

NEHEMIAH - CHAPTER 1:1 - 2:10 - SERMON FOR 23rd SEPTEMBER 2012.

Last week was the start of our series in Nehemiah when we had an overview putting the book in its Old Testament context.

If you were here - what do you remember? Here are some questions:

1. The Old Testament is divided up into four sections - the first five books called the Pentateuch - then the history section from Joshua - Esther - then the wisdom section from Job - Song of Songs - then we have the prophets from Isaiah - Malachi. Nehemiah is in the history section - on a time line where would you place it? (Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther cover the last 100m years)

2. How many years - roughly - is the silence between the Old Testament finishing and the New Testament with the gospels beginning?

3. The very, very low point in Old Testament history is the destruction of Jerusalem - including the temple - by the Babylonians. Most of the inhabitants in Jerusalem were taken into exile to Babylon - an exile that lasted seventy years. The exile finished when another powerful nation replaced the Babylonians - who were they? (The Persians)

What was the name of the King who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and start to rebuild the temple? (Cyrus)

4. Nehemiah did oversee the rebuilding of the walls. No one thought he would get it done. How long did it take for the walls to be rebuilt? (52 Days)

Today we are going to look at Chapter 1 - Chapter 2 verses 10 - before we look at this section two more questions.

Have you heard of Thomas Edison? What was he famous for?

The answer is the light bulb.

Did you know it took Thomas Edison 2000 experiments before he invented the right filament for the first light bulb? When a young reporter asked him what it felt like to fail so many times, Edison replied:

"I never failed once - inventing the light bulb just happened to be a 2000 step process"

Have you heard of Jonas Salk? What did he discover?

It was the vaccine for Polio - and he attempted 200 unsuccessful vaccines before he came up with the one that worked.

Someone asked Jonas how it felt to fail 200 times trying to come up with the right vaccine for Polio - and he replied:

"I have never failed 200 times at anything in my life - I was taught never to use that word. I simply found 200 ways not to make a vaccine for Polio."

You certainly have to admire their inner resolve and determination to keep going, to press on despite the difficulties and setbacks. Admire, because when things get tough and there are disappointments and setbacks - it is easy to get discouraged to the point where the temptation grows to actually give up.

I would suspect we have all experienced that to one degree or the other - I certainly have. Maybe that temptation is something that is very real for you at present.

Nehemiah will hopefully help us if this is the case. He is a great example of someone who faced all sorts of barriers and setbacks - yet he never gave up.

I highlighted last week three aspects of Nehemiah's character that we will do well to learn from in this series - can you recall what they were?

(Zeal, Humility and his practice of prayer)

I could also add to these three things - "determination". So if you are feeling discouraged and your determination to press on is fading - this is a great book to focus upon, learn from, and be encouraged by.

Let us read then from the beginning - there will be three passages the first and shortest one being Nehemiah 1 verses 1 - 4 - before we read it a brief summary of who Nehemiah actually was.

He was a Jew living in Persia and therefore would have been familiar with the challenges of being part of a minority. But he also knew what it was to succeed - he had risen to a prominent position - that of cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes - the most powerful ruler of his day. As cupbearer it was his duty to taste the wine from the King's cup before handing it personally to the King - a sort of guarantee that the wine was not poisoned.

It was a job of great responsibility - Nehemiah would have been an influential - if not powerful - figure around the palace. He had done very well and it says much about the character and trustworthiness of the man. We can also say that he was comfortable and

secure living and working in the palace at Susa – but this was all going to change when his brother came to see him having just returned from Jerusalem. What was the news?

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 1 verses 1 – 4.

It was very bad news from Jerusalem. Walls flattened, gates burned and moral at rock bottom – there is distress and shame among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This is a huge blow for Nehemiah to hear – for a prolonged period he weeps, mourns and prays. Why this reaction?

141 years have now passed since the Babylonian army had destroyed Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a descendent of those who had been taken into exile, and despite growing up in Persia, in his heart Nehemiah looked to Jerusalem as his true home. He would have known that following 70 years of exile there was the beginning of a return and, under Ezra, the temple was rebuilt. That was greatly encouraging.

But then to receive this news that the city was in ruins and the God's people were in great trouble and disgrace had a profound affect on him. Nehemiah had a deep understanding of the revealed will of God regarding Jerusalem. He cared so much about the glory and the honour of God and the good of the people there - this for him this was a tragedy. His reaction was to mourn, weep, fast, pray. People pray when they care – and Nehemiah's prayer shows just how deeply he does care:

Nehemiah chapter 1 verses 5 – 11 – READ IT.

