

Nehemiah 1

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Date: 04 October 2020

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[0 : 00] If you will, to Nehemiah 1. Nehemiah 1. Wednesday night, we've not got house groups, we've got prayer meeting, prayer gathering. We're doing it on Zoom. We'd love you to join with us.

It's been a real encouragement to have more people joining us on Zoom prayer meetings. So please, if you can, do make that a priority. It's just from 8 till 9. There's a special guest joining us, which I won't tell you about.

But you'll have to come on Wednesday. And Nehemiah 1. And so we started two weeks ago a series on Nehemiah, partly in that I think, as I said, we're in a bit of time of transition as a church, aren't we?

With kind of lots of people kind of going, some people coming, some long-established leaders leaving us. And so I think Nehemiah is a really helpful book on looking at how do we rebuild as a church family.

It's not about building projects of brick and mortar. It's about God's church, Nehemiah. It's a rebuilding job. Last time we saw, do you remember from verse 4, we looked at weeping at the state of the church.

[1 : 06] That when Nehemiah saw the state of God's church in those days, that need for God to work amongst his people and the state of his people, and Nehemiah recognized his sin in the midst of that.

And that's where you've got to begin, I think, with church life. You've got to see that real, deep, heartfelt concern and sorrow. And so how is the weeping?

So many sermons, aren't there? They can be wasted. How is the weeping? Remember what Matthew Henry said. He said, No one will do worthy work at rebuilding the walls. Who has not wept over the ruins.

And so weeping comes before rebuilding. And if we're not willing to face reality, we won't get anywhere. And it is, I think, embarrassing to face reality in church life sometimes.

It's easier to say everything in our church is perfect. My brother, when you ring my brother, he's a minister in Swansea, and you say, How are things in church, Steve?

[2 : 13] And he always says to me, They're amazing. I want to throttle him. And then he goes on for about 20 minutes with how things are terrible. But he always starts off, Oh, they're amazing. And I'm with him at a conference.

And somebody says to me, How are things in Mount Steve? Oh, they're amazing. I want to look at him. He's got two heads. Because it's easy to say the church is perfect, isn't it? And wonderfully prosperous. But it isn't.

And we will not get anywhere unless we face reality. And maybe you're new to this church, and everything is rosy in the garden. I just want to say, stay a little bit longer. But weeping is only the beginning.

So what comes next? And it's obvious, isn't it? It's really simple. It's prayer. And I think that's quite significant. Nehemiah is a top civil servant. He is a security policeman.

He is a man of action. As you go through, you can see that Nehemiah was a strong and a gifted administrator and planner. There are loads of books written on leadership about Nehemiah. Not that it's really about leadership.

[3 : 12] But he's a great leader. Nehemiah is a man who likes doing things. He's good at doing things. And as we go through the book, we're going to see how good he is at doing things.

We'll see how good he is at organizing, and motivating, and leading, and supervising, and getting people to do things. And I suppose his natural reaction, when he heard about Jerusalem, would be to do something.

But he doesn't. He doesn't. He prays. And praying is doing something, of course. But you know what I mean. There are nine prayers of Nehemiah in this book. Most of them are really brief prayers, but this is a longer prayer, and it's intense, and it's agonizing. So he says in verse 4, can you see it? I continued fasting, and praying. I mourned. And what he really means there, is it's a prolonged prayer. He says, I prayed for some days. In fact, it may have been longer than some days. Chapter 1, verse 1, it's the month of Chislech, which is December.

[4 : 22] And then, if you go to the front of chapter 2, verse 1, you've got Nisan, which is April. So there's four months between chapter 1 and chapter 2. And it seems that Nehemiah was fasting and praying for much of those four months.

And in fact, this prayer that we're going to look at is, I think, probably a kind of summary or a pulling together of his prayers during that period of time. And so here's the second indispensable step towards rebuilding the church, towards renewing the church.

The first is concern. The second is prayer. An earnest, prolonged prayer. And if we're concerned about the church, we must be men and women and boys and girls of earnest, prolonged prayer. Not just to hear about it and think about it, but to get on our knees and to pray. To pray privately. To pray as we gather our families and households to gather for family worship.

