

NEHEMIAH - INTRODUCTION - SUNDAY 16TH SEPTEMBER (Page 466)

We are beginning a series over the next 9 weeks in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah - this morning is an introduction which I have entitled:

“Where? Who? What?”

Referring to three questions I want to ask about this book before we look at it in detail. So, the first question is:

“WHERE DOES NEHEMIAH FIT INTO OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY?”

Imagine a time line for the Old Testament - starting with Genesis and going up to where the Old Testament ends. Well, where does the Old Testament end and where would you place the book of Nehemiah on the time line?

To answer this question go right to the front of your Bible and the “CONTENTS” page - page vii - between “Welcome to the Bible” and “How to read the Bible” (found it?)

The Old Testament is divided into four sections:

1. Genesis - Deuteronomy - called the Pentateuch - which means “five books”.

Here we have the account of the creation of the world, the fall of man, the establishment - through Abraham - of the nation of Israel - their exodus from Egypt and slavery, and the receiving of the commandments and the law that was given to Moses.

2. History - from Joshua through to the book of Esther - we have the history of Israel from the point Moses dies and Joshua leads them into the Promised Land - covering about 800 years. Come back to this section shortly.

3. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs - five books that are called the “Wisdom literature” - poetry, prayers, and wisdom to live by, spanning many years and different authors.

4. Isaiah through to the last book Malachi - the writings of the prophets of Israel.

Is that clear?

Back to section 2 - the history section - Joshua - Esther.

Now- something happens between the end of 2 Chronicles and the book of Ezra that is very, very significant in Old Testament history.

Do you know what that is?

(The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians - followed by the exile in Babylon of all those who were captured)

How did that happen?

Here is a very quick summary.

In 900 BC there was a split in the kingdom of Israel after the reign of Solomon as king. The northern kingdom from that point was called Israel and the southern kingdom was called Judah. Judah was where Jerusalem and the temple were situated. In both kingdoms a succession of prophets were raised up to bring God’s word to His people. The Northern territory Israel was particularly hard and rebellious and given over to idolatry, and - after generations of warnings through the prophets Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Hosea - it fell to Assyria in 700 BC.

The southern kingdom survived for further 100 years - and the prophets during this period were Isaiah, Micah, Habakkuk and Jeremiah. Jeremiah particularly gave warnings that if the people carried on dismissing God’s warnings then judgement would come. Jeremiah was ignored - reviled and finally persecuted for his message - but it came to pass. In 597 BC, Jerusalem was besieged and captured by the Babylonians. Initially they took away the 10 000 influential Jews into exile to assimilate them into Babylonian culture - but 10 years later a King called Zedekiah foolishly rebelled and the Babylonian army returned and decimated the city. The temple was destroyed, all the palaces were looted and burned, buildings were flattened and the city walls knocked down.

Those who escaped the sword were captured and taken into exile to be servants of the King of Babylon.

This is the very, very low point in Old Testament history.

Read the book of Lamentations when Jeremiah literally walks through the desolation and destruction and laments – not many Churches have a series on that book!
It seemed all hope had gone for the Israelites – with no city and no temple and now in exile it seemed God had completely abandoned them.
The feeling is summed up in Psalm 137:

“By the Rivers of Babylon – where we laid down and wept – when we remembered Zion”.
Those of a certain vintage may know that as a bouncy, jolly song – but it is taken from a desperately sad Psalm written by those who had been taken from their home in Jerusalem to be captives in a strange land – resulting in weeping and anguish!

But God hadn't forgotten or abandoned His people.

He promised – through the prophet Jeremiah – that the exile would not be the end but would last 70 years – and then the Jews, would start to return to Jerusalem.
That was fulfilled when the Persians defeated the Babylonians – we then read the Lord moved the heart of the King of Persia called Cyrus who then allowed the Jews to begin to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

In terms of Old Testament History – and we are near the end of our Old Testament time line – what happens from this point is told in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. They are the last three books in the history section – they belong together and cover the last century of Old Testament history – which is 538 – 433BC.

Nehemiah is actually the last book on the time line of Old Testament history books.

But why does Esther come after it you may well ask!

Esther is not set in Jerusalem, but in Persia, at a time when the preservation of the whole Jewish race was at stake. It is about an amazing deliverance God's people through the remarkable Esther. It is where it is in Scripture because it was written later than Ezra and Nehemiah – but chronologically speaking it is generally regarded as falling between the two. The actual date is not terribly important – what is important to grasp is following the desolation of Jerusalem and the exile into Babylon there is 70 years of exile, then the Persians replace the Babylonians and then there is the beginning of the promised return.

The book of Ezra tells of the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of public worship. This rebuilding took a long time. Initially the people of God got discouraged and distracted and literally gave up building – but eventually the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were raised up to challenge their attitude to the things of God and their way of life – there was an encouraging response, the work recommenced and the temple was completed.