What sort of God did Nehemiah put his faith in as he prayed?

We know from the opening of the prayer – he describes God as “great and awesome” – who “keeps his covenant of Love with those who love him and keep his commands.”

Nehemiah neither doubted the power of God – nor his love and kindness.

Nehemiah knew that this covenant keeping God has shown that He will never forsake a covenant keeping people.

But in this prayer it is clear that Nehemiah is very conscious that the covenant made God and his people had been flagrantly violated. There had been persistent rebellion and sin over many generations – the reason for their exile - so he pleads for forgiveness.

What is striking, though, is that he confesses other peoples sin as though it was his own! “We have acted very wickedly towards you – we have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses”

Of course Nehemiah was not free from sin – but his confession is about 100's of years of the failings of the people of God – their hardness of heart, their selfishness, their defiance and treatment of God's prophets. Nehemiah clearly had a sense of corporate responsibility.

Can we relate to this? How do we interpret this for ourselves?

We tend not to confess other believer's sins and the failure of the Church as our own – do we?

Maybe that is because our culture really does emphasise individuality – and it is hard not to let that permeate all our thinking and acting.

Yet, if we are the body of Christ it means that we do belong to each other, it means what we do does affect each other - I know that your actions and attitudes do affect me - and I am very aware that mine can affect you.

What are we to make of Nehemiah's confession of corporate sin?

The way he refuses to distance himself from his fellow believer's failures.

The way he is prepared to indentify and stand alongside them .

I said last week that we must always look for Christ in the Old Testament narratives and characters – and ask if what happens is pointing to a greater fulfilment in Christ.

So, is there an echo of Jesus in this prayer and Nehemiah's heart ?

I think there is a striking example of Jesus showing this identification principle.

It was when he came – at the very beginning of his public ministry – to John to be baptised.

What did he do?

He waited in line with sinners – yet he was without sin.

John acknowledged as much:

“I need to be baptised by you” he said to Jesus “ why do you come to me”.

But Jesus insisted that John baptise him – why? He tells us:

“This is to fulfil all righteousness”.

What does that mean?

Well, though without sin – Jesus chose to deliberately identify himself with sinners. That is why in the New Testament He is called “The Second Adam” – he was willing to identify with us – so much so that he was prepared to take our sin onto himself. He crossed the gulf, joined our ranks, embraced us, identified with us in our struggles and pain – but not in our sin and rebellion – for He was without sin.

Is there not just an echo of this in this prayer of Nehemiah?

He identifies with the sins of his people and by standing in the gap and pleading for forgiveness for them?

When he pleads for his people – what does he appeal to?

He appeals to God's faithfulness.

“Remember” he says “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses” – and there then follows quotations from the promises of God found in the book of Deuteronomy.

Because he knew and believed these promises – Nehemiah is bold.

He has a passion for God's name – a love for others – and in his passion an indifference to his own life and destiny.

The prayer was answered – as we are about to see.

It highlights that it brings God delight when we take His promises seriously.

A sign that we do is that, after humbly confessing our sin, we then come confidently and boldly when we pray.

The climax of the prayer is also very striking.

It is not Nehemiah asking for something huge or dramatic – it is not “Lord, bring revival to Jerusalem by tomorrow morning” –but it is something quite simple, straightforward and specific. Look again at the last line of the prayer:

“Give your servant success today by granting him favour in this presence of this man”

The servant is obviously Nehemiah – and “this man” is none other than the King who he works for – Artaxerxes.

Why this specific request?

Nehemiah knew that he would have to approach the king and request a leave of absence.

There was absolutely no guarantee the King would be happy to grant this – Eastern kings held ultimate power and their words meant life or death – with that power they were very unpredictable in their moods.

The potential – humanly speaking – for this to go completely pear shaped was on the high end of the scale.

It was a big prayer Nehemiah was praying.

But it is an indication to us that God was very much already in his heart.

Jesus taught us to pray:

“Your Kingdom come, your will be done – on earth as it is heaven”.

We should desire for God's will to be done on earth – yes?

Part of expressing this desire is to pray for it.

But for God's will to be done on earth – He needs people to respond to his call and be part of the answer to our prayers.

When we pray – in faith – according to His promises and will – God promises to hear and respond and act. That much is clear!

Things change – and doesn't that also include the heart of the one doing the praying?

