

Rebuilding the church

1. Catching the vision – in prayer

Nehemiah was a man at the top of his game (A rich influential figure, working abroad for a foreign Government). As cupbearer (vs 11) he was either second only to the King of Persia, THE superpower of the time or highly favoured by him. To be in the royal court he would have been handsome, well educated and possibly enjoyed the confidence of the King.

It's late November (Kislev) and the King is in Susa in the luxury and opulence of his Summer Residence. Though Persian by birth, education and tongue Nehemiah is a Jew by ethnicity and religion. Somewhere down his lineage his people were displaced by the great Babylonian military machine. Some of his family returned, 70 years later, with the first wave of those permitted to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Hence vs 2 his brother, Hannani, arrives in Susa from Jerusalem.

Nehemiah asks about what is happening in Jerusalem. He would have been aware of the whole history of God and his people, why they were exiled and why they were allowed to return. The return of the people was no accident, it had been prophesied they would return after exile after 70 years and they had. Nehemiah would have been expecting good

news of God's presence and blessing. But what he heard was very different.

Nehemiah 1:3 *They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."*

That was not the answer he was hoping for.

Nehemiah 1:4 *When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.*

It was true that the temple had been rebuilt, if but much smaller version of the original, and Ezra had reconstituted biblical worship. The thing was, then, not really the broken walls, they were just a symptom of a deeper spiritual problem. It was as if the soul of the nation was absent. There was no or little confidence in their God to complete the tasks before them. Were they too busy focussing on other things? So quickly they had turned from wholehearted commitment to a shadow of their dedication to God.

Let's update this. It is clear from the news and reports that as a nation we are not in a good place. Our affluence is stressing us out, child poverty in Britain has tripled in the last 20 years, in a league table produced by UNICEF on the well being of children in the worlds 21 most industrialised nations

Britain came last 21 out of 21. The areas of the study included material well-being, family and peer relationships, health and safety, behaviour and risks, and children's own sense of well-being. We let our kids out on the streets later and in greater numbers than the rest of Europe and so it goes on. In regard to medical ethics we are the dirty man of Europe – performing medical research prohibited by every other country in Europe. What is happening to our nation?

Paralleled to that and I believe directly related is the decline of the church. Yes we have our 'temples'/ church buildings dominating the horizon of many a town, we have our religious acts of worship but in many places attended by handfuls of people. The question that arises is this: Has Britain/uk sold it's soul? In following a materialistic and self oriented gospel are we seeing the words of Jesus borne out?

Mark 8:36 ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

We have forfeited our soul and are lost!

I believe the church is the greatest hope for the nation. I believe the church has a role as a prophetic voice calling the nation to its senses but also, and more importantly, a redemptive voice – calling the people back to God. According to Jesus they are lost, like a sheep without a shepherd. Jesus alone is

the good shepherd who can find the lost and grant them eternal life with God. He is the only saviour of our souls – taking us from the hell we have chosen to the heaven he offers! As we come to communion later we will be reminded of the cross where he purchased our salvation.

So what is to be done? Does Nehemiah have something to teach us? Can we detect the voice of God speaking to us through the pages of scripture? Can we learn the lessons of history?

What did Nehemiah do?

Nehemiah 1:4 ⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

He prayed? He fasted? He wept?

What kind of nonsense is that? Some might say.

I know some extremely rich people who are very concerned about the state of the nation and the church. One of the conclusions they have come is that no amount of money can purchase the kind of change needed. Why? Because in the end of the day what is needed is a change of heart – the bible word for that is repentance! Deep regret over the state of affairs that leads to a profound change of direction. What do you think about that? Do you agree? Some

of us might say a change of political direction will solve it. Others better education. Others will say better financial incentives will do it. I say they may help but we have been trying these but the root of the problem is spiritual – we are souled out.

H.G. Wells was never particularly religious, but after he had studied the history of the human race and had observed human life, he came to an interesting conclusion: *"Religion is the first thing and the last thing, and until a man has found God and been found by God, he begins at no beginning, he works to no end. He may have his friendships, his partial loyalties, his scraps of honour. But all these things fall into place and life falls into place only with God."*

Let's look at how this man of substance and influence prays.

