Going Home

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[0:00] This is the First Mustang Pulpit Podcast, a podcast of the weekly preaching and teaching at First Mustang.! Thank you for joining us. Let me invite you, if you would, to open your Bible with me to Nehemiah chapter 2.

Nehemiah 2. In Nehemiah 1, as we saw last week in our study as we begin that, Nehemiah talks to his brother and he asks two questions.
How is the city and how are the people? And what he learns breaks his heart as he finds out that the place is in disrepair, that the walls are still down.
As we looked at last week, that is more than simply a statement of things being a mess. It's more than just being in danger. It is a dishonor and a shame to them.
And what Nehemiah does in chapter 1 is a great example of what you and I should do when we encounter a problem, and that is to pray. What he learns breaks his heart and it drives him to immediate prayer.
[1:25] And I just want to encourage you that when you are confronted with needs in the lives of people, in your family, in our church, friends of yours, let it be your immediate instinct to pray for them.

Not just to talk about prayer or say that you will pray, but to pray with them and to pray for them. Prayer is something that is talked about as much as anything in the Christian life and maybe practiced about as little as anything.
Far easier to talk about praying or to think about praying or even to promise to pray than it is to actively do so. But we see something different in Nehemiah.
Go back to chapter 1 for a moment as we remind ourselves. Verse 4, 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, Not only is it the immediate response of Nehemiah to pray, it's the continual response of Nehemiah to pray.
[2:53] Make note of those two things, friends, that prayer is to be our immediate and our continual response. Day and night.

Day and night. Day after day after day. When we get to the end of chapter 1, we don't have any idea how this is going to unfold.
We don't know how the Lord is going to answer His prayer. We don't know what is going to be allowed to happen. We will see that a little bit more when we get to chapter 2. But at the end of chapter 1, what we do know is that Nehemiah is confident in God.
And the only reason he really has in this specific case to be confident that things are going to work out in a God-honoring way is just the character of God.
He knows that his God is great and awesome. He knows that his God is powerful. He knows that his God hears his prayer. But everything humanly seems to be stacked against him.
[4:06] He doesn't live in the land. He's a cupbearer to the king. How is he going to get permission to go? And there is one other issue that we'll find out in just a few minutes that makes this nearly impossible to see how Nehemiah would ever get permission to go do something about it.

One little thing kind of tucked away. It's not actually told to us in Nehemiah. We've got to go somewhere else in the Old Testament to put it together. But humanly speaking, it seems just almost impossible that he would be able to do something about this burden.
We're going to see throughout the book Nehemiah in several roles. He is the king's cupbearer. We've been told that in chapter 1. In chapter 2-6, he's going to be a builder. And then chapter 7-13, he is a governor.

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And we're going to see all the different ways the Lord uses him. When he gets to the end of chapter 1, he's praying, he's weeping, he's fasting, he's calling out and crying out to the Lord.
He believes in the power of his God. And he prays that he would find mercy in the sight of this man, the king.
[5:32] As I mentioned last week, I don't think we take that as a disrespect to the king as much as we take that as an acknowledgement that there is only one true king. That humanly speaking, the king can do anything, but theologically speaking, the king can only do what the God of the universe allows the king to do.

And so this king is this man. His power is not ultimate. God's power is ultimate.
And Nehemiah does not fear the king because he rightly fears the Lord. And that is where powerful living for you and for me comes in as well. Chapter 2.
We're going to see five parts throughout these verses in chapter 2. I want you to make note of.
First, there's a request to leave. There's a request to leave.
In the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. And now I had not been sad in his presence.
[6:41] We've gone roughly when the book opened from December to April. It's been about four months from where we started to where we are in chapter 2, verse 1.