At some point, Nehemiah decided himself to volunteer to go to Jerusalem and play his part in rebuilding the walls. He didn't pray for God to send someone else – he decided to offer himself for the task.

But how would this be possible given he needed the king's approval?

Before we find out – a detail that is easy to miss.

In Nehemiah 1 verse 1 it says:

“ In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa”

Chapter 2 verse 1:

“ In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him”

I presume that you don't know the Persian calendar (nor did I before reading about it) – the gap between the month of Kislev and Nisan is at least four of our months.

So, Nehemiah had been praying – no doubt with others – about this whole issue for all that time – and waiting – waiting – for some opportunity to approach the king and make the request.

You can't separate prayer and patience and waiting – which is one reason that it is hard work and a challenge.

The big challenge in prayer is not to lose heart and give up – true?

If so, be encouraged by Nehemiah – he didn't give up.

He prayed, waited and was looking for an answer – that then eventually came in an unexpected way.

NEHEMIAH 2 verse 1 – 10.

Palace protocol demanded the King's servant always look happy in his presence.

Nehemiah wasn't looking happy – whether this was deliberate or not, we are not told. But what we are told is that it was something that King did notice.

Nehemiah did not have to speak to the King at all – it was the King who spoke to him – for the initiative was not in Nehemiah's hands but in God's.

"Why are you so sad, Nehemiah" said the King.

Here is the breakthrough – a chance to tell the King about Jerusalem and what was on his heart.

At this point how was Nehemiah feeling?

Was it ecstatic – was it time to shout "Praise the Lord"?

Hardly – he tells us how he was feeling:

"I was very much afraid – but I said to the King..."

Fear was there – but so was faith.

Faith is not the absence of fear and trembling – it is believing and carrying on despite it.

Nehemiah takes the opportunity to tell the King about the desperate state of Jerusalem – "the place of his ancestors – now in ruins"

The King's response is amazing.

Remember he could have been angry and banished Nehemiah from his court – or worse.

But his response is: "What is it you want"

Nehemiah's answer shows that not only had he been praying for this moment over the months – but he had thought and planned his answer.

It is summarized in two requests – "Send me" and "Give me".

Nehemiah could not leave his post without the permission and approval of the King – nor could he work in Jerusalem when he got there without the authority and help of the King. So he asks Artaxerxes to appoint him governor of Judah and give him the authority he needed to rebuild the city walls – he then asks for letters of introduction that would guarantee safe travel and also asks the king to provide the materials needed for the construction of the buildings and walls.

This wasn't Nehemiah talking off the top of his head was it?

This moment had been on his heart and mind ever since he heard the news about Jerusalem – and he is ready to make his requests.

For Nehemiah – the weeks and months of waiting, praying, thinking and planning had been well invested.

The fruit of all that was that the King – after asking just three questions – grants Nehemiah all he needed – and more!

What does Nehemiah attribute this to?

His good timing – his persuasive words – the fact the King was in a good mood?

Nehemiah had no doubt where the source of blessing was from – verse 8:

"And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the King granted my request".

This is a reminder that in all we seek to do we must always humbly acknowledge the gracious hand of God upon us – and the gracious kindness of God in blessing us.

We must guard against thinking and believing that any fruit and breakthroughs that we see and experience is down to our own efforts and skills and talent and wisdom and gifts. So when God is pleased to work through us as a means of good and blessing to others – let us – always – learn to say:

"It is because the gracious hand of God is upon me"

Or as we work together to bring God's will here on earth – and are encouraged – as we often are – let us say:

"It is because the gracious hand of God is upon us".

The encouragement and challenge to us from the opening chapter of this book is to pray and not give up.

It is to trust that God will answer those prayers – and in His time and in His way.

I want to finish where we began.

At the opening of Nehemiah's prayer – verse 5:

"Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love him and keep His commandments."

The "great and awesome God" - who is in control of all the affairs of the nations.
The God who is clearly working out His purposes - and that is even through unbelieving, pagan Persian Kings.
Like Cyrus - the Persian King who delivered the people of God from the Babylonians and then allowed the Jews to return after their 70 year exile to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.
And then, 90 years on, we read of King Artaxerxes who is prepared to allow Nehemiah to go and rebuild the walls, and then provides all that is needed for his protection and provision.
There are lessons and encouragements for us now as we pray and work together.
So, will this stir us to come together and declare as Nehemiah did with confidence:
"Lord - let your ear be attentive to your servants - here - who delight in revering your name".