

Planning permission

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[0 : 00] Nehemiah chapter 1, you can find it on page 475. Page 475, Nehemiah chapter 1.

The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hekeliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa, the capital, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.

The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days.

And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant, that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

[1 : 29] Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.

But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your dispersed are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.

They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name.

And give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now I was cupbearer to the king. Well, the story is told of five young college students in the late 19th century.

[2 : 42] They were spending a Sunday in London. So they decided to go and hear the famous Baptist minister, C.H. Spurgeon, preach at the Metropolitan Tabernacle at Elephant and Castle. While waiting for the church doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who said, Gentlemen, let me show you around.

Would you like to see the heating plant of this church? Well, they weren't particularly interested. It was a hotter July day, but they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway.

The door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, This is our heating plant. Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, praying for the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above.

Softly closing the door, the gentleman then introduced himself. It was none other than Charles Spurgeon himself. Well, if you know anything about Spurgeon, you'll know the last great spiritual revival in London occurred under his ministry.

Thousands would come to hear him preach each week. He witnessed countless conversions, and yet he also understood that any success he experienced, the fruit his ministry produced, was all underpinned by prayer.

[4 : 04] Prayer was the heating plant of his ministry. His ministry was a work of God in answer to his people's prayers. Now, this week we start a little sermon series in the Old Testament book of

Nehemiah, one of the last history books in the Old Testament.

And as we look at Nehemiah over the next few weeks, and then again after Christmas, we'll see that he was another man who oversaw a remarkable revival among God's people.

Nehemiah was a courageous and godly man, greatly used to restore the fortunes of Israel. And yet it's striking that as we just read, the book of Nehemiah begins with a prayer.

Most of chapter one is in fact a prayer. Before God acts to fulfill his purposes, his people pray. Now, for those unfamiliar with his story, Nehemiah was a senior official in the Persian Empire.

Verse one tells us that he lived in Susa, the Persian capital. You may remember that the people of Judah, what was left of Israel, had been sent into exile in Babylon by God at the start of the 6th century BC.

[5 : 18] It was a desperate time for God's people cut off from the temple in Jerusalem, which was a symbolic place where God met with his people, and which had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

But eventually, the Babylonians had themselves been overthrown by the Persians. And the Persian Empire, Cyrus, had wonderfully allowed them to return to Judah and to rebuild their temple.

It was a great moment. And yet Jerusalem was still only a pale shadow of its former self. The older generation who remembered the first temple wept because the new version had nothing like the same splendor.

While the city walls were still in ruins, and many Jews had, like Nehemiah, remained in Persia, yet to return to the promised land. And the story of Nehemiah is the story of at least a partial rebuilding of Jerusalem and revival among God's people.

The first half of the book, what we'll be looking at over the next few weeks, concerns the restoration of the city. And the second half, the more important, renewal of the people. Because, of course, bricks and mortar can't change human hearts.

[6 : 31] And I think we'll see that it's a book that has tremendous contemporary parallels and application, living as we do in an age when the Christian church in the West is in decline and its people too often compromised in desperate need of renewal and revival.

So we'll see, I hope, that Nehemiah has great lessons to teach us about how God builds his church today, about the opposition and obstacles we're likely to meet along the way, and the parts that we're to play in God's work of growing his people.

And yet it's a book that can easily be misunderstood or misused because of its focus on rebuilding Jerusalem. Nehemiah is sometimes used either as a resource to guide church building projects or as a kind of leadership manual.

People draw all kinds of lessons from Nehemiah's conduct and then hold them up as an example for us. But while, no doubt, there's much we can learn from Nehemiah's wisdom, the book isn't primarily about him being an example for us.

Nor is it really about building with bricks and mortar. It has a far wider application than that. You see, it's vital when we read books like Nehemiah that we realise the equivalent of Israel today is neither the modern nation of Israel nor our own country, the United Kingdom, but the Christian Church.

[7 : 59] Galatians 6 in the New Testament describes the Church as the Israel of God. And Romans 9-11 teaches that the true Israel consists of all those, Jew and Gentile, who trust in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

So the primary application of Nehemiah isn't to be towards Britain as a nation in decline, nor towards Israel as a nation state, but towards the Church, which like ancient Israel is in desperate need of reviving.

The book of Revelation describes God's people, Christians, as his city, the new Jerusalem. So the rebuilding of the city in the book of Nehemiah is a picture for us of the rebuilding of God's people, his church.

