

Leading God's People – (1) Preparing With Prayer

1. Introduction – Living With a Tragic Past

This morning we begin a new series – on Nehemiah. In many ways it is not an easy part of the Old Testament to focus on. The events of this book took place at around 450 BC. The people we meet were living in the aftermath of God's judgement on his people for their persistent disobedience against his loving rule. That judgement had resulted in the destruction of their cities and temple, and exile to Babylon. True, by Nehemiah's time those events were about 140 years in the past but to the casual observer, not much had changed. Jerusalem was still largely an empty, ruined city under the thumb of its enemies. The devastation might suggest modern parallels such as Coventry, Dresden or Hiroshima, all of which suffered terrible destruction in living memory. However, there are some vital themes in this book, which take us beyond Israel's physical circumstances, and it is on these themes that we will focus over the next few weeks.

2. Applying Nehemiah Today

The question does arise, as with much of the Old Testament – how do we apply Nehemiah today? I want to suggest that there are some things that this book is not about today. It is not a manual for completing a monumental building project in an impossibly short time. Nor is it a guide showing the principles of effective business management, although I have heard of it being used for that purpose. It is not even about recovering the practices of a Christian nation – i.e. challenging a nation that has lost its way spiritually. It is true that Israel was a nation but it was in a special relationship with God that cannot today apply to any one nation, not even Britain, or America.

However, the term, Israel, does give us the vital clue – In God's purpose Israel refers primarily to the people of God before it is the land where they live. Now Israel is no longer a single nation. Since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ it refers to the body of Christ – those who through faith in him are grafted into his body, the church, to be his people, his obedient witnesses in this world. This was always God's intention for Israel. Forgetting this was what led to their downfall and the destruction of their capital city and temple. The message now is not primarily for a nation that has forgotten its Christian heritage but for a church that has been willing to live with all the symptoms of decline. The Book of Nehemiah is a reminder to the church that it too can lose its way and then it needs to be called back to its distinct role in the world. Our overall series title is "Leading God's people" but these sermons are not just for leaders. In God's purposes being the right kind of follower is as vital as being the right kind of leader, and Nehemiah has much to say about both.

We could easily pick up most of the major themes in Nehemiah in the opening chapter, but if I preached on them all, apart from keeping you here for rather a long time it would leave nothing for the rest of the series to cover. I do not intend to do that. What I want to focus on this morning is Nehemiah's prayer. I am not usually given to alliteration in my headings but this morning we have three P's – Problem, Promise & Provision, all bound up in a fourth P – Prayer. In particular we shall look at the attitudes that fed Nehemiah's prayer –

Seeing the problem as God sees it;
Recognising the whole of God's promise;
Pleading for the provision that God alone can supply.

We should then ask ourselves, are we, whoever we are in God's service, ready to take on Nehemiah's response?

3. What Fed Nehemiah's Prayer?

3.1 He saw the problem as God saw it (vv 3 – 7).

They were not big players but Nehemiah's brother Hanani and his companions had a vital role. They saw the problem as God saw it ("great trouble and disgrace" – v 3), and they were willing to travel over 1000 miles to tell someone who might be able to help. From what we will read later in the book it seems that was not the common view back in Jerusalem. It was 140 years since the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the temple, broken down the walls, burned the gates and flattened most of the city. It was 70 years since the Babylonians had been replaced as the super power by the Persians, whose king had allowed the Jews to return and rebuild the temple, albeit on a much more modest scale than before. However, in that time all attempts at any other major rebuilding had been thwarted by their enemies. It was 10 – 15 years since the priest Ezra and another large group of exiles had returned and started something of a religious revival. But now, despite the evidence for God's renewed graciousness to them, there seems to have been no concern to rebuild the walls and with it their role as the people of God. From the later chapters we see they had come to an acceptable accommodation with the surrounding people, whose religion included a small dose of the Jewish faith and a large dose of paganism. People like Sanballat and Tobiah that we read about were just accepted, with all their influence against a godly faith. The enemies of God were not at the gates (which anyway did not exist). They were in the gates and to some extent in charge. This highlights the problem of long term acceptance of compromise, compromise with the world's perspective. It becomes the norm and you live with it as though nothing else was possible or even conceivable. I once heard a clergyman describe his role in his parish as "managing for decline". This is the risk of accepting the way things are without looking at them as God sees them – "Great trouble and disgrace". They did not realise it but they were in great trouble because they were still not living as God intended. Their lifestyle was no threat to their enemies so they were left alone with broken down walls and burnt gates. The disgrace was the contempt with which God was treated in the eyes of the unbelievers due to the failure of his people to live distinctive lives as he wanted. Nehemiah's whole response was to recognise this level of trouble and disgrace – In his prayer he called it what it was – sin, to be confessed and repented of. In that prayer he did not speak of "they" but "we" (vv 6, 7). He might have been living a 1000 miles away from Jerusalem as a godly Jew and a respected official but Nehemiah saw he was party to the problem. In a time of compromise with the world we will not be concerned for God's solution until we see that we are part of the problem. We too have hearts that are content with being less than what God wants, because frankly it is so much easier than being whole hearted believers.