For four months, all Nehemiah has been able to do is what? Pray. Day and night. Praying. Praying. Fasting. Believing.
Trusting. Waiting. Planning. But mainly waiting for the Lord to open a door. As we get to chapter 2, verse 1, we could think of it this way.
One day in April, four months later, I was in the presence of the king. Why have four months passed?
We don't know for sure. Doesn't tell us exactly. Maybe the king was away for part of that. Maybe Nehemiah had other assignments given to him that made it impossible for him to do that.
[7:52] Maybe there was just never an occasion that Nehemiah thought was the right time. We can't say for sure. But when we get to chapter 2, it's been four months, and he says, Now, at this specific time, I was before him.

And then it says this sentence that to us just sounds kind of strange. Now, I had not been sad in his presence. That's not a throwaway descriptive. That's important to the story.
In that culture, servants before the king were not allowed to come in and to be sad. That wasn't tolerated. You couldn't come in and be upset.
You couldn't come in in a place of mourning. Your emotions had to be completely under control, completely in check. To come in the presence of the king in a sad way would be to your demise.
And yet, here he is now. He's not been sad in his presence the entire four months. However many times he's been in his presence, he's been able to not look sad.
[9:01] And now he no longer can because he is now much more than a cupbearer. He's bearing more than a cup. He now is bearing a burden. And at this point, he can't take it anymore.

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?
Nehemiah says, how could I be anything but distraught over this? This is the land of my fathers. This is the place where God's people have dwelt. This is the place where the Lord has met with His people and it has been destroyed and it still lies in ruins and the people are a mess and the place is a mess and the walls are a mess.
And you can see Nehemiah has a plan on his heart given to him by the Lord to do something about this.
[10:10] When you read verse 3, he says, why shouldn't my face not be sad? This is the place where my father's graves are. It's as if he's saying, look, I know I was born in Persia, but Jerusalem is my home.

This is a bolder statement than you might think it is. What he's telling the king is that things are so bad in Jerusalem because the wall is still in ruins.
And Nehemiah says, this is completely unacceptable. It cannot be tolerable for the people to live in a situation where not just that they are in danger, but they are continually living in a state of shame because of what's happened.

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Now the question becomes, why is that such a dangerous thing to say? It's because they had begun work on the walls until, according to the book of Ezra, the king made them stop.
This is Nehemiah saying to the king, not only is this intolerable, this is because of you in part.
[11:48] Now it's the Babylonian kings that came and, or the king and army that came and knocked down the temple and destroyed the walls and all those kind of things in 586 B.C. But it's this king who had previously said they can restart the work and then had told them in Ezra 4, it cannot go on.

This is Nehemiah saying to the king, the place is a mess because of you. If you're not allowed to be sad in the presence of the king, what can happen when you call the king to task on what he's done?
The king said to me, and if you've never read this before, and if you don't know, I mean, spoiler alert, Nehemiah survives the conversation.
If you didn't know that, when it says, the king said to me, you might think, if you know a little of the culture and background, you might think, the king said to me, off with your head. You might think, the king said to me, that he was ordered to the prisons.
You might think, the king said to him, you are demoted and will never be in my presence again. This is a much bolder request than we can probably fathom.
[13:16] But look at verse 4. The king said to me, what are you requesting? It's an interesting response.

Be clear and go on the record, what do you want me to let you do? Look at your very next sentence. So I prayed to the God of heaven. Now, he's been praying night and day for four months. We can assume rightly, I think, that he had spent hours and hours in prayer.
Long, uninterrupted seasons and times of prayer. But in this moment, this is not an occasion where he can say, I'll tell you what, king, give me half an hour. Let me pray.
I'll come right back to you. This is one of those instant prayers. This is, as one scholar said, a deep breath of silent prayer.
[14:20] What do you want from me? God be with me. The Bible says that the Lord turns the hearts of the kings wherever He wishes.

