

You'll all know the proverb 'strike while the iron is hot', the phrase which pushes us to action when the time is right.

In this chapter of Nehemiah we come to such a moment. Last week, Dan led us through the first chapter of Nehemiah and we left the titular hero weeping and praying over the news of the ruined Jerusalem.

This book can be used to illustrate the damaged and ruined areas of our lives that need to be rebuilt, repaired or recovered. As we journey through Nehemiah, we might just find some practical help on how to reclaim a ruined life.

This is where we find Nehemiah at the start of Chapter 2:

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, ² so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid, ³ but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"⁴ The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven,

Dan pointed out the difference in dates to us last week, with Chapter 1 taking place in the month of Kislev, which is roughly December, and Chapter 2 taking place in the month of Nisan, which is roughly April. Nehemiah doesn't say why it took so long to bring his problem to the king, but perhaps, being a man of prayer as we have seen, he was waiting for the Lord to indicate that time, which came in the month of Nisan.

God often works like that today. We can be so impatient can't we? In a click and buy generation, waiting can become so unbearable for many of us. I don't tend to watch live television these days and just watch things on catch-up. In my house we've been watching the Great British Bake Off on channel 4 and I really struggle with the adverts....

We can be the same with our prayers. We want them answered now. Not that we shouldn't pray with expectation, but God does sometimes delay. Scripture teaches us to persevere in prayer, to keep praying until an answer comes. This is what Nehemiah had been doing, and it is made evident in Nehemiah as it had become such a burden to him that it was written on his face. He had gone four months without letting it affect his work, but now he could hold back his

grief no more. When the King notices this and asks him what is wrong, he tells us that he was very much afraid.

Now, the king's concern may sound pretty innocuous. The King perhaps is genuinely concerned about the welfare of his trusted servant. Nehemiah though perhaps has good reason to be afraid. You see, he is the king's cupbearer. One of his main jobs was to taste the King's wine to see if it had been poisoned. In these days of monarchs, the only way to remove someone from a throne was assassination. It was a rather dangerous job that Nehemiah had. The man responsible for this would need to be a man of integrity, always above suspicion. If the king happened to become suspicious or distrustful, he couldn't just lose his job, he could lose his head. This is perhaps why he was very much afraid.

Though this is perhaps a moment of danger, it is also a moment of opportunity, which Nehemiah senses. This is God's open door. Nehemiah shoots up a prayer that probably went something along the lines of.....HELP.....Maybe you've prayed that kind of prayer before. With that prayer, Nehemiah makes his response.

and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it." 6 Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. 7 I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? 8 And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.

At first glance this doesn't sound like much, But when we read the book of Ezra we find that this is actually a huge request. To sum it up briefly, when the Israelites started to rebuild Jerusalem, the other people from that region got together and wrote a letter to King Artaxerxes telling him what's going on and if the Israelites completed their work, it would end up being big trouble for him. And so the king issued an edict saying, "No. I forbid it. There will be no rebuilding of the city, no rebuilding of the gates or the walls, no rebuilding of the houses of worship. I forbid it." And then those people took the king's edict

and stopped the Israelites by force. And so what Nehemiah is really asking here is for the king to reverse his foreign policy.

Nehemiah's response is also very tactful. He doesn't refer to Jerusalem here by name, as it has a reputation for trouble and the source of revolt. He instead just talks of the city where my ancestors are buried. Ancient kings were greatly concerned about their burial...just look at the pyramids. The king would have been sympathetic to the desire to restore the resting place of his ancestors.

Nehemiah sets a time in which he will be gone. He was actually gone for 12 years. Not only did he need sufficient time, but he needed to be able to travel safely, so asks for letters to the governors of the provinces to provide safe passage. We find out later in the book that not only did this give him diplomatic immunity, but it also meant he was appointed governor of Judah.

Nehemiah also knew he would need resources. He asks for special timber from the King's own forest.

Next we get the account of his journey

So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me. ¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

We see here Nehemiah not only went with a military escort, but that the full authority of the king was behind him. In the same way, if we are trying to rebuild areas of our lives that have been broken, we have the full authority of the king behind us, the very real power of God.

We then encounter the first enemies of Nehemiah, Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. A Horonite is a worshiper of the god Horon, a local deity of Palestine. Tobiah was a citizen of Ammon, which was the country that we now call Jordan (whose capital, by the way, is named Amman).

¹¹ I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few others.

Nehemiah takes time to recover from his journey, and then begins the job of examining the extent of the problem.

I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.¹³ By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal^[a] Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.¹⁴ Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through;¹⁵ so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate.¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

Nehemiah didn't tell anyone what was going on, perhaps anticipating opposition. The walls were in such a bad state that his horse couldn't even ride through.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

Nehemiah knows he needs help...this is not a job he can do on his own. He points out the ruins to them, and tells them that enough is enough. He shares the story of God opening the door for this work to begin and it encourages the people to action. It is at this point where Nehemiah meets some more resistance.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

But listen to how Nehemiah responds to this new opposition:

²⁰ I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

These three opposers to God's work were outside of God's covenant promise.

The form their opposition took is also prophetic of our struggles. They first "mocked and ridiculed." To follow a call of God, to those who do not know him, can seem foolish. It can lead to mocking and ridicule. But we know that

God is good, and He is powerful, and if He is for us, then what can stand against us?

So what does this all mean for us today? God's dwelling place is not in a temple anymore. At least not one made with bricks. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says **Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?**

We are the temple...it is in us that God comes to dwell by His Spirit. Our walls though, they get damaged...and we need to rebuild them. Maybe you know the things that have damaged your walls...perhaps it's sin, perhaps some kind of addiction, perhaps it's simply apathy, and you don't realise that you are in need of repair, but we are all in need of repair.

So how do we rebuild?

We listen to God. Prayer.

I think it's funny, that as well as the emphasis on prayer in last weeks sermon, the main focus of both Alpha and TGIF this week have been prayer. Perhaps God is already speaking to us about this.

Nehemiah prayed for 4 months before he got the green light to act. In our prayers, are we not just speaking, but also listening for His voice? I believe wholeheartedly that God still speaks today, in a variety of ways....in dreams, visions, even audibly. I would encourage you this week in your time with God, however you do that, to listen. To really listen. God wants to speak to you. In fact we can begin now.

We're about to enter a time of communion together. Perhaps in the quiet, you'll hear God speak.

Sometimes Dan will say before a sermon, quoting Samuel 'Speak Lord, your servant is listening'.

Perhaps we can say, 'Father, your children are listening'.

Amen.