

Reality Check!

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[0 : 0 0] It's a great modern hymn there by the New Scottish Hymns Band. I wonder if anyone here has heard of the Coluteca Bridge.

Anyone heard of the Coluteca Bridge? It's a 480-metre-long bridge in Honduras, in a region that's known and notorious for storms and hurricanes.

It's an amazing design. Do you notice there's something off with it, though? A little bit off. Yeah. It doesn't kind of go anywhere, does it? So that region of Honduras, with the various hurricanes that come and storms, the government decided, let's get together our most brilliant architectural minds, construct this new bridge to withstand it.

And it was finished and opened to the public in 1998. It became a symbol of pride for the nation, and it was known to survive any hurricane. And that was until Hurricane Mitch came along.

It caused considerable damage to the nation of Honduras, and many other bridges were damaged, but the Coluteca Bridge survived intact, near perfect condition.

[1 : 0 7] Isn't that amazing? But what we see, what happened to the actual landscape, is that there's no use for the bridge anymore, because the land actually shifted. The roads on either side of the bridge vanished.

There was no visible trace of their prior existence. It carved itself a new channel, the river, the Coluteca River, and there was massive flooding, of course.

So we see that it no longer flowed beneath the bridge, the river, in the water, and it was now on dry ground. And it became known as the bridge to nowhere.

Bridge to nowhere. It's an amazing picture, isn't it, of a vision for something, with all the greatest minds coming together, something that's depicted that's going to last for a while, that doesn't necessarily adapt.

And we're living in a time and a day, at a particular point in history, I believe, that's once in a generation, once in a century, once in a blue moon, we've been through a pandemic, the world is changing so fast.

[2 : 1 7] And we're given a choice, I think, as this church, as the church nationwide, and we're given that choice whether we'll have a vision that will both last and adapt, a vision that shapes history because we're invited to be part of his story, and that is one that's, we're invited to be part of each and every one of us.

And the vision we're going to have in our day, it's pretty simple. It's the vision is Jesus, and putting our faith and trust in him, no more complicated than that.

Having faith in Jesus, having love for Jesus as our saviour, having that fresh touch from heaven that we would be so in love with Jesus and know his love for us so that we might love others, so that we might not lose hope, that we might not grow weary and lose heart, that we might be so focused on the person of Jesus who is the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

And instead of growing weary and losing heart, which many are in this day, that instead we'll butt the trend, fix our eyes on Jesus, and we'll have fresh hope and purpose.

We'll seek a fresh empowering of his Holy Spirit in our lives, and we'll be reminded of and experience afresh his father's love, which he's lovingly lavished on us for all the children who are in relationship with him.

[3 : 39] And you know, we look around today, and it's a rather beautiful building, this. Many people come in from year to year, many cruise ships and passengers, and they look at the building, they look up, and they go, wow, it's amazing in here.

And we get very good comments, and that's great. But it's also just like many other church buildings in the land where they maybe have a link with Historic Scotland, or there's something that's, you know, where church buildings have been kept open for centuries.

And now what we're seeing in our land is that Church Scotland, you know, you've not seen the news, but you've not seen this, it's closing many buildings, many churches are being linked together. But there's questions that we're meaning to ask, and ask ourselves in this time, that these buildings are great, and they've honoured God, and people have worshipped God for many decades, and even centuries.

But to go forward and to adapt, what do we need to do in order to reach a new generation? Are there certain things that we hold on to in a building here?

And saying, well, it's I being this way, and I will always be this way. Or, are we asking God the question, Lord, what do we need to do?

[5 : 00] What do we need to do to see a generation walking in your ways? What do we need to do? At the end of the day, this is just a building.

It's a great building, but it's just a building. What do we need to do to adapt going forward? And similarly, we can look at each other, and we can rejoice in God that we come together on the Lord's Day and we come to worship, and we leave.

But there's a similar question we ask of ourselves. Lord, are we adaptable? Lord, what do you want to do in our hearts so that your purposes and your plans in this present hour, in this present day, will take place?

That we'll not be yesterday's people, but we'll be today's and we'll look to invest in tomorrow's people. And so simply, I want to begin with this point that we want to have our eyes fixed on Jesus today and his love for us and for his bride, the church.

So this morning's message is all about setting the scene of the story of Nehemiah himself, but also the particular point that he finds himself in and in Israel's history and also the big picture of the Bible and how it speaks to our heart and God's story.