He's been praying for months. He will now pray for a moment. Lord, grant me success. Verse 5, 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 father's graves, that I may rebuild it.
This is a bold request. What he's essentially saying here is send me home. This land I live today, though it's all that I've known, this isn't home.
This job I have for you is not my highest calling. And your kingdom, O king, is not my ultimate allegiance.
Send me home. And let me serve the king of all kings. And I just have to say that there is an unmistakable link here between the boldness of His request and the dependence of His heart that's been expressed through prayer for four months.
[15:58] People who pray fervently are bold. Have you noticed that? I mean, sometimes we think of prayer as almost some kind of a weak thing or some kind of an off-the-front-lines kind of ministry and people that are praying that they're not really doing.

But the fact of the matter is if you've been around people who truly, truly are people of prayer, they are bold as a lion. Because they know how weak they are and how strong their God is.
But when we're not prayerful, we become self-reliant and then we get consumed with our own strength and realize how weak we are. And when we realize how weak we are, all of our boldness flees.
But not the one dependent upon God. The one dependent upon God recognizes what the New Testament will state this way, that God's power is perfected in our weakness.
His boldness is because he was a prayerful man. Nehemiah heard a need. He prayed about it.
[17:17] And now he's asking to be turned loose to do something about it. I love that progression. I love people in our church who see a need and they sincerely pray about it.

That they don't just rush ahead without God. Sincerely pray about it. And as they pray about it, they get bold and they get courageous and they see how the Lord can use them and then they say, let me go at it.
There's a need. There's prayer. And there's commitment. Verse 6, The king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, How long will you be gone?

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And when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. There's a lot of things in this brief conversation that shock me.
He's in his presence sad. Not supposed to do that. He takes the king to task because of the reason the walls are still down. That's extremely risky. He asked to leave.
[18:28] And this is a very important position. The position Nehemiah is in is a big position. And even in our world and our culture today, you've got people in leadership positions that are high on the chain and they don't like people that serve underneath them to leave and go somewhere else because it's going to make their own life harder.

Certainly the king knows that. And yet, somehow, the king listens to his request.
The king responds to his request. And now the king has granted his request because the king's heart was inclined toward Nehemiah.
This is the hand of God at work in the situation. For four months, Nehemiah could only pray.
And from the outside looking in, if you were just trying to evaluate and keep score, you would say, for four months, God hasn't done anything. But that would be wrong.
[19:34] God was working. He was preparing Nehemiah and he was preparing the king. You won't always, in fact, I'll say it better, you often won't even know what God is doing when it looks like he's not doing anything.

But our God is working. And so often, we want to say, but God, I don't see it. God, I don't understand it. God, I don't know what you're doing. And if you were to look at Nehemiah's predicament two days before this conversation, you would say, Nehemiah, it's been four months. You've prayed faithfully. I don't think your God is hearing your prayer. And if he's hearing it, I sure don't think he's answering it. But he kept praying. Day and night.
Day after day. Seasons of prayer. Moments of prayer. All the while, trusting God and His providence in His time would do what a great and awesome God would do.
And He did. Verse 7 says, 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.
[21:02] Just because the king says you can go, the problems aren't solved. All the king's granting him to go does is allows Nehemiah to go in a situation where he can go deal with all the problems.

And those problems will start long before he even gets to rebuilding a wall. Nehemiah knows he's going to meet resistance. He's going to embark on this journey.
800 miles, 850 miles, 900 miles. It's a journey that took Ezra about five months to make. But Nehemiah has prayed and he has prepared.
It's a good model for how the people of God ought to live. Pray, prepare. Cry out to the Lord in desperation and be prepared.
Whatever your ministry is, if you're a teacher, pray for the help of God and study as hard as you can. If you're a musician, pray for the help of God and practice as diligently as you can.
[22:18] If your work is behind the scenes in organization, administration, pray for the help of God and work your spreadsheets. You do what you can do.