But following the restoration of the temple morale remained low and there was far more fear than faith among the Jews in Jerusalem.

It was at this juncture in 445BC – 90 years after the first exiles returned – that someone was raised up to match the need of the hour. It was Nehemiah – a Jew living and working in Persia – who was called to go and rebuild the walls of the city.

So, after our brief history lesson to set the context of the book if you are still confused talk to me after – but let us now consider the man and ask our second question:

WHO WAS NEHEMIAH?

READ NEHEMIAH 1 verses 1 – 4 (page 466)

When Nehemiah heard that the walls were broken, the gates burned and the people who had returned were in trouble – it moved him deeply.

He sat down and wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. Why?

This was the city of God – Israel's appointed centre for worship and sacrifice.

What was at stake for Nehemiah was the honour of God's name – and the fruit of his fasting, praying and pleading was that he himself was given the opportunity to go back to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding of its walls and play his part in the renewal of the faith and spiritual focus of the people of God there.

What position did he hold in Persia?

He tells us in the last sentence of Chapter 1:

“I was cup bearer to the king”

His job was to protect the King of Persia – he was constantly in his presence with all the trappings of privilege and power that went with working in the royal court.

From the outset of the book Nehemiah is clearly someone of deep faith, conviction and integrity who was not compromised by his elevated position. In that way he is like two other great Old Testament figures who found themselves in similar circumstances – Joseph, who served in the court of the Pharaohs in Egypt, and Daniel who served under 5 different pagan kings in Babylon.

All three men were not corrupted in any way by their pre-eminence and power and their faith remained steadfast throughout despite having to live daily in a predominately pagan culture.

All three stayed faithful and fearless in their spiritual conviction and focus.

Nehemiah gives us a study in great leadership.

It showed in his commitment to people he served – he was a natural mover and shaker – he used the power granted him for God's glory not his own and he showed he had a heart after God's heart by his compassionate service for the poor and needy of the city.

Nehemiah was clearly able to motivate and inspire others – people followed him both willingly and faithfully.

There are lots of good quotes about leadership - here is just one by Harry S Truman – 33rd president of the United States - which I like:

“ The leaders business is to get people to do what they don't want to do - and to make them like doing it”.

That appears to happen when Nehemiah oversees the rebuilding of the walls.

He didn't get it done through manipulation or exploitation. He was not a dictator - but neither was he a doormat. He did not ride roughshod over people anymore than he allowed people to ride roughshod over him.

Nehemiah exchanged his secure and privileged life as the royal cup bearer to the king for the really problematical challenge of rebuilding and reorganizing Jerusalem in the face, initially, of very little belief – even among his own people - that it could be done at all. When the building work commenced they received opposition first in the form of mocking and ridicule, and then outright persecution and threats of violence. Yet the ruined walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in 52 days – it was a remarkable achievement. He – along with Ezra – was the key figure in restoring Israel's spiritual life following the exile in Babylon.

Aside from his leadership skills I want to briefly highlight three attributes Nehemiah demonstrates throughout the book that will hopefully both inspire and challenge us as to the importance of their place in our own hearts and our walk with God.

The first is zeal.

What is zeal? The dictionary defines it as “deep enthusiasm, eagerness, and passion” – to be zealous means to be “extremely eager and enthusiastic”

Zeal on its own is not necessarily a virtue – what is important is what we are actually zealous for.

In Nehemiah's case it was for the honour and glory of God and His name.

Read Nehemiah 1 verse 11 (Highlight “delight in revering your name”.)

All great servants of God have zeal and a passion for the honour and the glory of God – a deep desire to do His will and to glorify Him and to please Him.

Zealous disciples are always sensitive to situations in which God's truth and honour are - in one way or another - being jeopardised and they are then prepared to do something about this – even at personal risk or cost.

Zeal for God's name and honour and the courage to suffer for these are very close allies.

What is the opposite of being zealous? What would you say?

Is it not apathy – half heartedness – what we call being lukewarm?

In the last book of the Bible – Revelation – in Chapter 3 Jesus gives his verdict on the Church in a place called Laodicea. This is what he declared (quite a warning!): Revelation 3 verses 15 – 17.

In light of that – do we not need to guard our hearts against our zeal cooling and becoming Lukewarm which according to Jesus is a dangerous spiritual condition we must do something about?

There is something that is particularly encouraging about Nehemiah that we will discover throughout this series and it is that his zeal for the honour of God's name remained constant and undiminished throughout the whole book. He is as zealous at the end in Chapter 13 as he is at the beginning in Chapter 1.

There stands an example for us all.

The second attribute shown in his ministry was humility.

What does it mean to be humble?

Let us say what it is not.

Humility does not mean belittling ourselves – having an inferiority complex – and it is not when we make excuses about ourselves in order to get out of what God is calling us to do. Humility is grounded in realism. Yes, we must acknowledge our failures and flaws – and that then leads to a deep acknowledgement and understanding of our dependence on God's mercy and grace.