To gather as a church like we will on Wednesday, like we do early in the morning once a month. And we should pray for renewal. And so what can we learn from this passage?

[5 : 32] Four parts of prayer for renewal. And the first is concentration upon God. And so that's the first thing, concentration about God. And so very often, at least in my own praying, I'm in far too much of a hurry.

Are there something that I want? And perhaps it's very important to me and so I get down on my knees and I say, thank you God for hearing me. Please grant this request. And I suspect many of us tend to do that.

We rush in with our requests, but Nehemiah doesn't do that. He doesn't begin with his requests. He doesn't begin by telling God what he wants. What does he do? He begins by worship. He begins not by thinking about himself at all or his requests at all.

He begins by thinking about God. And he reminds himself of who God is and he focuses on the God to whom he's speaking. So look at verse five. And I said, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God.

That's how Nehemiah begins. O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God. He begins by praying, by reminding himself, who is this God before whom I come?

[6 : 47] What's he like? Who is he? What sort of God is he? What do I know of him? What is true of him? And that is the secret to biblical prayer, isn't it? You begin with God.

We begin by filling our heart and our mind and our soul with God. We don't start with ourselves. We don't start with our needs. We start with God because everything else depends on that.

Everything else flows from that. So the most crucial thing about prayer, and there's loads of books on prayer that miss this, the most crucial thing about prayer is to whom are we praying? And what is he like?

And if we're not sure about what he's like, then our praying will be fundamentally weak. And so if I want someone to help me, I need to know two things, don't I? First of all, can they help me? And secondly, will they help me? And so let's say you come up to me after the service and you say, Paul, I wonder if you can help me. My car is broken down and it needs somebody to have a look at the engine and sort out the problem.

[7 : 55] Could you do that for me? Now, I would be willing to do that. I'd be very willing to do that. But unfortunately, I'd be totally and utterly incompetent. I know nothing about cars.

I don't understand anything about cars and engines. And so I'm willing to help you and I might want to help you, but I don't have the ability to actually help you.

So if somebody's going to help us, we need to know, can they help us? And we also need to know, will they help us? And they may be unfriendly. They might be in a hurry.

They might have time. They might be selfish. They might be unwilling to help us. And so when we pray to God, we need to ask ourselves two questions. Why don't you do this tomorrow morning or tonight? And you get down on your knees.

When you pray, you ask, can God help me? And secondly, will God help me? And so look what Nehemiah says. He says, oh God, Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love.

[9 : 03] And so God can help him. He's the God of power and the God of majesty and the God of infinite strength and wisdom. He's the God who made the heavens and the earth. He's the God who can.

And then he says, he goes on and he says, the God of the covenant. The God who keeps his covenant of love and that promise that God will be with his people and he will be his people's God and he will bless them and he will make them a blessing to the ends of the earth and he will bless our children.

And so Nehemiah begins his prayer by saying, God is almighty and God is loving. And so I can give you no better advice when you're praying than to begin with those two things, that God is almighty and that God is loving.

And before you go any further, before you bring your problem to God or your anxiety or whatever it is you're concerned about, let your mind and your heart be filled with this awareness that my God is almighty, that my God can do everything and that my God loves me intensely and passionately. And he is kind and he is gracious and he is compassionate. Concentration upon God. And so often my prayers are so weak because I don't take time to remember these things.

[10 : 23] I'm in too much of a hurry. And I get up from praying and I'm as stressed and worried and anxious as before I knelt down to pray. And praying hasn't done me any good at all.

Why is that? But it hasn't done me any good at all because I've forgotten God's might and God's mercy. And you could almost say if you didn't say anything else it would be well worth it wouldn't it? You would get up from your knees and be convinced again of the might and the mercy of God. And so here's where Nehemiah begins.

And it's a really wonderful and suggestive beginning. It's so helpful. In all sorts of praying O Lord God of heaven the great God of heaven who keeps this covenant of love concentration upon God. The second part of Nehemiah's prayer is confession of sin. confession of sin. And so he recognizes and he worships God in verse 6. And then he asks God to listen.