You plan. You prepare. But you make sure you are prayed up. And we see right here the legitimacy of both of these because if not for the prayers of Nehemiah, this would have never taken place.
And yet, if Nehemiah had not planned, if he were to say to the king, here's what I'd like to do, and the king says, what's your plan? How long are you going to be gone? What are you going to do? And Nehemiah says, I don't know.
I haven't really thought it through yet. It's not happening. Nehemiah prayed and he planned. Both are acts of wisdom.
This is how we should live individually, as households, as a church. The Gospels, the New Testament, speaks of this same kind of idea and mentality.
[23:29] Luke 14, 28, for which of you desiring to build a tower does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it. There's a planning process in our ministry that's important.

But you can't outplan your need of God. Nehemiah acknowledges that God's hand is upon him, and that gives him confidence.
There's a request to leave. Number two, once that's been granted, there's a review of the damage. Verses 9 to 16.

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Verse 9, Then I came to the governors of the province beyond the river, and I gave them the king's letters. Now, the king had sent me with officers of the army and horsemen.
So, let's push pause for a minute. Nehemiah has been praying. He's been burdened. He's been heartbroken. He took the risk. In front of the king, he makes his plea.
[24:39] The king acquiesces to his request. And in his desperation, his dependence upon God, it has made him bold as a lion. In his boldness, he has done what he can do.

The Lord in his kindness has inclined the king's heart toward him, and he's been allowed to go. Something, if we were just reading this, we would probably not have ever expected it would happen.
And at the end of chapter 2, verse 8, we're kind of cheering. Thank you, God. Way to go, Nehemiah. Thank you to the king.
Things seem to be going well. And now the music returns to a minor key. Verse 10, When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.
No sooner does he get to town than opposition starts. Right away. Have you been there?
[25:57] Playing to ministry, playing an outreach, playing a mission trip. Playing an event, and the first conversation you have is somebody saying, who do you think you are?

Why are you doing this? The opposition from the king seemed to be insurmountable. It was not. But don't think that that means everything is going to be easy.
It will not. We just have to expect opposition to come when we're doing the work God's called us to do. We just have to expect that.
Sanballat is the governor of Samaria. Tobiah, a Jewish name, he had moved out. Now, back in Jerusalem as a kind of enforcer.
Verse 11, So I went to Jerusalem and was there for three days. He made the journey. Some 900 miles likely.
[27:00] That couldn't have been easy. Ezra 7 says it took Ezra five months to make the same journey. Nehemiah didn't travel with as large of a group as Ezra.

Maybe he made it a little bit more quickly. Verse 12, Nehemiah had a plan.
He had desires put in his heart by the Lord. But most of it, he had to keep silent. He has sought the Lord. And the Lord has put the desires into his heart.
Back to verse 12, I arose in the night, I and a few men with me, and I told no one what my God had put into my heart. Psalm 37 verse 4 says it this way, Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.
I think the best way to understand that is not that you dream your dreams, and then you go seek the Lord, and now God's on the hook to do for you what you always wanted to do in the first place.
[28:32] I think the way you understand this is you seek the Lord in his holiness, and then the Lord puts in you the desires he wants in your heart.

And now you pray for his will to be done, which is your desires because it was given to you by God. I told no one what God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.
Now understand that Nehemiah, all throughout chapter 1, understands and believes that God is wholly sovereign. But knowing God was sovereign did not in any way cause him to just sit and do nothing.
It actually motivated him to pray, to plan, and to work. So lost in so much of the contemporary debate and discussion on man's responsibility and God's sovereignty is this very clear biblical understanding that the more the people of God understand our God is sovereign, the bolder and braver and more engaged in the work they become.
Not less. Verse 13, 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.
[30:12] The word inspect in verse 13 is an interesting word. It's a medical term. It means to, literally, to inspect a wound. Nehemiah goes and he rides around.

I'll show you next week on a map what this looks like. He rides around and like a physician looking at a surgical wound on a patient, Nehemiah inspects the damage.
Where's the infection? How severe is it? And what can be done to fix it?