We express this humility in a variety of ways.

We express it when we are happy to give credit and praise to others rather than seeking it for ourselves.

We express it when we are willing to listen and not fight to have the final word.

We express it when we are gentle and gracious – rather than judgemental and condemning – with those who fail.

Humble believers recognise that they have been given gifts which are to be used for the glory of God (not themselves) and for the building up and benefit of others – but they also recognise that they do have limitations which means that they cannot do everything themselves!

Nehemiah had leadership and organisational gifts that he used very much for the glory of God and that did produce impressive results. The manner he motivated others and oversaw the rebuilding of the walls was inspiring. But when the next task was to rally those in Jerusalem towards a renewed obedience to God – Nehemiah stepped back and handed that over to Ezra and the Levites.

Why?

Nehemiah knew that he was not called or gifted to do that – and he did not try and usurp or undermine others who were. In not trying to control everything and everybody he showed humility and maturity and revealed realism about his own gifts and responsibilities.

The third attribute to learn from Nehemiah.

He was a man of prayer!

The book begins with him praying and then finishes with a prayer with a number of prayers in between.

A simple, but essential, spiritual principle runs through the whole book that I hope will stir us afresh over the coming weeks as we look at it together.

Nehemiah's example – and the fruit of his praying – tells us that prayer does change things – and is a reminder that, in spiritual work, without prayer there is no prospering.

My experience is that we know this in theory – but so easily forget this in practice.

Isn't it so easy for prayer – individually and corporately – to slip to the bottom of our priorities?

Nehemiah is hopefully going to challenge us on this – and isn't that something we need?

Final question after "Where" and "Who" is "What".

What can this book teach us now?

(Another question – Why look at this for nine weeks?)

I want to highlight at the outset of our series that Nehemiah is not a book about impressive human achievement – which is something Nehemiah himself would be keen to underline.

Nehemiah knew where the source of his wisdom and strength lay – and who ultimately was behind the walls being rebuilt.

Turn over to chapter 6 – page 471. Let me read you verses 15, 16.

Nehemiah, at the completion of the walls, which was a triumphant moment, effectively says: "Don't give me the credit, for what has been done has been done by God – He must have the praise for it.

Like Nehemiah, we must learn always to say:

"To God, alone, is the Glory".

Above everything else, this book – like all in scripture – teaches us about God. This God is powerful and personal – 10 times Nehemiah describes Him as “My God” – and his descriptions of his God are both inspiring and encouraging throughout the whole book. For example – consider how Nehemiah begins the prayer in Chapter 1

go back to verse 5.

(Read verses 4, 5).

Something that Nehemiah knew about his God – and this is our God too this morning – is that He shows Himself to be a faithful, covenant keeping God who will not let his servants down.

All through the book we see Nehemiah trusting that God will stand by what He has said and promised. Something we always need reminding of – for we forget so easily.

What else can this book teach us now?

What about seeing Nehemiah from a New Testament perspective?

We have a commitment here when speaking from the Old Testament to always ask – where is Christ in this passage?

This comes from a belief and conviction that all the stories and promises in Old Testament are pointing to the person of Jesus Christ and find their fulfilment in Him.

To underline this – I have mentioned this morning that Nehemiah showed great zeal in all he did.

Now consider the zeal and passion shown by Christ – His desire above everything for the name of God to be honoured and for His will to be done.

When Jesus went into the temple and drove out the money lenders He declared that His Father’s house had been turned into a den of thieves.

In John’s gospel it then quotes a prophecy from Psalm 69:

“Zeal for your house consumes me”

That was certainly fulfilled by Jesus on that day.

Then there is humility. Isn’t the ultimate example of humility Jesus?

He was the servant king – the one who declared greatness in the kingdom as being prepared to go unnoticed and be the least – who washed the disciples feet before choosing to the ultimate humiliation of crucifixion – who didn’t consider equality with God as something to be grasped but made himself nothing taking on the very nature of a servant.

Then there is prayer. Jesus who began His ministry by going into the wilderness to pray, who taught his disciples how to pray, who prayed in the garden as He awaited his arrest and whose dying breath was a prayer:

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”

Yes, we will be reminded of zeal, humility and prayer as we consider Nehemiah – but we must let it point to the great revelation of it in Christ Jesus.

In Nehemiah we will read that God’s plan is stated – that plan is opposed in a number of different ways – but – through the dedication of His chosen servant – there is deliverance and redemption and hope for the people of God – and God in his sovereignty fulfils His promises through the obedience of His servant.

It is a book then that is pointing towards the gospel of Christ Jesus.

My hope is that in the coming weeks we will make the connections between the person and story of Nehemiah and then the Lord Jesus Christ and then our own lives and our own response to the call that – individually and corporately – God gives to us now.