[11 : 26] Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open. This servant is praying day and night.

And he asks God to hear him. And then in 7 and 8 he moves on to confession of sin. And he says this doesn't he I confess the sins that we Israelites including myself and including my father's house have committed against you.

We have acted wickedly towards you. And so I confess the sins of the people at the end of verse 6 which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

We've acted very corruptly against you and we've not kept the commandments the statutes the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. But we say don't we if you've been in church any time that's normal and we always have to confess our sins.

Many of us were taught acts weren't we as young people? We teach that to our young people adoration and confession and thanksgiving and supplication. It's really helpful to be praying and to divide your prayer into those four parts.

[12 : 43] And every time we pray we're to confess our sins. And so what Nehemiah is doing is really normal but here's the important thing what is he praying about? He's praying about isn't he the ruined walls of Jerusalem.

That's the context of his prayer. That is what his prayer is all about the state of Jerusalem the ruined walls of Jerusalem the people of God. And what's the first thing he wants to say about those walls after he has worshipped God?

It is I have sinned. I have sinned. And so what I want to try and make the point is it is not a general confession. It's very specific and it's a very focused prayer for renewal.

He begins his prayer for renewal by saying I have sinned. And I think that's really important to grasp. Nehemiah does not blame the Babylonian armies who destroyed the city.

He doesn't say it's their fault. He doesn't blame the Samaritans and other local enemies although they're doing their best to hinder the work. We're going to see that. He doesn't blame the economic situation.

[13 : 57] He doesn't blame the government. He doesn't blame the poor harvests. He doesn't blame the difficulties of the work. When he looks at the ruined walls and the state of the church the first

thought that comes into his mind is this is our fault.

God has punished us for our disobedience. And we are responsible for the walls being in a ruined condition. I find that very challenging. And because all of us are quite happy to confess our sin in general I expect.

I'm sure you are but we're not nearly so happy to confess it in particular. And so if I went up to you after church this evening and I said to you wouldn't you agree that you're a sinner?

You might think that's a bit odd but you would say yeah of course I am. You wouldn't be offended by that. But suppose I went up to you afterwards and I say listen I want to talk to you about something that you did last week that I think is particularly sinful.

Well then suddenly what happens is we get don't we prickly and annoyed and saying well who do you think you are? And we excuse ourself.

[15:13] We'd be quite happy to admit wouldn't we generally that we're sinners until someone points out one of our sins and then we're not happy at all well I'm not. Maybe some of you are gracious and humble enough to be happy when somebody points out your sin I struggle with that.

But we're happy to confess in general but we're not happy to confess sin particularly. And yet I want to say to you that is the only confession that counts really.

that's where we have to ask I think hard questions of ourselves and as we look at the state of the church we certainly blame others and we could blame the hardness of people's hearts.

And we could blame a culture that that has fundamentally turned its back on God and the gospel and we could blame even God that we live in a day of small things. And we could say well people don't like a church that holds firmly to the biblical truth.

And that might be true. But much of the blame lies at our own door. Let me say in passing that same principle holds true doesn't it in our own lives.

[16:26] If we're not doing well spiritually it is really easy to blame other factors. You might say I'm so busy at my work or at my home that I haven't got time to read the Bible.

I've got no time to spend in prayer. You don't know what my husband is like. I'm busy. I'm so busy I'm overwhelmed.

We can blame all sorts of factors for our spiritual weakness but we have to come back to this that it is our problem. And if we say we have no sin John says we're kidding ourselves.

Nehemiah could have laid the blame elsewhere for the state of the people of Israel and he could have done so legitimately. It wasn't his fault he didn't knock the walls down but he says I confess the sins we Israelites including myself and my father's house have committed.

We've acted wickedly we've not obeyed. And so do you see the searing honesty of this man? His conscience is troubled and he's ashamed of himself and his disobedience and he includes himself.

[17:44] We've not obeyed confession of sin. The third thing in Nehemiah's prayer is he claims the promise. He claims the promises. I think we have to accept that lots of God's promises are not very joyful.