3.2 He recognised the whole of God's promise (vv 8, 9).

Nehemiah's prayer does not stop there with an understanding of the problem. He also recognised the whole promise of God (vv 8, 9). There is an approach to God's promises called "name it and claim it", which goes something like this: You are living by faith if you see one of God's good promises and then in prayer you name it and claim it. Then it's yours. If you don't get the promise you obviously don't have enough faith. Apart from it being an unscriptural emphasis, I'm not sure I want to "claim" the whole of God's promise, of the kind we have just read. The covenant keeping

God promised judgement even on his people if they do not live as he wants. Nehemiah recognised that what had happened to them was not just “one of those things”, an unfortunate accident of history. God had been utterly faithful to his word and judged his wayward people in exactly the way he had promised (Deuteronomy 4: 27, 28; 30: 1). He had kept his promise. That’s usually the bit of God’s promise that we try to forget. But if God had kept his promise, even though it allowed his enemies to bring him in contempt, then the rest of his promise must be as sure (See Deuteronomy 4: 29-31; 30: 2-4). That part of the promise was about restoration to be God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing. That was the ground for Nehemiah’s confidence in prayer. God could be totally trusted to keep his word. You could say the good signs were already there in the return of some of the people, the rebuilt temple and Ezra’s early reforms. One of the most encouraging signs I believe we can see in the world today is the strength of the church in places where it once seemed so lifeless and appeared doomed to disappear under communist rule. Yet God has been faithful and breathed new life into those parts of the body of Christ.

If we recognise the truth about the church’s failure, our failure, to witness by word and life to the difference that Christ makes to our lives and the decline that has resulted, do we also see the faithfulness of God to those who have turned back to him? Do we recognise God’s faithfulness in small struggling churches that seek to be true to God’s word and are kept afloat, when all human logic suggests they should just disappear? Are we willing to see ourselves in those terms? If we are it will lead us in prayer to the third P –

3.3 He pleaded for the provision that only God could supply (vv 10, 11)

Even though he had the right attitude towards the situation we still have to ask, what could Nehemiah do about it? True he was in a position of royal trust, but that trust was a precarious thing. Even trusted Persian servants had tried to assassinate their royal masters, so kings were on the lookout for any suspect behaviour. He may have had some slight influence but would a Persian king really allow the rebuilding of the walls of a city that had a reputation for being a real pain to the imperial state? Nehemiah’s first call was not to the king but to his faithful God. Whatever needed to be done to restore God’s good name in the eyes of his people and the eyes of the world could only be done by God, and Nehemiah knew it. So he didn’t start a petition for the relaxation of building regulations or begin having quiet words with the king’s advisors, explaining how beneficial it would be having a strong city near the Persian south west border. He went to the top. The God he knew was quite capable of overturning the plans of emperors. He had done it with Egypt’s Pharaoh; he was doing it by bringing the exiles home. He was the only one who could make the Persian king favourably disposed towards Nehemiah.

I’m sure we do face an uphill struggle in bringing God’s Good News to our community. We are going to be sadly disillusioned if we think we are capable of making an impact with “A Passion for Life”. But what we cannot do God can do. Ultimately, God’s provision is the only reason our job today is not “managing for decline”.

4. Conclusion – Waiting on God’s Timing

I don’t want to impose on the next sermon in the series but there is a point that is almost hidden in the transition from Chapter 1 to Chapter 2, which relates to Nehemiah’s prayer. That is the issue of timing, God’s timing. The two chapters begin with dates, both in the 20th year of this king’s reign – the months of Kislev and Nisan. The fact is they are 4 months apart. Nehemiah had to live with this

prayer burden for all that time until, in God's time, the king noticed and asked what the matter was. During that time Nehemiah had a job to do and he had to do it in such a way that the king would listen to him when God gave the opportunity. So often we find that our timing expectations and God's actual timing are very different. Like Nehemiah we can trust that God knows the best timing and will bring about his glory. Our job is to keep faithful, to keep praying for the opportunities to arise, to pray for the wisdom to see them and to pray for the courage to take the opportunities God puts our way.