.

some of the more senior folks, they will remember back to the days of the Cold War, the days of the Soviet Empire, when in the days of Khrushchev and Brezhnev and so on, it seemed inconceivable to so many in the world that that great monolithic empire could ever be cracked.

There was huge fear all over the Western world. And then, in such a short period of time, bang, the Berlin Wall came down, everything changed, and the whole shape of the world as we know it has been so totally different.

[25 : 11] Human empires will collapse in moments, but the King of heaven, his hand, will never be thwarted. And today, when we look around in the world and we see the threats of ISIS, we see terrorism, we wonder if things will ever change, we need to remember that God of heaven is still God.

His hand is still upon his people for good. I am with you always, says the Lord Jesus, even to the end of the age. And the more we grasp his truly sovereign power, the more we will then be confident in dreaming great things, in planning strategically for great things for his kingdom, because we trust his hand, and we trust that his hand is holding our hands.

That's the way it was in the 16th century during the Reformation. It was the zeal unleashed by a Reformation church that understood the true sovereignty of the majestic God.

It was that that caused great missionary labors to go out all over the continent of Europe, churches planted all over the place, because a true knowledge of God's sovereignty never ever leads to passivity.

It always leads to action. Think of the Apostle Paul. He knew, didn't he, that God's plan and purpose was for the gospel to reach all peoples.

[26 : 38] And that's precisely why he was prayerfully strategic in taking that gospel at any cost to all the key population centers and cities of the ancient world so that the gospel would be planted and people would take it to the outer extremities of the empire.

And so today as well, surely if we are people who grasp the Bible's truth about the sovereign hand of God, still working out his purpose through the gospel to build his kingdom, then surely that will drive us to prayer for his kingdom.

And surely it will drive us to be planning great things for his kingdom strategically, doing everything we can so that when opportunities do arise and doors open for us, we're ready.

We don't have to sit and think, oh, I wonder what God could be wanting us to do. Let's spend months thinking about it so that we are able to better serve the gospel and the kingdom.

God's sovereign providence drives our strategic planning for building for his kingdom. But never in a sort of gung-ho or thoughtless way.

[27 : 50] And that's the second thing we have to observe here in verses 9 to 16, which are really all about the steady hand of God's servant. When the God of heaven is your God and you know that God's hand is upon you, you will still make shrewd preparations because you're not naive about sinful people.

And those who achieve great things for God will never be idealists. They have to be realists. And Nehemiah most certainly was a realist. Some people are full of ideas, aren't they?

But they're very unrealistic. They've got boundless enthusiasm like Tigger. But it's just uncontrolled and so it's unproductive. Then, of course, you get other people who are like Eeyore who just pour cold water on every possible suggestion you make.

It's not either of these things that we need. No. Of course, the kingdom does need people with dreams to see just what could happen for God.

But it also needs people with discernment to see how it can happen and with drive to make it happen and also with discretion to manage the whole process worthily and well for the sake of Christ.

[29 : 02] Now, Nehemiah had that balanced and steady hand. And he knew that he needed not only the provisions that he speaks of in verse 8, but also he would need protection and above all, partnership in the work.

Now, protection came from the letters. You see that in verse 9 and, of course, also from the king's soldiers that backed up the letters. And the whole process there, not just about physical protection, but the protection from a great, wide, purposeful proclamation to everybody that they would see that this man clearly has the king's authority.

So don't mess with him and what he's doing. Some people, by the way, have contrasted this with what happens in Ezra chapter 8. Do you remember, Ezra refused soldiers or rather didn't seek for soldiers because he had told the king, no, the Lord will protect us.

And so some people look at Nehemiah here and say, oh, Nehemiah didn't have as much faith as Ezra. But that's just silly. That's just to see that, not to see, rather, that different situations often require different tactics.

You see that in the Acts of the Apostle. Sometimes the Apostle Paul would take a beating. But other times, he asserted his Roman citizenship, didn't he? to protect himself. Other times, he was even rescued by Roman soldiers.

[30 : 19] Sometimes he refused to take any money from the church. Other times, he told the church in no uncertain terms, give money for the sake of the gospel mission. All a matter of what best serves the kingdom in any particular situation.

That's just the way it was here. Nehemiah didn't go asking for these soldiers, but they were given to him. And to refuse them would simply have been to foolishly refuse a provision from God because verse 10 tells us precisely why he needed such a thing.