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Verse 14, I went on to the fountain gate into the king's pool but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass and 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.
Twice it mentions he was inspecting. Verse 13 and verse 15. Three times it says it was at night. Verse 12, verse 13, and verse 15. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.
[31:32] As this story unfolds, if we're reading it for the first time, I think what we're meant to see is it's just one problem after the other.

He's in Susa. We've got a problem 900 miles away in Jerusalem. He hears about the problem. He prays. Now he's got another problem. He's got to go in front of the king. He goes in front of the king. He can't hide his sadness and his burden. That's a problem. Then he's got to ask the king if we can rebuild the wall, but it's the king who said we've got to put a stop to it in the first place.
That's a problem. Then he's got to have a plan that the king will agree to let him go. And that's a problem. And then he's going to be met along the way with people who want to know what he's doing. And that's a problem. And now he gets there and you've got these people, these leaders or these other people who live in the area coming against him from the very beginning.
And that's a problem. And then he goes and inspects the damage. And that's a problem. And then to make matters worse, he hadn't even told the people who dwell there what his plan is.
[32:34] And they themselves may say, we're out. Then what? Nehemiah has no way of knowing at this point if he's going to be able to persuade the people to do the work.

What he does know is that God has given him a desire. And what he does trust is that obedience to what God has called you to do carries its own reward.
It carries its own reward. There's a request to leave. There's a review of the damage. Verses 17 and 18. Thirdly, there's a resolve to build the wall. Verse 17.
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.
There is so much more in Nehemiah than just a building project. There is so much more in Nehemiah than just leadership principles.
[33:47] There's much more theology than that. However, there are some important leadership principles that we ought to pick up along the way. Here's one of them. Notice his language in verse 17.

You see the trouble we are in. We need to fix this that we may no longer suffer derision.
He's been there three days. Their problems are his problems. Their needs are his needs. When you get married, your wife's problems are your problems.
Your husband's needs are your needs. You can't get married to somebody and say, hey, you know what? That's your crazy parents.
Not my problem. It is your problem. And you'll soon find out it's your problem. Or you get married and your husband says, by the way, you probably ought to know this.
[34:54] I got a lot of debt. You can't say, not my deal. That's your debt. No, that's your debt now. When you said I do. When pastors go to a church, they often will speak in terms of, you know, you guys have problems.

Well, no, pastor. You have problems. These are your people. This is your flock. Nehemiah says, look around.
We've got a problem. And we need to address this so that we no longer face and suffer derision. He's honest with them. He's direct with them. And He's clear that the current condition is absolutely unacceptable.
And He's saying this to the people who have been living with it as it is. Don't turn Nehemiah into nothing more than a leadership book, but it does include that.
[36:14] There's a lot to learn. Verse 18, I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good and also of the words the king had spoken to me and they said, let us rise up and build.

So they strengthened their hands for the good work. It's a great verse. Notice what Nehemiah did not say. He did not say, we've got a huge problem and we've got to address this and good news, I've got a plan.
That's not what He led with. What He led with was, I told them of the hand of God.

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Mom and Dad, teach and train your children to have confidence confidence in God. Teachers, teach your Sunday school classes to be confident in God.
Yes, we pray and we plan. That's a part of it. But our ultimate confidence is not from our wisdom, our scheming, our intellect, our experience, or our education.
[37:33] If we are confident in anything, let it be because the hand of God is for us. He says to them, we've got a real problem, but we have a real God.

Fourth, we might expect this because we've gone two verses without conflict. There's a rebuke from the opposition. verse 19, but, oh goodness, here we go again.
Your life ever feel like that? If I could just get rid of this problem, good, it's gone, but, something else is coming. If I could just get this burden off my mind, and it's gone, and you rest, and tomorrow, but, here's something else.
verse 19, but when Senbal, the Haranite, 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? These leaders in the area who are against them doing it for obvious reasons begin to mock Nehemiah and to despise him.
[39:03] They're jeering him, and then they accuse him of rebellion. Are you rebelling against the king? There's mocking, there's hatred, there's false accusations.