That some of God's promises are scary and upsetting. And you see such a promise there in verse 8. Remember he says we remember what you promised your servant Israel.

And so God promised his people didn't he that if they were disobedient God would not let them get away with it. God would not turn a blind eye. God would deal with them. He'd punish them. And he says to his people Israel he says to the church he says if you're unfaithful I will scatter you.

All the way through scripture isn't it? God gathers sin scatters judgment scatters and God keeps that promise. He keeps all his promises and that is why Nehemiah has to make confession.

We are scattered and weak. Why are we scattered and weak? Because we've been unfaithful. And because God has kept his promise his promise to punish us but here's something I think unique in this passage and you maybe need to think and reflect on this God's faithfulness in punishing fills Nehemiah with hope.

[19:16] Can you see that? God's faithfulness in punishing it fills Nehemiah with hope. So let me speak to the children alright? When mum and dad keep their promise to punish you they are giving you deep inner security alright?

Do you get that? Marius is not looking convinced. Alright? I'm not expecting you to like this but it's true alright? And so when dad and mum punish you they are giving you deep inner security.

Okay let me explain that. Let me speak to parents when you punish your children when you follow through with punishing your children you're providing for your children psychological and emotional

security and their well-being.

Because when you follow through with punishing your children having warned them you are saying to them dad and mum mean what they say. Mum means what she says.

And you give them a world with sound foundations. you give them an environment on which they can rely on. It's a world where what their parents say their parents mean.

[20 : 31] And so children you can be thankful when your parents follow through on punishment. And so the mother that says if you do that again I'll kill you what does the child do?

The child just ignores the mother treats her with contempt. because the child knows you don't mean a thing. It doesn't mean a thing. And so what Nehemiah does is Nehemiah finds hope in God's remorseless severe punishment.

Why does he do so? Because the very God who said if you're disobedient I will punish you is the same God who said if you repent I will forgive you. Do you see the point?

The certainty of punishment argues for the certainty of forgiveness. Does God mean what he says? Does God follow through on his warnings? Does God follow through on his promises?

He means what he says. So we sin and he punishes us but that also means if we repent he forgives us. The certainty of the punishment the reality of the judgment affirms strengthens the certainty of the blessing.

[21 : 49] And the same God who promises to deal with the disobedient has also promised to forgive the repentant and to bless the repentant. So verse 9 is a summary of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

It says there doesn't it verse 9 But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven from there I will gather them and bring them to the place where I have chosen and I will make my name dwell there.

And so Nehemiah finds enormous hope in God's punishment that the same God will certainly forgive and he will restore. He says in verse 10 They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

It's Exodus 20 isn't it? And I think that's crucially important for us. And it's really important for us for this because accepting responsibility!

is the most hopeful thing that we can do. acceptance of responsibility is the most hopeful thing we can do as a church. We live don't we in a world and in a culture that minimizes responsibility.

[23 : 12] We're living in a culture which says to the criminal it's not your fault. It's in your genes. It's your family's fault. It's your upbringing.

It's poverty. It's not your fault. The way you are is not your fault. You're just a product of your upbringing. And there's something soft and something cowardly in us that wants to be told that. We want to be told when we mess up it's not your fault. That's really comforting but ultimately destroying and infinitely very depressing.

Because let me try and tease this out more. If it's not your fault then you can't do nothing about it either. And if it's not your fault if you didn't contribute to the mistake then you can't correct the mistake.

And if the mistake was caused by forces outside you then the solution is by forces outside you. It's far more loving and far more beneficial to say to people no this is your fault.

[24 : 21] And by God's grace and by God's help you can change. and you can correct it you can do something about it. And so if the weakness of the church has got absolutely nothing to do with us then the recovery of the church has got nothing to do with us.

And if we're not responsible for the decline then we can't be responsible for its discovery. It's just forces outside of us. It's just hard hearts. It's small days. It's just not liking them liking the clear teaching of the Bible.