Already, the dark shadow of enemies is hovering on the horizon. So he accepts the protection. But most of this section focuses on his discernment about the need for partnership.

If this work is ever going to be done, he needs partners. Verse 12, you see, tells us that God had clearly put into Nehemiah's heart a real vision to do something for Jerusalem.

But he knows that he can't do it himself. Verse 16 tells us that. He's already absolutely got in his mind all of those others who are going to be needed to do the work. Now that would not be easy.

[31 : 27] So he has to prepare the people and prepare the whole situation with great shrewdness. Because as any leader knows, it's not only God's enemies, but also it is God's people.

who are sinful. And Nehemiah then is going to have to be on top of his brief, isn't he? He's going to have to be able to anticipate every objection that will be given to him. He has to be confident that he can present a clear, compelling plan to all these beleaguered people.

And so he prepares very carefully, verses 13 to 15. And very quietly, notice at night, doesn't tell anybody. He doesn't want leaks. He knows that not all of God's people are wise.

And he suspects perhaps even some of them might be treacherous. So when plans are afoot, it's necessary that he has to do some confidential work, have some confidential discussions.

And that's sometimes needed, isn't it, in the life of any Christian work, in the life of a church.

Sometimes people can get niggled about that and can complain about things like that because I suppose we all like to be in the know.

[32 : 33] We all think we're so terribly important that if we don't know what's going on, there must be something wrong. But that's not so. Sometimes it's just the need for real care and discretion and prudence in planning for God's work.

And notice, Nehemiah is not building his own empire here. He's engaged in building God's kingdom. And so he has to be realistic about the opposition and the potential sources of opposition, which will come, as we shall see, not only from outside the city and the open enemies, but also from inside.

And that's the pattern we see all through the church's history, all through the book of Acts, opposition without and, sadly, sometimes within. Notice, by the way, also how modestly this extraordinary work begins.

It's very quiet. Careful, quiet walk by night. No ostentation, no advertisement, no displays. There's some people aren't there who blow the trumpet a lot, talk up their own book a very great deal, talk a lot about the great things that they're going to do in church building or church planting or starting some new movement, whatever it is, even before they've even started.

Well, Nehemiah doesn't seem to be that kind of man at all, does he? He seems to be the chap who got on quietly, just started, and was quite happy to let the fruit do its talking one day.

[34 : 02] And I think that's worth us noting, isn't it? Derek Kidner calls him a model of good sense, piety, and attention to detail. He certainly is a man with a steady hand.

He was strategic in his planning because he knew the sovereign providence of the God of heaven. And he was shrewd in his preparation because he also knew the sinful propensity of both his enemies and his own people and his own heart.

That's a steady-handed man. But there comes a time, of course, when the vision must be shared if work's going to be done.

And everybody, notice verse 16, all the people, all Israel, that's a great theme in the post-exilic books. All God's people, the priests, the nobles, the officials, all of them are to be involved together

in the work of building the kingdom of God.

And Nehemiah's job, like the job of every Christian leader, is to equip the saints for the work, which is the work of building the body of Christ, as Paul calls it in Ephesians 4.

[35 : 07] And it's exactly the same task, whether it's the 1st century AD, the 21st century AD, or the 5th century BC, like here. And verses 17 and 18 shows us how he did it.

And they show us, don't they, the strengthened hands of Christ's church. Because when the God of heaven is your God and his hand is upon you, then strengthened hands among his people come from stirred hearts, hearts that have been gripped by the thrill of God's great purposes.

And Nehemiah shared his vision in such a way that touched the people's hearts. And somebody has said of verse 18 that such a total response from such a group of people was as miraculous as the response of Artaxerxes.

And that's right, isn't it? Anybody who's tried to mobilize even a small congregation of people to be of one mind and heart absolutely in the work of the gospel knows that that is a miraculous work of God.

How did he do it? Well, somehow, Nehemiah pierced through the fog and the slumber and the disillusion and the numbness of mind that we so easily get into.

[36 : 22] Just expecting life to be the same day after day and nothing to change. And Nehemiah pierced through that and he made them see two things very clearly. Do you see?

Verse 17. He made them see the horror of the consequences of the judgment of God and of his absence from his true place at the heart of the world. See the trouble that we are in, the city of God in disarray.

