

Overcoming the Enemy of Fear

Nehemiah 2:1-8

It's an exciting passage of Scripture we have to look at today that I think can really help us move forward in the process of restoration God is doing in our lives. One of the greatest barriers to restoration is the common enemy of fear. We may see the need for restoration and experience a shift deep in our hearts like we've talked about the past two weeks – we're ready to change direction and let God lead the way, but it's often at that point we encounter fear that can have a crippling effect.

I remember going to the Boundary Waters when I was in high school and my friend Troy and I liked to go exploring to see what we could find. One day in our exploring we found a cliff that was about 20-25 feet tall and looked like we could climb it, so we decided to give it a try. I went first. I remember the first 15 feet seemed pretty easy, but as I got to the last 10 feet, the cliff actually angled back over my head a little bit and I would have to shift my weight backwards. I remember looking down at the jagged rocks below that I would fall on if my hand slipped and looking up at the tough climb ahead of me and I remember fear entering my heart.

I wanted to go back down but I thought that would be even more dangerous and for a moment I started to panic. But then I heard Troy's voice above me urging me on. He had climbed around on the trail and gotten on top, and with his encouragement I moved forward and made it safely to the top – nervous and shaking, and thinking "that was really stupid," but alive and unharmed and a little bit more cautious of trying something like that again.

Fear can have a crippling effect on us whether it's a physical danger we encounter or a situation we're in. Moving forward is risky and difficult and we're not sure that it will work out in our favor. We realize it's probably easier to just stay where we're at and it's not worth the risk. We'll just put up with the current situation and not move forward.

That's fear and that's the crippling effect it can have in our lives, and when it comes to the process of restoration that God wants to do in us it can become a major enemy. Sometimes God wants us to do things that seem dangerous or risky

to make us become more like Christ and fear can hold us back. And even though we know that things could be better than where we're at, we settle in rather than advancing. What's going to help us move forward in spite of our fear so we can get to the top and move on to what we know God wants for us?

Today in the story of Nehemiah we will see that he too faced fear that could have crippled the process of restoration God had put on his heart for his people in Jerusalem. He had heard about their condition and saw their need for further restoration. He could see that they were stuck in a rut because they were still living their own way and not submitting to God. And a major shift happened deep in his heart where he humbled himself before God, confessed his sins, and resolved to move forward in repentance and lead his people to do the same.

But now there was a major problem because of the situation he was in. He was living in Persia, not Jerusalem, and we saw at the end of chapter 1 last week, that he was cupbearer to the King. So he was a servant. He was called upon to do his duty when the king was around and wine was being served. According to my Study Bible, a cupbearer was a member of the royal court whose responsibility was to choose wine and safeguard it from poison. So that was his job and that's what he was expected to do with excellence and a smile on his face.

And the only way he was going to get to Jerusalem and continue to move forward with the restoration of his people and city was if he could get permission from the king to leave his position, go hundreds of miles away to Jerusalem – a journey that would take several months at least – and rebuild the defensive walls around a city that had once been powerful in military strength and prosperous in that region. Why on earth would the king ever let him do that? To even ask for a favor was beyond what a servant should ever do, much less a favor on such an enormous magnitude!

But that's what he was up against if restoration was going to move forward. A mountain that by all accounts looked like it was uncrossable. Let's begin reading in chapter 2.

Read Nehemiah 2:1-2.

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in

his presence. ² And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid.

So Nehemiah had a heavy burden for the restoration of his people and he knew what he would have to do if that was ever going to happen, but he knew the risk it would be to do it. So the next time he stood before the king he felt sick to his stomach – grief for his people mixed with anxiety over what he'd have to do – it was written all over his face and when the king saw how bothered he was he asked him about it. "What's the matter with you? I can see something is deeply troubling you..."

This was the very opportunity Nehemiah needed. The king had opened the door and Nehemiah knew that telling him was a step he'd have to take, but it was a big risk. How would the king respond? Would he hear his request and just say, "No"? Because that would be devastating. Worse than that, would he make the king mad with such an outlandish request? Would the king demote him to a miserable position or even cut off his head for asking such a stupid thing? What would he do? He was very afraid. Fear was now the barrier he must cross if he would take that step toward restoration. Maybe he should just keep quiet or make up an excuse.