That's the building project God is concerned with today. We're even described as God's building in the New Testament. For us, Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem to be rebuilt is to be echoed in a concern for God's church, his people, to grow and prosper.

We'll return to those themes time and again in the book. But this morning, I want us to begin by noticing together four things from chapter one that paved the way for the rebuilding that was to follow. Four lessons we can learn from Nehemiah and his magnificent prayer.

[9 : 20] Here's the first. Nehemiah's concern for God's people, his concern for God's people. Let's read from verse one. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chisleu in the 20th year as I was in Susa the Citadel. The capital, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.

The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days.

And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Nehemiah, like Daniel in the generation before him, had risen to great prominence in a foreign land.

[10 : 23] The final sentence of the chapter tells us he was cupbearer to the king, an eminent position. But despite his high office in the course of the leading superpower of the day, Nehemiah's primary loyalty lay in another country and to another people.

And so when he hears a report from his brother that all was not well back home, he's deeply disturbed. The message he receives from his brother probably concerns a decision of the Persian authorities to bring to an end the Jews' rebuilding of their city walls.

Just have a look at verse 3. The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire.

So Jerusalem and its people were in distress, they were in trouble notice, despised, we're told they were experiencing shame, and in danger, they were vulnerable with their walls and gates destroyed.

I don't know about you, but when I hear of Christians being persecuted overseas or the church being slandered in the press, I feel sad, sometimes even angry.

[11 : 39] But too often I quickly forget about it and move on to becoming consumed again by the temporal concerns of my little world. But not so with Nehemiah.

His example reminds us we're not to be like that. Look at verse 4. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days.

Nehemiah was deeply troubled by the predicament of God's people and it deeply affected him. He wept and mourned for days. He had a concern for God's people.

I don't know what moves us to tears or to anger or to concern. So often it's something trivial. Think of the outrage over the BBC losing the Great British Bake Off or the national sense of loss when England bow out of a major football tournament.

On other occasions it's something a little more serious. Brexit still seems to be eliciting strong emotions from both sides. But if we understand that our true concern is to be with God's people and his kingdom with the coming future world rather than this transient world then how much more ought our emotions to be directed towards very different things from those around us and towards the concern of God's people.

[13 : 10] And so I guess it begs the question whether we share Nehemiah's deep concern for God's people. Nehemiah was doing rather well for himself and he could easily have just shrugged his shoulders and forgotten about his fellow Jews in a foreign land.

And the danger is that our worldly comfort in many cases or our preoccupation with our careers and families prevent us from a right genuine concern for God's people.

But Nehemiah understood that God's plans for his world revolve around his people and that their welfare is of supreme importance. I wonder whether we're sufficiently bothered about a member of our growth group who we haven't seen for weeks and who stopped coming to church to get in touch with them and find out how they're doing just as Nehemiah requested this report from Hannah and I. does the spiritual welfare of our children concern us more than their success at school or their popularity? Do we keep in touch with old Christian friends who may be drifting or think to drop a note of encouragement to the church leader we read about in the press who's having a hard time because he's standing up for biblical truth?

Like Nehemiah we're to have a deep concern for God's people. But notice that Nehemiah's concern didn't lead to despair or defeatism or to lashing out in frustration.

[14 : 36] No, before anything else it drove him to his knees. And that leads us on to the second lesson we can learn from this opening chapter. Nehemiah's constancy in prayer.

His constancy in prayer. Let's see how verse 4 continues. As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah continued in prayer. We'll just look on to verse 6. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants.

Nehemiah was constant in prayer. Like Spurgeon, he understood that prayer was the boiler room behind any effective spiritual revival or work.

a number of us were thinking about the reformation at the men on track meeting on Thursday evening and one of the great figures of the protestant reformation was John Knox, the leader of the reformation in Scotland.

[15:48] Knox led a busy and dramatic life which included preaching before monarchs, standing trial for his life and fleeing to the continent on more than one occasion. But what drove him to persevere was the deep concern he had for the people of his country.

On a number of occasions, political developments meant the cause of the gospel in Scotland looked very fragile and as he looked on as a fugitive in Geneva, Knox must have felt very helpless just as Nehemiah must have done far away in Persia.

But like Nehemiah, he prayed. On one occasion when things looked particularly bleak, Knox was spotted leaving his study and walking into his garden.

A friend followed and amidst the darkness heard Knox in prayer. After a few moments of silence, his voice became clear and his earnest petition to heaven. Oh Lord, give me Scotland or I die, he famously cried.