[6 : 22] So the book of Nehemiah is at the tail end of the Old Testament, chronologically speaking, and in the history of Israel. The books of both Nehemiah and Ezra are kind of maybe a longer collection of they're together.

It's Ezra and Nehemiah and they cover from both around the region of 538 BC when King Cyrus sent the exiles home to re-erect the temple to around 430 BC.

And so first, a little bit of a geography and history tour. So the geography is we've got two locations. We see in verse 1 that Nehemiah, who's telling the story himself, he's in the citadel of Susa.

That was most likely a winter resort for the Persian kings. It's full of pomp and splendor. That's what he's serving. He has been there for a week while. It's a major city and it links to other major cities such as Ephesus.

And then we've got the second location which is in direct contrast to the pomp and splendor. We've got Jerusalem, the most famous city of all. And it's now a shadow of its former self. In 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem.

[7 : 24] He destroyed Solomon's temple. And so we've got the wealth of Susa on one side. We've got the ruins of Jerusalem on the other side. And this contrast is the way Nehemiah's, the book of Nehemiah opens up.

And just to give a guided history tour, that's the geography. The history tour is that there were three deportations of God's people. So the first, we've got in 606 BC, the Babylonians deported the creme de la creme of society.

And then in 597 BC, we've got the craftspeople, which included the prophet Ezekiel. And then lastly, 586 BC, we've got the rest, the remaining Jewish people. And so the city, they're deported.

They're under Babylonian rule, the Babylonian rule of King Nebuchadnezzar. There's just a few remaining folk left. And these three deportations were then followed by the three returns of God's people.

So we've got, in the beginning of the book of Ezra, Zerubbabel in 537 BC, he came to revive the community aspects of the place. Ezra in 458 BC came to revive the religious life and standards.

[8 : 33] And then we've got Nehemiah. So the time score were around about November 446 BC. And what we know from the book of Ezra is that the previous attempts to rebuild the wall had been frustrated by the enemies of Judah.

That's recorded in Ezra chapter 4. And as a result, we've got very few people of God's people living in the capital city. So that's the setting of Nehemiah. There's this rebuilding of a nation.

It's a great turning point for the people of God. No longer are they a great kingdom, but they're a little flock. No longer are they big, but they're now just a small remnant cut down to the roots, long exiled, but now having returned and they're cut down to this small remnant.

And there's this man called Nehemiah and he's God's man for the hour. He's the right man at the right time and the right place. And it's a place that's dear to his heart. And Susa is a thousand miles away and he receives this call and he's ready for God to use him.

But we also see that God is behind, always behind the scenes at work too, even when we don't know it. So this is where King Cyrus comes in. And King Cyrus in Chronicles 36, we read that the Lord moved his heart.

[9 : 44] And this was a fulfillment of what the prophet Jeremiah spoke of, that he would reverse the Babylonian policy in order to allow some Jewish groups to return to Jerusalem.

And what's important about this is that this was a decree that was written down, it was ordered to be passed through. And God had promised that Cyrus, who was a pagan king, would be his shepherd and he would help rebuild the Jerusalem and the temple.

And it's probably not what God's people anticipated, to use a pagan king to be in what we might call a mixed economy. But this is what God's plan was, even as God's people were rediscovering their own identity as people who were set apart, as distinctive people, as the people of God, that they're in a mixed economy serving a pagan king.

Some people today would say that the Church of Scotland is too much of a mixed economy to survive. And some people, self-proclaimed prophets, have gladly already prophesied the death of this denomination that we find ourselves in.

And although we find ourselves at a difficult point in time, many changes along the way, many churches and people within them perhaps losing hope, losing faith even, moving on to other churches or maybe they're thinking about it, God is still on the move and still at work in our denomination.

[11 : 10] And we believe that to be true. Just earlier this week, I was catching up with a friend of mine. We both came through Mark's Memorial as teenagers. He's a couple years younger than me. He's a minister in Glasgow in Sandy Hills Church.

And it's a little bit more difficult down there in terms of the presbytery plans and what they're doing there. And he happens to be the interim moderator at a vacant church. And they decided that they do not want to go into a union because they've been asked to go into a union with another church and they do not want to do it.

And so he's having a meeting with them and he says, you've got two options. You either go into a union or you receive palliative care and you die out. And what have they chosen?

They've chosen the second option to receive palliative care and just to die. Isn't that tragic? And that's the case for not a soul church. That's happening.