He faced the enemy of fear that most of us probably also face at times in our lives that prevents us from moving forward in restoration. We can see a step that God wants us to take to follow Jesus, but it's a step that could change everything and we're not sure if it's worth the risk. We might be afraid of making a major change, leaving a certain lifestyle behind, or our sense of identity. We get comfortable in our old way of life and can even come to wear it as a badge of honor – it's who we are. It's all we've known and we're not sure if we're ready to leave it behind.

We see a step God wants us to take but we're afraid to take it because of what we'll be giving up. We face fear of the unknown, fear of a new identity. Or it might be fear of the people around us and how they'll respond. "What will my husband or wife say if I go forward in this direction? What will my friends or business partners think? If I go that way, I'll be kind of leaving them behind." So we're afraid of the effect that moving forward might have on our relationships. We face the fear of losing friends, the fear of ridicule, or backlash. There are all kinds of things.

Fear – it can creep up in a number of ways and have a crippling effect. We know we need restoration and want to go that direction in our hearts, but the enemy of fear stands in our way. How will we get beyond it? Let's look at what happened to Nehemiah. The opportunity came up to take a huge step forward, but intense fear rose up as well...

Read Nehemiah 2:3-5.

³I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" ⁴Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."

So Nehemiah pushed past the fear and stepped out in faith. God had put the desire for restoration on his heart and though he didn't know the outcome, he was willing to step out in faith and entrust himself to the mercy of God. So he offered up a prayer, stuck out his neck and made the big ask.

I can imagine that a few heads turned in that room. "What are you doing? Servants don't ask a favor of the king! You shouldn't even ask for a week of vacation to work on your emotional health, much less a yearlong furlough to go and rebuild a city! It's probably going to be time for a new cupbearer." It was a crazy thing to ask for, but he did it. God had put a burden for restoration on his heart and changed something inside him and he couldn't stay the same, he had to move forward even if it cost him his life. He put his trust in the Lord and made the big ask. And here's how the king responded...

Read Nehemiah 2:6-8.

⁶And 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. ⁷And 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, ⁸and 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.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

This is unbelievable. Not only did the king give him permission to go and rebuild the city, but he also gave him signed letters to the governors of that region to ensure his safe travel, and a letter to the keeper of the forest to give him all the lumber he needed! And if you look ahead to verse 9 you see that even beyond that, the king sent him with officers of the army and horsemen – an armed military escort for the journey! Unbelievable!

How is it possible that all these things happened? When Nehemiah wrote about it in his memoirs (which is what we’re reading in these verses), he said in verse 8: *“because the good hand of God was upon me.”* The good hand of God was upon him. The reason that Nehemiah had success and was given even more than he asked for or imagined was because the good hand of God was upon him.

**God wanted restoration for his people even more than Nehemiah* and paved the way for it to happen. He moved the heart of the King of Persia – a mountain that others thought was impossible. Nehemiah stepped out in faith in God to pursue restoration even though the way forward seemed impossible and he was given success because that’s what God wanted.

How can we break through the barrier of fear that stands in the way of our restoration? It’s by believing the awesome reality that God wants it even more than we do. He wants us to become more like Christ, and he will move mountains to open the way for you to move forward. You can trust him. God wants you fully restored. It’s about becoming like Jesus and making you the person God wants you to be.

That’s what God is after and he will move mountains to make it happen in your life. So what’s the mountain you are facing? What’s the fear that’s holding you back? What’s that move you know God wants you to make, but fear keeps getting in the way? It’s God’s will that you become like Christ in every way and experience restoration and he will pave the way for that to happen if you overcome your fear by faith and step forward.

Paul knew that God wants restoration for us, so in writing a letter to the Christians in Ephesus he told them how he prayed for them in Ephesians 3:14-21: *“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (That’s restoration. And then he goes on to say...)*

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

God is able to do far more than we can ask or think, and he wants to in order to bring restoration in our lives. So when you face that enemy of fear that keeps getting in your way I encourage you to pray, trust God, and move forward in the direction he wants you to go.