Hear me, friends. Unbelievers mocking of you can never be an excuse to stop what God's called you to do. Never. But they're mocking me.
But they're despising me. But they've made up false accusations. Nehemiah says that's exactly what's happened to him. There was mocking, there was jeering, and they accused him of rebelling against the king.
None of that was true. All of it just thrown out there to try to discourage him and persuade him to stop. There's three opponents' names.
Sanballat. It's a Babylonian name. Governor of Samaria. Tobiah. And Geshem. By the way, if you look at where these men serve and lead and the task they do, they're representing the provinces all around Nehemiah.
[40:20] Ammon's to the northeast, Samaria to the northwest, Edom and Moab to the southeast. In other words, if we read this and could understand immediately the geography, we would understand the picture of what they're saying is your opponents surround you.

Which leads fifthly and finally for tonight, a response of trust in God. Verse 20. A response of trust in God.
Then I replied to them, the God of heaven will make us prosper and we His servants will arise and build.
Do you just hear the music and the crescendo here? I need an orchestra. Because the orchestration right here is getting loud. It's building. This is like Rocky IV with the Russian.
This is Him saying, listen to me, you surround me with your hatred and you surround me with your mocking and you surround me with false accusations and you are trying to come against us.
[41:28] Let me explain to you, He says, who's on my side. It's the God of heaven. And the God of heaven has put this in my heart. He will make us prosper.

We are His servants. We will rise. We will build in the end of verse 20. And you will have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.
Where did this boldness come from? I'll tell you where it came from. Four months of desperate weeping prayer.
That's where it came from. everybody wants to be strong. Very few people want to pray that way. Nehemiah is strong and bold because Nehemiah was broken in the beginning.
Nehemiah's been alone verses 11 to 16. He's been in front of his people verses 17 and 18. And now he's in front of his enemies verses 19 and 20.
[42:38] And it doesn't matter where you put him. His confidence is in God. Can I share with you four quick implications for us here?

Number one, do not let discouragement or opposition stop you from doing the Lord's work. Do not let discouragement or opposition stop you from doing the Lord's work.
If you expect it to be hard and it's really hard you persevere because you just got what you expected.

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Why did you think spiritual battle would be easy? Number two, some things are just worth the work, worth the fight, worth the opposition, and demand our unwavering commitment.
Not everything, but some things are. There are some things you just say, you know what, this isn't really worth my time.
[44:02] This isn't really worth the work. But when you're doing the Lord's work and you know what He's called you to do through His Word, confirmed through His people, the body, the church, and you get opposition, it doesn't matter where that opposition comes from, some things are just worth the work, worth the fight, worth the opposition, worth the unwavering commitment to never surrender and keep doing what God has called you to do.

Number three, God's good hand does not mean the elimination of enemies, rather perseverance against them.
That's how Nehemiah describes the Lord. God's good hand is upon me. It did not eliminate His enemies. It just gave Him perseverance against them.
Number four, steadfast prayer does not eliminate hard work, but it does empower it.
Steadfast prayer does not eliminate hard work, but it does empower it. I see the world a little differently as a grandfather.
[45:27] Different songs that I hear in my head and different songs that are played in my living room and different songs that I play on the piano and sing for my grandkids. If it was just me, when I get to the end of Nehemiah 2, I'm probably thinking of Martin Luther's words, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, A Bulwark Never Failing.

But that's not the song that came to my mind when I was finishing this message a couple days ago. I thought of a song that I play and sing to my grandkids on occasion.
You know it. My God is so big. So strong and so mighty. There's nothing my God cannot do.
Boo, boo, boo. And whether you are thinking through the lens of a reformation, or you're thinking through the lens of teaching a young child childlike faith, you let them know it's the same God.
Lord, we are thankful tonight for Your Word. More than a story, it's the telling of Your power and Your sovereignty and Your kindness.
[46:56] We give You thanks for that. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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