That's duplicating itself. It's a sad state of affairs. Why do I tell that story when I've just said God is still on the move? Well, this is the reality check.

[12 : 15] This is the reality check of where we are. And that's the title of the message today, reality check. And we've been cut down to our roots. And we need to focus on God.

God himself. Thinking about Nehemiah's prayer when we come back to this. Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God. Hudson Taylor, the apostle, great apostle to China, that great missionary, he said this, the issue is not greater faith but faith in a great, big God.

Big God, big faith. focusing on Jesus himself. Though the church and Christians in our nation are a small number, though Scripture Union, here and there, starts recently, there's about 2% of school children and schools who call themselves Christian.

2%? Though a small remnant we be at this time, we're living at a particular point in history where God is wanting to do something afresh with his people.

And we read in these verses that the people of God were in great trouble and they were disgraced. The wall of Jerusalem was broken down. But what do we also see?

[13 : 24] They had survived the exile. They'd survived the cutting down. What we see also is that the book of Nehemiah, it's not just about Nehemiah himself.

It's not just about the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. It's about the greatness of our God. it's about how we live on the other side of Pentecost.

As believers who have full access to God's throne who are adopted and we're heirs with Christ we stand to receive the benefits that he receives and God loves us in the same way that he loves his only begotten son.

And he's the one today that we can put our trust in and our hope in and the one who has promised that he will one day forever renew and restore all things. But I wonder is there first a reality check for each and every one of us as a church corporately?

Where's our trust? Are we able to say along with Peter Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed and we have come to know that you are the holy one of God.

[14 : 32] People small in number yet a big God equals limitless possibilities for nothing is impossible with God. I wonder do we believe this to be true for ourselves at this point in time as the people of God.

I'd like to read you now something which I find quite inspiring this week and if you don't mind I might even put on an accent for it. This is the way it goes.

The next 90 minutes are probably the most important in your career. I read the day that the average man lives to about 77. That's 40 million minutes in his life and I'm asking you to get your absolute utmost for the next 90 minutes.

90 minutes out of that 40 million. That's all I'm asking. So when that whistle goes people with prayer to get everything you got you got. It's a good airtight accent. For each other for yourself and your family be proud of what you achieve and you're going to achieve because I promise you right now we can win this.

It's about belief that starts inside yourself and it spreads to one another. They call us the underdogs but we're not. I've never believed that because I know what's in this changing room. I know what's in your hearts and I know when we're together we can achieve anything we set our minds to but you've got to be hungry.

[15:50] You've got to have the desire in your belly. You've got to draw strength from the crowd from one another. You've got to look to your family. You've got to find that extra yard. Let's go. Let's go to the next round.

I just read to you the Darvell manager Mick Kennedy's passionate team talk. It went viral this week. I don't know if anyone saw it on BBC Scotland. It was the greatest upset in Scottish Cup football history.

The Scottish Cup is the oldest football trophy in the world. 146 years of cup competition and sixth division. They played where's the Scotland Football League?

Darvell. I had to look up where Darvell was. Sorry. I didn't know what it was. But the beauty and romance of the small more coming big and this passion and the inspiring way that Darvell beat Aberdeen, the third most successful team in Scotland.

not judged by recent results but the third most successful team. Isn't that amazing? Sixth division, Darvell and Aberdeen. Team number three in Scotland. Sorry if anyone disagrees.

[17:00] But the team talk, it was inspiring. And it may well, if we're looking at the book of Nehemiah being a play of Nehemiah's book because Nehemiah would, as we go through this wonderful book, as a man who's called by God to inspire the people of God, he would need inspired team talks.

We call them prayers as Christians. And Nehemiah has all sorts of different inspiring team talks. In chapter one, we'll look through it, how he has this amazing prayer focusing his eyes on God. In chapter two, we've got this prayer where it's just merely an arrow prayer.

It's a very, he stopped and he prayed and then he spoke to the king. But in the midst of that, there's all the preparation and the fasting and coming together. Who is Nehemiah anyway?

Let's just take a step back from that. We know in the very beginning that he's the son of Hakaliah. He's got a brother called Hanani who comes and gives him the bad news of what's happening.

He's in the citadel of Susa. We've already spoken about that. And in chapter, sorry, in verse 11, he is the cupbearer to the king.

[18:05] That's his job title. And if we're to modernize that a little bit, he's basically like a 007 secret agent. That's what he is. Mixed in with being like a kind of prime minister. He's that kind of ruled into one.