But he also made them see the hope in the grace and mercy and the purpose of God for the future and the real possibility of restoration and renewal.

He told them the good news of the good hand of his God that was at work to do a new thing. And he showed them the evidence of that hand of God at work now in the world.

Verse 18. Look what God has done, he says. Look what God has done through the king and all that he has given me. Here is proof positive in the king's edict. This good news, he is saying to them in effect, is bearing fruit and growing as Paul put it to the Colossians centuries later.

[37 : 31] And sometimes it takes the jolt out of the ordinary, doesn't it, to awaken God's people to that reality. Sometimes it just needs a fresh perspective on things that I suppose familiarity have made us immune to.

Sometimes it is a teenager in church but they have gone off to a camp or a conference and suddenly somehow they have just heard clearly in a different setting and they have been awoken in a way they have not been before.

Sometimes it is just a change of a different voice, a visiting preacher or a visit to a different place, a conference or something like that. But sometimes, even thank God, it just happens through an ordinary Sunday when God's people are together and a penny drops in somebody's mind and heart or in a whole congregation's mind and heart.

And that seems to be what God did through Nehemiah's word on that occasion. Notice he wasn't pompous. He wasn't the superior newcomer coming in and saying, oh, I can tell you all your faults. Look what you've done. Notice what he says. Not the mess you're in. It's we. Look at the mess we're all in together. He's at one with them in it and he's at one with them in the essential response.

[38 : 42] Come, let us build together. And notice how he lays before them such an absolutely clear objective.

Nothing else matters except this essential task of overriding importance. Just like Paul again, centuries later, saying this one thing that I do, forgetting all that's behind, I press on towards the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

You see, both these men were absolutely clear about the one thing that really matters for the life of Christian people in every age of God's story, whenever it is.

And it's not the European Union. And it's not Scottish independence. And it's not your job or your career or your family. It's certainly not your new kitchen or your next holiday.

No, what really matters about all other things are the issues of eternity and of our part in those issues of eternity, building together for what will last forever.

[39 : 57] And friends, all Bible history, all Christian history shows us that the church's hands are strengthened for that task when their hearts are truly stirred to see with clarity these two things,

both the horror of God's judgment and the hope of His glorious gospel of the kingdom as the one great need of this world and its people and the one great need for this world and its people.

Utter clarity about the truth of the true biblical gospel alone is what will make people wise for salvation in Jesus Christ, yes, but which alone will equip the saints for every good work.

Hands strengthened for gospel work come only from hearts stirred by the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its matters of eternal significance.

And we need to be clear, don't we, ourselves, today, each one of us and as a church. Are we clear about the task facing us today?

The state of Jerusalem as Nehemiah saw it is a vivid picture, isn't it, of the state of the church of Jesus Christ in much of our nation today in much of the western world. It's lying in ruins. Its buildings are abandoned or they're turned into flats or clubs or restaurants or whatever.

[41 : 27] So many of the church buildings that are still open are virtually empty. There's a few people hobbling out on their walking sticks and their zoom frames. The influence of the church in our nation is shriveled, it's scorned, it's pitiful in so many ways.

Do we feel the shame of that? And do we feel the horror of the consequences for the vast mass of people in our city and in our country who are therefore ignorant, utterly, of Christ and his gospel and of the horror of God's judgment but also of the hope of salvation in Jesus his son.

If we did see that as clearly I think as Nehemiah and his people saw it that day how could we rest when there is still so much to do even in our own city never mind our nation never mind the world.

Is God calling us come let us build that we may no more suffer disgrace and shame at the cause of Christ in our day? Don't we need that same clarity about our task which is likewise to build and to rebuild these walls of salvation to focus our energies on building what only God's people can ever build in this world that is the church of Jesus Christ serving his gospel therefore with all of our might with all of our time and resources not being distracted with many other things many of them good things useful things things we might do things perhaps we could do but things we simply cannot do and devote our time and our money and energies to because the fundamental need is still not met Christ's church Christ's church is still not built people are not yet saved they are not yet gathered in safely within those walls of salvation and until that task is complete and Jesus comes we must have absolute clarity mustn't we about what our task is above all other it is to serve him in his great commission which is to build these walls of his living city by making disciples in Jesus name and bringing them into the city of God and that is and that will always be the good work that we're to strengthen our hands for under God's good hand of power and might and as the book of Acts shows us plainly where God's people pray for his hand to work when they go on proclaiming his gospel the word of God will increase and the church will be built and is being built all over the world today but just as in Acts in the first century and for Nehemiah in the fifth century

