

**RISK: The Instinct of a Leader**  
Nehemiah 2:1-8

“If our single, all-embracing passion is to make much of Christ in life and death, and if the life that magnifies him most is the life of costly love, **then life is risk, and risk is right.** To run from it is to waste your life.”

John Piper

**Introduction:** Risk is unavoidable. If we come to grips with how much in this life is *out of our control, out of our ability stop*, we realize that no matter how much money, how many safety measures, or how many insurances we possess we cannot control the economy, others, or what happens to our vital organs. In other words, all the money we have can go away, all the material we have can leave in an instant, and our health can turn on a dime. We know that no matter how much sunscreen we put on, how many toxins we can get rid of, and how much we exercise we can get hit by a car or get in an accident just as easily.

Now my goal this morning is not to be downer, but realistic. Risk is inevitable for everyone, but especially someone bought with the blood of Christ, whose Lord is Jesus Himself, and whose desire is to see God glorified in all the world. Here is how **John Piper** described it:

Risk is defined as an action that exposes you to the possibility of loss or injury. It means that we are willing to lose what is precious to us in this life. It does not mean heroism desire for adventure, courageous self-reliance, or efforts to earn God's favor. *“It is a childlike faith in the triumph of God's love, that on the other side of all our risks, for the sake of righteousness, God will still be holding us. We will be eternally satisfied in him. Nothing will have been wasted.”*

Now this all sounds and looks good on paper, but applying it is difficult. When I was 19 and could fit everything I owned in my 1988 Chevy Cavalier, it was much easier to talk and think about risk than it is today with stuff that would necessitate a bigger-than-I-think moving truck and four other souls to care for. **Risk becomes more difficult when you have more to lose, and we have much to lose.** Because of this, we can drift toward **risk adverse thinking**: *preserving what we have, seeking comfort as a highest goal, and thinking that "ministry" is for someone else.* When an individual gets into this mode, their growth in sanctification, or in becoming more like Christ, is stunted. When a church gets in this mode, **death is inevitable**, it simply needs time to take effect.

What we are after this morning is NOT a knee jerk reaction, but rather the continuance of a radical recalibration of our thinking. Each one of us (myself included) must continue to have our minds and hearts transformed by Scripture through the Spirit since we are constantly bombarded with calls to safety, security, and comfort by our culture. We want to **embrace the value and mindset of risk**, since living to the glory of God always puts at odds with the thinking around us. We will look at one of the greatest examples of leadership in Nehemiah as he wrestles with the consequences of God saturated prayer that led to a clear path of what he needed to do, which put him on a collision course with risk.

**Risk is NOT the Absence of Fear** (1-3)

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. <sup>2</sup> 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.** <sup>3</sup> I 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?"

### **Fear is both a motivator and deterrent**

Fear is a double edged sword as it can both keep us away from opportunities and fuel us through them. One of the reasons I'm thankful that I played competitive sports growing up was that it prepared me for teaching and leadership today. Every time I stepped into the batter's box in baseball, there was a mixture of fear, excitement, and nerves. The same reaction was there in shooting from the free throw line, but was also there singing in a recital, acting in a school show, or competing in a speech meet. I watched my daughter compete in a spelling bee last week and that same fear mixture was there, which caused her to come to a decision point: is fear going to keep me away from trying and risking, or motivate me through it.

The Bible deals pervasively with fear. Fear is common to all people everywhere, and is not limited to gender, geography, economics, or even time in history. Adam and Eve, Moses, the Israelites, Mary, and the disciples were all gripped with fear, and each had to walk through that fear to obey and accomplish what God had for them. There is a reason a common refrain in Scripture is "Do not be afraid" (Matt. 14:27; Luke 1:30), since God knows that fear can be a deterrent to obedience and joy. But it is also true that rightly placed fear can motivate. When we **fear the Lord**, our eyes are open to the truth that God is in control, that our life is hidden in Him and thus we are securely held by Him. This motivates us to action, living **fearlessly in the world since our fear is on the truth, not on unknown possibilities**. Nehemiah understood this well. Notice the end of his prayer that we looked at last week:

*O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servant who **delight to fear your name**, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."*

He was clear that *"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love **toward those who fear Him**."* Psalm 103:11

When fear is properly placed in the Lord alone, we not only experience delight but also are freed from missing out on risky faith because we are afraid of losing something.

### ***Then one day it happened...***

The second chapter starts in the month of Nisan, or our equivalent to April, which means Nehemiah has invested 4 – 5 months of prayer leading to this inevitable outcome. We will look later that there was planning that went along with his prayer, but it is clear that his prayer was NOT that he would go and rebuild the wall, but that God would fulfill His promises and make it happen. Along the way, it was clear that *he would be the one to actually do it*. Isn't that exactly what God does with us sometimes? "God, please bring someone to talk to my \_\_\_\_\_ about the gospel", and the answer to that prayer is often us!