We don't know how, but he's risen to a prominent position. And so we might think that as Hanani approaches, he might have also been entrusted to a prominent office. And Nehemiah's duty was to put his life on the line, literally, by tasting the wine from the king's cup before handing it personally to him.

So he's got direct access to the king. He's living a very privileged life in Susa, and it's a guarantee that the wine was not poisoned. And that means also that being the cupbearer to the king, he probably guarded the sleeping quarters of the monarch, so he was very close to the king.

We can assume from this, presume that he was a deeply trusted man, that as an individual, he was both powerful and successful. As a leader, he was formidable and practical, whereas in the book of Ezra, he's more of a quieter individual and personality.

Nehemiah is like an extrovert. He jumps off the page, he leaps off, such is his tenacity. And as a Jew, he's an influential minority where he's based, but yet a thousand miles away in Judah, a heart cry goes out, and he's touched from deep within.

[19 : 21] This is where he comes into the point of history and God's story, that he's a descendant of the exile himself, but the longing of his heart is for the place that he knew so well. And this is where we hear that Nehemiah questioned his brother.

He gives the initiative. What's happened? What's the news about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile? There's this longing in his heart for home.

He'd be given this huge task of rebuilding the walls, but he was God's right man at the right time and in the right place. Jerusalem might not have seemed like the right place to be, but for Nehemiah it was God's call on his life.

It was a community lost in its own grief and struggles and groanings and grumblings. Because bad news had arrived on Nehemiah's doorstep, how does he respond?

He responds also by weeping, by mourning, by getting that reality check of where things are at, but by turning to God.

[20 : 26] What is the news that he receives? 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. It's not good news.

And Hanani doesn't hide the details. It's not a parish profile given to a prospective candidate where the church usually brings out the best of what it does but hides the bad stuff.

And let me just say on a side note, I would not be here if your parish profile was not so honest and open. I would not be here. The problems were identified.

The honesty was there and it was, look, here's what, where we're at? Here's what's going on. And Nehemiah responds from where he is in the pomp and glory of Susa to traveling a thousand miles to serve God because he couldn't rest until something was done.

This was his reality check. He was determined to turn to God to trust him in the process at each and every point. It's as an old hymn puts it, out of the ivory places into a world of war.

[21 : 32] That's Nehemiah's call. And zoning in now to us on a personal level, what is the reality check for you and I? Is it the realization that yes, we are living in ever-changing and ever-different days?

Is it a reminder that God is calling us back to simple Christian living, to simply being people of the word, people of prayer, people who long for God's spirit to be poured out?

Is it a prompting in your heart and mind to trust God to restore us personally in the areas that we need his peace? Or is it an awareness to allow him to speak directly to our hearts in a fresh way that we might be open to how he wants to work in and through us at this point in time?

Because in order to move forward, we need God's perspective. And Nehemiah would demonstrate that for God's people, that as it says in Isaiah chapter 10, that in that day, the remnant of Israel, the survivors of Jacob, they would no longer rely on him who struck them down, but they will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel.

A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the mighty of God. Though your people be like the sand by the sea, Israel, only a remnant will return.

[22 : 53] A remnant will return to the Lord, the Holy One. They've got this big view of who their big God is. A remnant will return to the mighty God because he's the one who can fix anything.

So even though the days are hard, God's word and his promises are timeless. And we are his people, the sheep of his pasture, and so we trust in him. I just want to close off our thoughts this morning for the remaining few minutes.

I was listening to a message from the Christian festival Spring Harvest the other night, and it was around the theme of rebuilding. The speaker was Rachel Gardner. She's a youth worker.

She works for a youth organization called Youthscape. And she said that during the pandemic, they did regular polling of churches across the UK. And as the church moved online, it wasn't happening for young people.

There was a lost connection there, a lost bridge. And she said that churches had lost, said that they had lost meaningful contact with 75% of the young people that they would normally see on a week-to-week basis.

[23 : 58] Three quarters of the young people had gone. And then this is what she said. We must look again at how we pass on faith to the next generation or risk losing them forever.

It's a crisis. It's an absolute crisis in our day. And Nehemiah, as we've already pointed out, that he responds to hearing the news, that he sat down and he weeps.

For some days, he mourns and he fasts and he prays before the God of heaven. And this is the key ingredient for us, that we pray and we ask God to do our work in us first and foremost.