Then another pause before once again his appeal broke forth. Oh Lord, give me Scotland or I die. Again there was quiet before, with an even more intense poignancy, Knox was heard to cry out again, Oh Lord, give me Scotland or I die.

[17:07] It was a prayer which was often heard on his lips. Like Nehemiah, he was constant in prayer, asking God to rescue his people.

His concern for them led to his prayers for them. In fact, Scotland's Catholic queen, Mary Queen of Scots, who made Knox her arch enemy, once said, I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe.

Like Nehemiah, John Knox showed a constancy in prayer. Now I guess there's a sense in which the church could be described as being in great trouble and shame in this country at the moment.

We'll think more about that next week when we look at chapter two. And so the question is whether we will pray like Nehemiah did, like John Knox did for Scotland.

Will we pray continually out of concern for God's people? Nehemiah 1 may seem less dramatic than later parts of the book, but the success of later chapters in Nehemiah wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for the prayers of chapter one.

[18:21] And yet we so easily think we can skip over chapter one as it were, that our own gifts are sufficient to grow the church. Don Carson in his introduction to his book, A Call to Spiritual Reformation, writes this of the contemporary evangelical church.

He writes, we have learned to organize, build institutions, publish books, insert ourselves into the media, develop evangelistic strategies and administer discipleship programs, but we have forgotten how to pray.

What is both surprising and depressing is the sheer prayerlessness that characterizes so much of the western church. It is surprising because it is out of step with the Bible. It is depressing because it frequently coexists with abounding Christian activity that somehow seems hollow, frivolous and superficial.

Prayer must come before all else. That's why the church prayer meeting is in a sense the most important meeting of the month in the church calendar or why on the Christian summer camps that I'm involved with we always say that the leaders prayer meeting is the most important meeting of the day.

Now obviously we can't pray for everything, but just as Nehemiah heard news about Jerusalem and then prayed, so we can pray for our mission partners as we regularly hear news about them on a Sunday as we did earlier about Grace Church Novice Ant.

[19:51] We can pray for those in our growth groups during the week. Or if you don't already do so, why not pencil the monthly prayer gathering at Grace Church on the first Tuesday of each

month into your diary as a priority.

Nehemiah was marked by a deep concern for God's people and this led to a constancy in prayer. But thirdly, notice also Nehemiah's confession of sin.

His confession of sin. Have a look down with me at verse 6 again. Nehemiah prays, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the words that you commanded your servant Moses saying if you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples.

Nehemiah begins his prayer with confession. You see the basis of Nehemiah's prayer for God to act wasn't his own worthiness or that of those he was praying for.

[21 : 16] I think we sometimes have this misguided notion that we deserve to receive God's blessing or that we can somehow earn a favourable hearing for our prayers. That's why we get bitter if they're not answered as we think they should be.

But Nehemiah understood that the distress God's people were experiencing was due to their sin. God had in fact promised to send them into exile if they rebelled.

And that's exactly what had happened. More than that Nehemiah acknowledges his own guilt. He himself was a sinner. There's no doubt God's people were being treated unjustly in Nehemiah's day.

And yet Nehemiah begins by acknowledging his and their sin rather than the wickedness of their enemies. They're all guilty before God.

undeserving of his kindness. Now we need to be careful here when it comes to application. We're not Old Testament Israel and we can't say that when things go wrong in our lives or when the church in Britain is declining that it's necessarily a sign of God's judgment in the way that we know the exile was.

[22 : 31] But nonetheless confession is an important part of prayer. prayer. Jesus teaches us to ask for forgiveness in the Lord's prayer and most church services contain a corporate prayer of confession such as we had this morning.

And we can be sure that an unrepentant church will incur God's displeasure. Striking how in his letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 Jesus regularly urges churches to repent and warns them that he will take his presence away from them if they don't.

So I guess this is a reminder to us that we must be humble before God and quick to confess our sins. We're to keep short accounts before God and not think that we in any way deserve his blessing.

If you study times of revival in church history it's noticeable how both a prayerfulness and a commitment to repentance and holiness underscore them. So Nehemiah had a concern for God's people.

He was constant in prayer and he confessed his sin. But finally he also had confidence in God's word. Confidence in God's word.

[23 : 48] You see Nehemiah's prayer was directed by the Bible. I wonder if you noticed that. He prayed in accordance with what God had promised in his word. Have a look down with me at verse 8.

Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses saying if you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples.

But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them though you're dispersed or under the farther skies I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I've chosen to make my name dwell there.

They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name and give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

Nehemiah knew God had promised in his word to gather his people together and rescue them to restore their prosperity if they turn back to him. And so he was able to pray on that basis with

confidence knowing as he prays in verse 5 that God is the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him.

[25 : 11] That he can be trusted to keep his promises. And his prayer is a great model for us isn't it? Too often our prayers can I guess be dominated by wishful thinking or our own desires.

But prayer isn't about me trying to twist God's arm into aligning his will with what I want. Rather it's about me praying according to God's will and so aligning my desires in accordance with his purposes as revealed in the Bible.

It's no surprise that Nehemiah appeals here to what God had promised in his word. He seems to have had the promises and warnings of Deuteronomy in mind. And of course there are all kinds of promises the Bible makes that can inform and direct our prayers when it comes to God's people. For example Jesus promises that he will build his church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. He promises that not one of his people will be lost. He promises to be with us always as we seek to share the gospel.

He says that he will carry to completion the work he has started in his people and that his heavenly kingdom will include people from every nation. These are wonderful promises and of course there are countless more like them.

[26 : 35] And Nehemiah's prayer reminds us that we're to pray in light of such promises for God's word and to pray for them to be fulfilled. We're to join in with God's work by praying in line with his promises.

The American Christian leader John Piper has put it like this when describing our prayers. He says we have taken a wartime walkie talkie and tried to turn it into a civilian intercom to call the servants for another cushion.

We see repeatedly in scripture that prayer is a walkie talkie for warfare not a domestic intercom for increasing our conveniences. So let's be those who pray for God to grow his kingdom to protect his people and to build his church.

Our prayers ought not to be dominated by our comfort or by worldly ambitions but by God's word and his priorities. There's another reformer John Calvin said the sole end and legitimate use of prayer is that we may reap the fruit of God's promises.

I can think of a number of older Christians whose prayers are always soaked in scripture. Praying in response to what God has promised. And that's the way it should be.

[27 : 59] And of course if we do pray that in that way we can be confident that God will answer those prayers as he does for Nehemiah. Because what God has promised he always does.

So Nehemiah had confidence in God's word. He prayed and as we'll see then acted because he knew God had promised to restore his people.

And God's word should give us confidence too. Confidence to pray and to act because we know Jesus will prevail ultimately and the gospel will advance.

Again the subsequent chapters of Nehemiah wouldn't have been written if it wasn't for the confidence Nehemiah first had that God's word was reliable and his promises would be fulfilled. That confidence gave Nehemiah not only the motivation to pray but also the courage to go and speak to the king as he hints at the end of his prayer and as we'll see next week.

And if we're to be effective in growing God's church in our day we too need to have the confidence that comes from God's promises. He is a God who rescues his people and whose purposes cannot be thwarted.

[29 : 14] And of course we have even greater reasons than Nehemiah to be confident because we know God did answer Nehemiah's prayer and that by sending Jesus to die in our place on the cross he has dealt with the penalty of our sin and has gathered his people back to him just as he promised.

So Nehemiah chapter 1 prepares the way for the rest of the book. Nehemiah hears that all is not well with God's people and it drives him to his knees in prayer.

It's a chapter that warns us that it's a grave mistake to think that we can bear fruit as Christians without constantly depending on God's help. But as we'll see next week prayer isn't the end of the matter because it would be equally mistaken to think we can just pray and then leave everything up to God.

In fact very often as Nehemiah discovered we're to become the answers to our own prayers. But more on that next week. Let me lead us in prayer now.

Father we remember how Nehemiah begins this majestic prayer by confessing his sins and we want to confess our sins again before you now and particularly to acknowledge that so often we don't have the concern for the plight of your people that we ought to.

[30 : 38] They were unmoved by the welfare of our fellow Christians that we fail to be concerned for one another in the way that we ought to be. And we confess also that we are too often guilty of prayerlessness or of only praying for those things that we want rather than what you want.

We ask this morning that you would forgive us and change us and we pray that we would be those who have a deep concern for your people. We would be those who remember that your plans for the world revolve around your people.

And that we would therefore be prayerful and be prayerful in line with the promises of your word.

And we thank you that we can be sure that when we pray according to your word you will answer our prayers and that you will rescue and restore your people.

And we thank you for it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. ■■■■ Fusion ■■ gak ■js ■