Nehemiah is written in part as a memoir, so we get a look "*behind the scenes*" from the man himself, even though we know the ultimate outcome. He had been praying for a day, a time that God would mercifully grant an opportunity to broach the subject with the king. ***Then one day it actually happened...*** Now it became real, now prayer sprung to action and the potentiality of risk stared him in the face. It started with the king noticing the somber look on his cupbearers face, "**You aren't sick...what's wrong with you?**" Two things with this: 1) I'm pretty sure you don't want your cupbearer looking sick out of nowhere after tasting the wine, 2) A king wanted people in his court that were not going to bring the party down. In other words, for the first time ever, what was in Nehemiah's heart

affected his countenance, it was noticed, and it put him at **risk in a way he had never experienced before**.

Months of prayer and planning, yet when it came down to the moment, **fear**. This was not just a little fear, but the full blown kind "*very much afraid*." But all of that preparation allowed him to push past his fear and answer with **boldness**. Notice that in operating out of risk and boldness, he still kept decorum and protocol: *Let the king live forever* (respect of the position of a foreign king), *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?*" (he did not frame the request out of anger but deference, and he shrewdly did this in an indirect way, not naming Jerusalem by name, which would have been political, but talked about his homeland, which made it a personal request, allowing the king to ask the next question, 'what is it that you want?')

This all could have cost Nehemiah everything, and he knew it. The fear was real, but he did not allow fear of man to rule, but trusted the Lord while still operating wisely in social protocol and personal equity that he had with the king. Each of these components is important if we are going to truly risk well.

### **Risk is NOT Possible without Prayer (4)**

Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" **So I prayed to the God of heaven.**

#### **Action chases and stays intertwined with prayer**

Prayer is never an excuse for inaction. In prayer we are asking God to act, and even though we may not be able to fix a problem or know *how* to enter in, praying always has an eye toward what we *could do*. As we have seen, an extended time of prayer by Nehemiah chased him down a path of action, and when action was ready, prayer continued. Sometimes we separate the two needlessly: we pray for a pathway of action, and once action is started, we forget to continue on in the power source of the action. We view prayer like **charging our phone**: we hope that the charge from overnight will keep us going all day, knowing that the battery will be drained throughout the day. But prayer and action is like keeping our power source plugged in all day, which frees us for continual use without losing power.

#### **Power of Insta-Prayers**

The story of Nehemiah could easily be a study on prayer, since there are many sections that demonstrate a commitment to it. Here we see the simplicity of prayer. As he received a direct question from the king, demanding an answer, it was not time to leave the room, or close his eyes/fold his hands, or to ask the king to wait until tomorrow for an answer. But on the other hand, Nehemiah knew he needed God's help, strength, and power. So he prayed to the God of heaven. This was **Insta-prayer**: quick, pointed, and dependant. What do we learn about prayer through this beautifully short conversation with God?:

- **Insta-prayer is effective** - It is NOT the length of our prayer that produces answers. Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34), which the Father heard and thankfully heard. The thief on the cross cried out "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42), which God answered. And because Jesus said, "Surely I am coming soon", we can pray "Maranatha, come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).
- **Insta-prayer comes out of dedicated prayer** - But notice that for Nehemiah, insta-prayer was simply an extension of what he had already been praying, day and night (1:6), for months. Insta prayer is possible and effective when it comes out of dedicated, disciplined prayer. Its the same

principle of all our disciplines of grace: spontaneity comes out of discipline. Without discipline spontaneity becomes presumptuous.

- **Insta-prayer demonstrates the nature of prayer** - Prayer in conversing with the God of the universe, and though we should never lose a sense of awe and wonder, nor should we become flippant, prayer is an ongoing conversation with God. God has promised He will never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5), and He hears all who fear Him. Ongoing prayer to God demonstrates our ongoing dependence on Him, and this happens formally and informally, spoken and in our own mind/heart, and corporately and personally.
- **Insta-prayer is prayed in crisis and in peace** - Its said there are no atheists in foxholes, or that everyone believes in God before final exams, but for Nehemiah praying in crisis was normal because he prayed when there was none. To pray **ONLY** in crisis demonstrates that we believe God is there to serve us, not one to be treasured, trusted, and worshipped.
- **Insta-prayers are answered** - This prayer was answered. Nehemiah was emboldened to ask audaciously of the king. When we are dependent on God with ongoing communion with Him, He answers these prayers. In Luke 12:11-12, Jesus told His disciples, "*And when they bring you before synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.*" God will not leave us alone. I have experienced this in counseling and sharing the gospel with people (pretty much the same thing). As we get into situations that are new, we pray for wisdom and recall, and its amazing the questions and Scripture that God brings to mind in the midst of conversations that could easily be stalled by fear.