1. Prayer that weeps and worships

I wonder if you are like me, whilst appalled by some of what we see is happening around the world we rarely weep as we see babies dying from malnutrition and so on. But go to the cinema or watch a movie at home and depending on the film you might weep like a baby. There is something perverse there, isn't there? Have we become so hardened to reality that we are unmoved by it, just thankful it is not us!

When our hearts beat to the beat of God's own heart there will be a discerning softness. That will lead us to strong emotional reactions in prayer and maybe even to weeping.

The psalmist talks about it

Psalm 126:6 *"Those who sow in tears will reap in songs of joy"*

In the early years of the Salvation Army when the Salvationist might hit a dead end they would contact William Booth who would reply, "Try tears!"

In other words, how deep is your passion for the folks you are trying to help? How much do you feel the pain in God's heart for the people? We get a glimpse of that when Jesus looked over Jerusalem and wept over their lostness.

Nehemiah weeps and fasts but he also worships!

Worship in prayer helps put things in perspective.

I was speaking to someone recently who recalled the words of his old Minister, *"Great is the task before us, but even greater is the power behind us"*

And so Nehemiah sets himself in context before his maker, reminding himself in the first instance of who God is.

Nehemiah 1:5-7 ⁵ Then I said: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses."

He addresses the God of heaven, the great and awesome God. Whose covenant is love with those who love him.

Have you ever noticed that when you look up at the sky during the day it feels like the world is a small place. But when night falls and the clouds clear and we peer into the vastness of space things seem very different. We feel smaller and when we think of God its creator he seems a whole heap bigger.

As we worship it should be like looking into the nights sky, God should seem great and awesome. And our perspective on prayer may change as we realise prayer is actually not about getting God to do what we want but for us to do what he wants.

As Abraham Lincoln once said

"My concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

Nehemiah comes to prayer to align himself with the will of God, then his success is secure!

PT Forsyth a great Scottish preacher once said when addressing the topic of prayer. Every prays in one form or another...*"The very egotism of craving life is prayer. The great difference is the object of it. The man whose passion is habitually set upon pleasure, knowledge, wealth, honour or power is in a state of prayer to these things or for them. He prays without ceasing. These are his real gods, on whom he waits day and night...he prays to an unknown God for selfish boon...Beware lest the whole trend of the soul fix on a deity that turns a doom."*

Who and what do we pray for? The missionaries of the past used to say, "dream great dreams and pray great prayers". How big are our dreams? Do they extend beyond our own garden wall? For a nation and a church in decline? How big are our prayers? How big is the God whom we pray to? Nehemiah's God. The God of the bible is, as Paul puts it, "able to do immeasurably more than we can ever ask or imagine!" And he is able to do it here in Braehead,

Stirling, Scotland, the UK...Do you believe that? I am not sure anything will change until we do.

Interestingly, Nehemiah's worship also includes repentance.

Vs 6 I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses."

Someone has said, "*The existence of God means that we are living in a moral order, and in a moral order we can no more sin and get away with it than we can break all physical laws and escape the penalty.*"

Our sin has consequences here on earth and in heaven but our sin is not just what we commit, it is also what we omit. We as a national church have stood back and done nothing as we have witnessed national spiritual and moral decline. We are all implicated in that and it is time to repent and change. Like the church of the past we too are having to re-learn the lessons of history, aren't we?

Nehemiah leads us in the way firstly of prayer that weeps and worships but also in prayer that knows God's character and promises.

Prayer that knows and claims God's character and promises.

Nehemiah knows his bible and the God of whom it speaks. He knows God is a God of covenant commitment, that he sticks to his promises like glue. He holds on to the character of God as one who loves his people and made himself accountable to his promises. And Nehemiah will not let God go until he God is true to his name.

Our prayers should be filled with scripture – claiming the promises of God contained within them. Promises like he will build his church, that if we sow in tears we will reap in joy, if we ask he will answer and so on.

Prayer meetings have gone out of fashion like nobodies business but partly as a result of the vision day we will see in the coming months opportunities to correct that as we re-examine our congregational prayer life.

To our peril the church in general has lost vision for how much can be accomplished through prayer. God grant us a vision for what can be in our nation and in our church – reconnecting lost souls to the God of heaven. God grant us an increasingly prayerful spirit for as it has been said 'when we work we work, but when we pray, God works.'