

Building Back: Reconnect

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[0 : 0 0] Let's move and look on into the new year. We're starting the new year with a new series, and we're going to be working our way through the book of Nehemiah, trusting and praying that we will learn through our study lessons that apply to us as Christians, and perhaps more importantly, to us as a church.

Without wishing to steal the thunder of those who come after me to preach in this series, the overall theme of Nehemiah is the call to the Jews to spiritual repentance and practical rebuilding of the wall around the city of Jerusalem, which acts as a physical and pictorial representation of rebuilding the city of God.

And I'm sure that further down the line, we will learn more of how the practical and the spiritual work together, as well as the importance of good leadership, good teamwork, and putting to good use the skills and the abilities that reside in all of us.

But that's further down the line. Today, we're looking at chapter one only, with the title of Reconnect, which I would suggest in this context has three aspects, or three directions of reconnection.

Nehemiah reconnecting with the people of Jerusalem, Nehemiah reconnecting with the city of Jerusalem, and the Jews reconnecting with God.

[1 : 3 3] And maybe for us, that might mean something like reconnecting as individuals in the church, reconnecting with the church in membership or in commitment, and us as a church reconnecting with God.

As I said earlier, today, we are looking at chapter one, and I must stop myself from looking too far ahead for what other lessons might be learned, and what other challenges might be laid before us as individuals and as a church.

Now, one of the really good things about the Bible, amongst many good things, is the prayers that it records. There are over 650 recorded prayers, including 25 prayers by Jesus himself.

And I'm not going to go through each of those in turn. You'll be pleased to hear. We're not actually told what the first prayer is. But in Genesis 4, 26, we read that after Eve gave birth to Seth, at that time, people began to call on the name of the Lord.

But we're not told what they called or why they called. Before that, all the conversations between man and God that are recorded have been initiated by God himself.

[2 : 5 4] But now we can see, if you like, a development of a relationship where man himself begins to feel more comfortable calling out to God. The first time we read a prayer that has reference to a particular content of the prayer, rather than just a general calling out, is when Abraham pleads with God for the righteous people in the city of Sodom, which is essentially a prayer of intercession.

And I just want to mention a couple of things about that. Firstly, Abraham bargained God down from 50 righteous down to 10 righteous people in the whole city.

And we know that there weren't even 10 righteous people in the city because Sodom was destroyed. And then the other side of that coin, if you like, is to note that potentially even a small number of righteous people can act as a protection and as a buffer between God and the punishment of the evil and allows time for repentance and salvation to be brought about for those who do not yet know or love God or who have deliberately turned against him.

And maybe that is a picture of how the church should be praying for us as a country as well as within the world. That God would protect the righteous people and in protecting the righteous, protect the unrighteous, that we might preach to them the message of salvation.

Abraham's prayer was very much a bargaining with God. What if? But what if? But what if? And was a reasonably long conversation in that respect.

[4 : 46] And I just want to go to the other end of the biblical story briefly. The final prayer that we read in Revelation 22, where Jesus gives the invitation, as he's in the vision to John, to come to him.

And he promises that he is coming soon. And John prays, come Lord Jesus. Which basically is God saying, sorry, John saying, please do what you said you will, Jesus.

Please do what you've promised to do. And he's not a long and involved and convoluted and complex prayer. He's very simple. I just wanted to highlight these two particular prayers before looking more closely at Nehemiah's prayer, because it shows that there isn't just one way to pray.

For Abraham, as I've said, it was a conversation. For John, it was just one sentence. We also have what is known, and what we've just said together, as the Lord's Prayer.

And we are often encouraged to use that as a prayer for our, as a pattern for our own prayers. But we need to be careful, because sometimes something that starts as a pattern becomes a fixed way of working or thinking, and stops us from being able to explore different ways of talking to and relating to God.

[6 : 14] What happens is, we find that we go through the same pattern, and it becomes just a repetition. And then after a repetition, it just becomes rote. And then after it becomes rote, it's just words we're speaking out without even really thinking about what they mean.

And then it's not a communication at all. It's just a nothingness. It's just words in the air. And one of my favourite verses in the Bible is to do with prayer.

It says, when you pray, don't use vain repetitions like the pagans, for they think that in their many words they will be heard. And also Jesus tells us not to pray in such a way to draw attention to ourselves.

He warns us, if you like, against performative prayer. Prayer is between us and God. It may be for us, it may be for other people, but it is not a show.