This is why we're doing the prayer course, because we're asking God, teach us to pray. And I need this. I'm not just saying this humbly, but I need this. I need to learn how to pray. How do we? And it's very simple.

And this is why we're doing it in the evenings. And I must also say that when we meet to pray, in our prayer meeting on Thursday, there's no, I hope, pretense, or pretentiousness than anything, we simply come to pray and to worship God.

[25 : 01] And I had to come down from something I said at the prayer meeting a little bit, because when I was sharing something, and I was sharing about reaching young people, and then I added a qualifier saying, not that it's all about the children and young people.

And I actually felt a conviction in my heart from God to say, no, it is all about the children and young people. Because they're not just the future of church, they are the church today.

And we as a fellowship, as a congregation, are nothing without children and young people and families. And we want to be a church where every generation is welcomed, every stage of life is honoured, but we're looking to the next generation.

Because the way things once were as church, the good old days where people automatically came out of church, we didn't have to really think about it that much, just the way it was. these days, that's rubble, that's dead, it's gone, it's not coming back.

But a new day is here, a day for rebuilding. And with Jesus on our side, who can be against us? And so today, I offer this challenge, what's the reality check for us here today?

[26 : 16] Is it of mindsets that are no longer relevant for our age? Do we need to just come back to simple faithfulness in God? Not on traditions and the way we've done things, and I'm not saying we're going to go the opposite way, and you know, I'm not saying that.

I'm simply saying, what is God saying to our hearts right here, right now? Do we need a bigger vision of what church could be for the next generation? I mean, we're learning some new songs, and I know they're not everyone's cup of tea, but how can we expect the next generation who music has changed, and for them, it's a love language.

My daughter Lydia, she dances around the room to the song Goodness of God, or Waymaker, Waymaker, Miracle Worker. She doesn't go, oh, for a thousand times.

And I want to introduce her to both. I want to introduce her to the older hymns, which are amazing. But music today is like a love language. Bach is what we call classical music.

The Beatles are the 60s. Beyonce is today. Music has changed. Tastes have changed. And younger people are singing love songs to God and not just about Him.

[27 : 30] And I'm not asking you to like all these songs, but to simply be open that if we have new songs, I want to sing them and encourage young people in that.

And not just expect young people to sing the older hymns. It's got to work both ways. It's got to work both ways. We've got to be open where God's leading us.

Songs speak of the beauty of God and the splendor and the majesty of God, but also the intimacy that we can know with God. And these next few years for us as a church are critical because we're living in critical days.

And we might then have to get over our own personal preferences as a church in order to say, what can we do for the next generation? Lord, what is it that we need to do to reach the next generation?

And so to close then, one thing that we will be doing is that the pews that you're sitting in, they will be gone right about Easter time.

[28 : 35] We've made the decision. And I know as well that might be a challenge for some of you, for some of us. But we'll be getting nice comfy chairs.

And it's only for our bums to sit in at the end of the day. But it can change the dynamics of walking into a building and experiencing the welcome and the hospitality of God.

And do so more than pews do. It's about rebuilding and revitalizing. we go together on this journey because the next few years are critical to rebuild, to look to Jesus.

And we thank God for everything that's emanated from the pews to worship, to lift his name on high. And I thank God for your faithfulness to him.

And I know that some of these things might be challenging and difficult. I'm not expecting you to agree with it straight away or to get over the struggle straight away. But to simply say, God, what must we do in this day to reach a new generation?

[29 : 52] God, what are you doing in our hearts? We want the next generation. We want families to encounter the goodness of God. That as Jesus came in, as we read at the beginning of the service, the spirit of the Lord is on me.

And he's anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. Sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free to proclaim this the year of the Lord's favor.

This passage is beautiful in that it's all about the Messiah coming to rebuild the ancient ruins, to restore the places long devastated, about renewing ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

And seeing that a new dawn is here, a new day is here, the Messiah has come in all his beauty. And he is the one who has power to restore broken lives, to equip us with supernatural power from on high, and to change things, whether it's in an instant, whether it's day to day, as we look to him.

How long did it take for Nehemiah to rebuild the wall? 52 days. Maybe you're thinking, I'm asking you to go faster than you might expect.

[31 : 08] We're all going together on a journey, and let's trust in the Lord with all our hearts, fix our eyes on Jesus himself, the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building being fitted together grows into a holy temple in the Lord as we will be built together as a dwelling place of God's spirit.

It's all about Jesus. Let's look to him in heaven. Amen. Amen.