BC there will also when we are doing that always be enemies for our great enemy the devil hates the church of Jesus Christ and he hates any church and any Christian and any people that have the building of that church as their one clear set task in all the world and that's what verses 19 and 20 show us as the threatening shadow of verse 10 again begins to materialize more clearly we see the satanic hand of God's enemies when the God of heaven is your God and his hand is upon you for good and you do begin actively engaging in the building work of his everlasting kingdom then you will face severe hindrances because of the satanic hatred for God's kingdom and his gospel and his people we saw that didn't we in our first overview study what Daniel saw the angel to the end there will be war and verse 10 shows us how visceral how irrational that hatred really is this is much much more than some petty jealousy these people are furious that anyone should come to seek any good at all for the people of God this is the timeless hatred of the seed of the serpent for all the seed of true faith verses 19 and 20 put flesh on this nefarious triad who were to scourge

[46 : 12] Nehemiah all through his work and they illustrate for us the particularly toxic combination of religion and politics Sanballat was the governor of Syria up to the north of Israel Tobiah held office in Ammon that's to the east and both of these men you perhaps notice they have Jewish names Tobiah's name means God is good and yet they sided for their own gain with the world and when the chips were down they were thoroughly against God's people and his cause there's nothing sadder in church circles than those from an evangelical background for whom the lure of high office or position has corrupted them and actually in the end made them into enemies of the gospel however much they might have pious titles and mouth pious platitudes they're enemies and so were they again Geshem the Arab was an even more powerful man he controlled the whole area

to the south trade routes to Saudi Arabia to Egypt and so on he didn't want any newly independent kingdom on the edge of his common trading area messing up his common market gosh that sounds very familiar doesn't it really the world doesn't change much does it if you touch people's real idol their empires their institutions they will hate you but this enmity is something far far more than a mere political and natural thing it is a supernatural hatred it's spiritual as Paul wrote centuries later to the Galatians he who was born according to the flesh always persecuted him born according to the spirit and as it was so it is now it has been right the way back to Genesis 3 it will be says the Bible right to the very end but just as we close notice their words in verse 19 it shouldn't surprise us they hit out with the twin barbs of scorn they jeered at us they despised they reviled us and slander are you rebelling all kinds of false evil against them for what they were doing in God's name isn't that exactly what Jesus promises will be the lot for those who follow him and speak for him and join in the task of building his church today because in Matthew 5 he says that doesn't he that his coming does not abolish the story of the law and the prophets it doesn't abolish that old testament struggle to establish

God's kingdom on earth no it fulfills it and so now he says to his followers you disciples you Christian believers you are to take up the task you are the light of the world you are the salt of the earth you are the city set on the hill you are the ones who are gathering into that city all those that God is calling through his great gospel of salvation but he says yes they will scorn you and yes they will slander you but blessed are you when they revile you and when they utter all kinds of evil falsely against you on my account what does Jesus say rejoice why rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven that tells you that you belong here in this everlasting city of God for sure and he says for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you like Nehemiah and his sturdy builders and every other one and this proves that you are in the company of God's people who all the way through history have been building for the true city of God you are in the right place the safe place the city of God the place of salvation he whose word cannot be broken has formed you for his own abode and with salvation's walls surrounded you may smile at all your foes just as Nehemiah did here look at verse 20 isn't it magnificent the God of heaven will prosper us his hand is sovereign we his servants we will build our hands must serve God and not man you you have no part or place in this city in other words your hands are empty as Ralph Davis has put it when human enmity runs into divine providence the latter smashes the former what a warning to anyone who might think they can pit their hand against the hand of the God of heaven what a comfort and a great encouragement to all who have entrusted this God with the work of their hands and put it into his hand into the good hand of our

God the sovereign Lord of heaven well let's pray heavenly father we are encouraged by your word to us how we praise you that we have in Jesus Christ a portion and a right and a claim to your great everlasting city and therefore with the walls of your salvation built around us no enemy can ever overcome us and our hearts can be glad and our hands strengthened to build with all that we have for the kingdom that is everlasting so help us we pray and encourage us in that this coming week for we ask it in Jesus name Amen