Having said all that, I'm now going to look at Nehemiah's prayer and think of it as a pattern of prayer that we might use or find helpful in our prayers and in the future.

[7 : 24] Its outcome doesn't come until chapter two. So I'm going to try and not tip into chapter two but stick with chapter one. Before we get to the actual structure, content and purpose, I thought we should ask the question, what prompted Nehemiah to this point of prayer?

Why did he decide there was a need to pray? Well, the beginning of the chapter tells us that Nehemiah questioned his brother and the men with him about the Jewish remnant and Jerusalem itself.

And although it isn't explicitly saying so, I would argue that from the context that Nehemiah is not simply going, well, how's it going? You know, everyone all right?

Yeah, lovely. All right, let's move on. It seems to me that he really is questioning what went on and what's happening. Are things how they used to be?

Have the people who returned to Jerusalem, has something happened? Or did they just go back and carry on? Are they prospering? Are things back how God wants them to be?

[8 : 35] In other words, he recognised that the mere presence of the Jews back in Jerusalem was not enough in itself. But there needed to be, if you like, a rebirth of the community and the religious practices and the re-establishment of the Jewish identity.

If you like, it's not enough just to have a Christian presence. There needs to be obvious Christian practice and obvious Christian identity.

What Nehemiah heard in response, that the people were in disgrace and the city in ruins, clearly and not surprisingly, moved him greatly.

He admits to crying. Obviously, he was sad, but also probably as much in despair. He's moved to pray and to fast.

He clearly sees the need for a response beyond what just humans can achieve because he implores for God to help.

[9 : 43] We are not told the content of his initial earlier prayers, but clearly there was something that was building up within him that drove him to speak more specifically and more boldly to God in a way that we now have recorded for us to learn from.

He did not simply wring his hands and say, there's nothing I can do. I'm too far away. He didn't say, there's nothing I can do. I've got no authority in Jerusalem.

I don't know anyone there. Better leave it to someone else. He didn't say that. He didn't think that. He recognized that even with none of those things in place, he could still do something.

He could start with prayer. And I think the first thing to say about the prayer that we have recorded here is it's not a reactive prayer. It doesn't come straight off the top of his head.

And that's clear because he says, I was praying and fasting leading up to this point. Now he steps it up a level, both to show his own seriousness, but also to lay a challenge down to God.

[10 : 56] But he doesn't start with a challenge or even a request. He starts with worship and a declaration of a truth about God.

And it may seem strange to remind God of truth about himself because I'm sure he knows them already. But what it does is it demonstrates to God that Nehemiah understands who God is and how he works and might work now.

But we must be careful in this prayer not to hear only half the truth. The half truth, God keeps his covenant of love.

Alleluia. God keeps his covenant of love. Yes and amen. But this is a covenant kept with those who love him and keep his commandments.

It's a covenant kept with people who are responding to him. And I hope it's not stretching the parallel too much to say that in the New Testament the equivalent might be where James tells us that we prove our faith through the works that we do.

[12 : 15] Simply obeying the commandments is not enough. If we seek to earn God's love or try to earn salvation through the keeping of the law, then we have put the proverbial cart before the proverbial horse.

It's we obey because we love. We commit ourselves to good works because we love God. The other side of the coin, of course, is if we do not love, if we do not obey, if we have no faith, if we do know good deeds, and we're told that God has prepared good deeds for us to do, then our lovelessness and our inaction and our apathy actually tell God we don't really care.

about you and your kingdom. But here, Nehemiah is appealing to the constancy of God's love whilst acknowledging that it is conditional.

He then asks God to pay attention to his prayer, pointing out that it is not a prayer for his, for Nehemiah's own sake, but for the sake of the people of God, that God has chosen to give his love to, his word to, and promise to protect.

And he's almost saying, well, if you've promised to do that, you've got to prove that you can do it. And what he does first is clear the air with a confession of sins and an apology for not obeying the commands, decrees, and laws of Moses as they, as the Jews, as God's chosen people, should have been doing.

[13 : 53] Now, I've got a bit of an aside here, and I might be setting myself up for a lesson in humility after the service. But if anyone asks for marriage advice, they're very often told as a fundamental principle, do not go to sleep angry with one another.

Do not let the sun go down on your anger. This is sound advice, and I would like to think that it has helped Liz and me through our years together.