We're helpless and we just have to pray to God to do something and hope that he will. But if our church will face up to it if we're willing to face up to that actually we've not been prayerful enough and we've not spoken out when we should and we've kept our heads down we've not had enough love for people and maybe we've been too stuck in the mud and our zeal for the Lord Jesus Christ has just dimmed a little and our spiritual life has been weak if we face up to that then we can do something about it and we can see reformation and we can see God begin to work and to bless us and we can claim his promises I've not got time to go through the promises let's think of one let's think of Matthew 16 verse 18 where Jesus says I will build my church and the gates of hell will not

prevail against it so I think we can go to God and we can say Lord numerically you've not been building our church so to speak and that's partly our fault and we don't deny that there are other factors and there is the sovereign purpose of

God of course but we've got to admit that it's partly our fault and if we have the honesty to confess that and to face up to it that we've not been the people that we should be but by God's grace and by God's help we can change we will change and we will reform then we can claim God's promises and Nehemi says listen it's my fault that the walls are ruined but from this point on by God's grace it's not going to be my fault anymore he claims God promises and nothing delights God more than when we go to him in prayer with his promises Alexander McLaren says we are always sure of an answer if we ask God not to contradict us so concentration on God confession of sin claiming the promises and lastly and quickly commitment to action commitment to action and the whole prayer seems to end doesn't it in a rather pathetic anti-climax and so

Nehemiah has been praying on a cosmic scale an international scale he's been praying for the restoration and the renewal of a nation he's been praying for hundreds of thousands of people to be gathered from the far ends from the ends of the earth from Babylonian empire he's been praying about God's anger against his people that it would be turned away and how does he end he ends with Lord please give me a good day at work he puts it a little bit more elegantly than that but he says in verse 11 let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and the prayer of your servants who delight to fear in him and give success to your servant today give us a good day in school amen and grant him mercy in the sight of this man and you come to Nehemiah and you just say he could have done better with ending that prayer couldn't you have ended it on a high note aren't you going to pray for the situation in Jerusalem or the destruction of the

[28 : 21] Samaritans or for a new harvest or a mighty work of God give your servant success today and grant him mercy in the sight of this king amen is that all he's going to ask for is that how you want to end a prayer from the Bible but it's not an anticlimax because what Nehemiah does is he brings it to a kind of personal commitment so he prays he agonizes for four months and a conviction begins to form in his heart and what was that conviction it's this that Nehemiah was to be part of the answer to his own prayer and so I suspect as Nehemiah was praying he began to find himself involved in his prayer and his life and his life was to be changed and as he prays he recognizes that there is something that God wants him to do and as he prayed over the weeks and the months the conviction born in his mind I have to speak to the king here I am in this privileged position and I see the king every day

I'm the cupbearer to the king and God wants me to speak to him and that will mean upheaval and danger and hardship and for Nehemiah it will mean risking his life abandon his well paid career after go to the far end of the Babylonian empire it would mean stress and aggravation and opposition and poverty and it was something that would make Nehemiah tremble and seek to be excused but that conviction would not go away I've got to speak to the king I've got to speak to the king Nehemiah would say it terrifies me it scares the wits out of me I don't want to do it but I've been praying for God to bless his people my people and God has shown me that I actually have to do something and he ends this prayer not in an anti-climax but really on a personal climax of faith and self-surrender and he says Lord I'm willing to give myself to be part of the answer to my own prayer and we ought to pray for our church but our praying would be incomplete unless as you pray and I pray we ask and keep on asking

Lord what do you want me to do what do you want me to do Nehemiah could have prayed finished his prayer with a flourish with wonderful generalities but he ends his prayer really simply saying Lord help me to take the difficult step that I must take and so all his praying is a prelude to action and we cannot sincerely pray unless we are prepared to put ourselves into it and we can't pray can we Lord build your church unless we're willing to give ourselves to that and so please don't sit here tonight and pray at the Lord's table Lord make me a better Christian and give me joy in you without being willing to give yourself to the Lord and to give yourself to the Lord and his word and prayer and struggle against sin and so

Nehemiah finishes his prayer doesn't he by saying Lord I'm scared but I'll do what you want me to do please help me to do it and I love the specificness with which this prayer closes give your servant success today in the presence of this man Amen let's pray to to to to to to to to