### **Risk is NOT Opposed to Careful Planning (5-8)**

And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> 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." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

### **Audacious Asks Require Painstaking Plans**

Sometimes the stories of Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, can seem more mythical than real. They seem too easy because it is out of context, and we know how the story plays out in the end, without personally feeling the tension. But remember, Nehemiah was a Jewish man serving in the court of the most powerful man in the world, one who had unilateral control over peoples lives, whose word was law, and who could do things for his own whimsical reasons. Not only that, but what he was asking for was nothing short of audacious. On paper, the percentage possibilities that the king would say "yes" let alone listen were in the .0001%, the one in a billion kind of bets. Here is why this request was so audacious:

- **The Length of Time** - The king asked how long Nehemiah was asking to take leave to do what he wanted to do. Remember, it took 4 months of travel to and from Persia to Jerusalem, so he was **at least** asking for a year away (in actuality Nehemiah was gone for 12 years, with probable trips back and forth during that time). No matter what job, profession, or situation we are in, leaving for over a year is a big ask without consequences.

- **The Reversal of Policy** - Back in Ezra 4, Artaxerxes had already ruled *against* the rebuilding of the wall. This had come at the request of people in the land, and the king would have been proactive in trying to keep the peace in all areas of the kingdom, so to reverse this would potentially stir up political problems for him (which he was not inclined to do normally)
- **The Stronghold** - People today are divided on the effectiveness on a wall for a country, but in the time of Nehemiah, there was no debate. A walled city was necessary for peace, prosperity, and order. A walled city was a threat inside a kingdom. To destroy a walled city meant much in terms of manpower, time, and material. This is why the people of the land were so adamant against the building of a wall around Jerusalem: it made Israel a power player instead of a group of spread out discouraged people.

Notice, that when the king asked specific questions, Nehemiah was ready with answers. This was not the result of some divine revelation, this was out of hard work behind the scenes. He knew what was needed to have success. He did not shorten the request, but if he was going to ask big, he went all the way. He asked the King to not only release him, but make him an official governmental delegate, giving him safety in travel. He asked for resources to rebuild the wall, gates, and a residence for himself. This showed he had an understanding of the land, the political situation he was entering into, and the material need when he got there. This necessitated much in research ahead of time. **Proverbs 16:9 says** *"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."* This describes how our planning and God's moving are not opposed to each other but are intertwined.

Do you have a clear understanding and vision for your life? For your family? Your role in this church? Your function in whatever job you have? Have you spent time and sweat equity in prayer before the Lord, searching Scripture and praying His promises, and have you put time into planning to be ready to act? When we neglect either of these sides, prayer/dependency or planning, we are out of tension and will be self-dependant or apathetic.

### **All Planning Yields Power & Credit to God Alone**

Amazingly, the king granted the request, and even went above and beyond (2:9). It is incredibly easy to forget the Lord when something like this happens. Nehemiah could have easily pointed to his planning, his shrewd way of asking, his impeccable timing, and the fact that the King liked him as reasons why there was a positive response. But notice how he quickly responded to the King's answer, **"for the good hand of my God was upon me."** Nehemiah knew this as a leader:

- **God is the one who changes hearts and minds, not us** - *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will"* (Prov. 21:1). This does not mean we do not operate in wisdom, but it means that it takes the miraculous for hearts to move from stone to flesh, for eyes to move from blindness to sight. The only One who can change your spouse, your child, your friends, or our politicians is God alone. And the truth is HE CAN and WILL according to his good pleasure. That means we keep praying for our spouse who is wavering, for our children who are rebelling, and our friends who are rejecting.
- **God is by nature good and gracious** - Yes, God is a God of justice and wrath, but He is also good, who desires to give good gifts to His kids. *"The LORD is good to all, and His mercy is over all that he has made"* (Psalm 145:9), who gives food in due season and opens His hand to us (Psalm 145:15-16). We trust and pray to a God who desires all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), and appeal to His graciousness when we pray.

- **A leader deflects and attributes success to God** - A leader takes responsibility, even for failures that are not directly his/hers. A husband knows he is responsible for his wife and family, even though the choices they make are not directly his. But a true leader is also quick to point to the true leader, deflecting praise to God, knowing that God does not compete with us for glory. The leader is absolutely dependent on God for all things and desires for God to be magnified and for himself to fade into the background.

Because God is who He says He is, we can risk. We risk not because God needs us to accomplish His plans, but because He has called us to trust ourselves completely to Him. So we are freed up to risk moving forward, seeking to call others to magnify Jesus, to worship God, and to yield themselves in freedom from sin and punishment. We are not trying to preserve our life in this world, but to lose it, since we know we have already gained life eternal. **Jim Elliot**, who lost his life reaching the Auca Indians, said it this way, "**He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose .**"

*"If our single, all-embracing passion is to make much of Christ in life and death, and if the life that magnifies him most is the life of costly love, **then life is risk, and risk is right. To run from it is to waste your life.**"*