You may wish to ask her about that afterwards. But of course, underpinning the practice of not being angry with someone, anyone, not just your spouse, I would say is the apology.

Because the apology helps restore relationship. The last time a colleague asked at work, a group of us, when they were getting married, about some advice, I mentioned that particular advice.

Don't go to bed, go and go to sleep, angry with each other. But then I said, there needs to be an apology. That's the way to help reduce the anger.

[15 : 07] And this is the hard part. You may have to make an apology, even if you think you are the one that is right. because the other person also thinks they are right.

Who's going to give way? The immovable object or the unstoppable force? They can't both be in the same place. And you holding on to your belief that you are right is clearly causing resentment and anger in someone else who believes they are right.

and is therefore a barrier to proper communication. Now, either party can apologise first. But dare I suggest that in a marriage, I nearly put in marriage and other relations, and romantic relationships, but of course it's marriage and other romantic relationships, because marriage is a romantic relationship as well, the man should make the first apology.

Now, back to Nehemiah. Nehemiah confesses the sin of the people. He does not excuse it. I had no excuse for forgetting the notices.

Nehemiah does not excuse the sin of the people. He doesn't say it was so difficult. He doesn't say the enemy was so strong. He doesn't say the temptation to marry people from other religions was just unavoidable.

[16 : 37] He confesses the sin. He does not excuse it. He acknowledges the true state of affairs and does not try to pretend it is something different.

He goes on to remind God, though, after that, of possibly what might be an even better truth than God keeps his covenant of love with those who love him. And that is what seems to be possibly an even more important truth is that God will gather back to him even the Jews who are unfaithful and scattered if they return to him.

If they, as we heard earlier, begin to seek him with all their hearts and all their minds and all their souls. Just as in the New Testament, the prodigal son who went off and abandoned his family, abandoned his father, he returned to his father and his father welcomed him with open arms.

And then at the end of his prayer, he prays something very practical. Please let me find favour in the presence of the king. So I've got a short PowerPoint presentation just to highlight some of the things I've mentioned so far.

So how did Nehemiah pray? He starts with worship and declaration of truth.

[18 : 09] He asks to be heard. He is polite, not presumptuous. He acknowledges failings, both what's personal and corporate. He asks God to act in a way which is consistent with God's own promises.

He asks God to give him an answer through the blessing of a Gentile ruler. His prayer was for God to bless his own, that's Nehemiah's actions, not for God to step in and do something so that Nehemiah didn't have to.

We'll close the presentation there for a minute. then, after all this, to complete the chapter, Nehemiah tells us that he was a cupbearer to the king.

In other words, he was not a priest, he wasn't a rabbi, he wasn't a prophet, he was in effect a member of a foreign civil service, albeit a high-ranking official in a trusted position.

There is no indication that he was like Daniel, who was also high-ranking in the service of a foreign king, but Daniel, the story of Daniel is all about how Daniel was open about his faith and was persistent in his prayers and not afraid or ashamed of showing that he was committed to God.

[19 : 38] But there are hints within this that Nehemiah himself feels that he may well have drifted away from God himself in this foreign land. We can see from this that although we have heard recently in the Christmas period that God can and does often choose the low-born or the youngest or the worldly insignificant, he can also call upon those of people who are of high standing and a high position to work out his plans.

So if you are important, if you are the eldest, if you are a member of an important family, don't think that God will pass you by looking for the least because he might well want to use you too.

We hear that you do not have to be part of the ordained ministry to be here, sorry, to hear and respond to God's challenge to step up into leadership.

I have the next slide, please. What might some of the challenges for us as individuals be? Do I need to address a particular area of my Christian practice?

Do I know God well enough to pray according to his will and not my will? Do I need to reconnect with someone?

[21 : 13] An individual? A group? Of people? The church? Am I asking God to bless what I am doing for him?

Or am I trying to get out of it and asking God to do it for me so I don't have to? Is that the last one? The last one. Thank you.

Your prayer life, your walk with God, your observance of religious practices and discipline may be far from perfect. They may even be absent.

but at any time you can turn back to God, repent, recommit and re-enlist into his church to become an active part of his kingdom.

And as we go through Nehemiah, we'll see how not only Nehemiah but others, others of the Jews learned to repent, to recommit, to re-enlist into the kingdom of God and to work his purposes out.

[22 : 28] May God bless us as we seek his purposes for us in this place over the coming months.
Amen.