

A life of faith

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[0 : 00] I recently passed a personal milestone just over a month ago, 20 years as a disciple of the Lord Jesus. It was the 31st of May, 1993.

I was sitting in the big shed on the Katoomba side, up at Katoomba, on the Christian Convention side in Katoomba. And I remember it specifically as a Friday night.

It was cold, but I remember the words of John Wesley, my heart was strangely warmed as my chains fell off.

My heart was free and I rose and I went forth and followed him, the Lord Jesus. And I've been exposed all of my life up until then to the Bible.

Prayer was pretty much a normal thing. I even gave money to Christian organizations. But up until that point, I had trusted in myself and not Jesus.

[0 : 59] And the biggest and immediate change that happened in my life when I became a Christian was a love for Jesus' church. It didn't exist up until that point.

I was suspicious and even judgmental of the church. But a love for Christ went hand in hand with a love for Christ's church. And I think the New Testament expects it.

Listen to how Paul puts it to the Ephesian church. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.

And present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

The church that Christ loves is one of the key features of God's plan for time and eternity. All who love the Lord Jesus Christ ought to love the church, which is the object of Christ's love.

[2 : 15] And so I would suggest from the New Testament that there is something wrong with professing Christians who do not identify with the church and love it and invest themselves in it and carry its needs on their hearts.

Now when I say love for the church, I don't mean love for the institutional church. Just need to clarify that.

Those who love the church in its institutional form will have an enthusiasm for its liturgy, ceremony, bureaucracy, and the labor that keeps the wheels turning.

It will express itself in a strong interest in preservation, maintenance, and the nurture within a closed group, accompanied by an indifference, or even an opposition to revival, evangelism, and conversions that ultimately drive change.

The church that I fell in love with is the New Testament picture of God's people getting together on a regular basis to do the things that the church does.

[3 : 31] To praise and pray, to hear the word of God through preaching and teaching, to practice fellowship and pastoral care with mutual encouragement and accountability, to exalt and honor Jesus Christ, specifically by word and song and sacrament, to reach out locally and cross-culturally in order to share Christ with people who need him.

A church that sees itself not as an institution, but as Mission HQ for the glory of God. It's a love for the church that is expressed in a constant quest for faithfulness and holiness and vitality in our individual and corporate life.

A love that results in a deep care for the faithfulness and holiness and obedience and spiritual vitality and a missional effectiveness of the church. A love that is committed to praying and planning and sacrificing and laboring and praying again for the reformation and revitalization of the people of God.

That is what the next 30 days of time to build is all about. What is immediate obvious to most of us is that we have a building project.

It's kind of obvious. It's been in process for three years. Today we are voting as a church as to whether we will proceed or not.

[5 : 03] And if we do, and I've suggested that we should, then one of the purposes of the next 30 days of time to build is to raise the almost \$1 million we need to fund the project.

But even if we vote not to proceed with the building project, this stuff's staying here and we're proceeding with time to build. Because what is most important to me in time to build is the building, reforming, and revitalization of the church, the people of God.

Which is why time to build has three purposes. Three other purposes, I should say. And that is spiritual growth across the church, the building of fellowship, and the building of gratitude.

Even as we seek to redevelop our facilities, the church that Christ is building is the community of men and women, boys and girls, who have been redeemed by God the Father through the finished work of the Savior, Jesus Christ, on the cross.

This building means hearts being changed so that repentance and faith and obedience become more and more the pattern of our lives.

[6 : 19] And the evidence of such building work will be the humility and purity and love and zeal for God and His Word, a devotion to pray, a love for the people of God, a deep passion for those who need Christ.

That is biblical church growth. And Nehemiah will instruct us in the next 30 days because Nehemiah is about building saints even as he seeks to rebuild Jerusalem.

Nehemiah loves the glory of God and the people of God more than the place where they came together. His passion is for the relationship between God and His people, not so much the walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was governor in Jerusalem for 13 years. It took him 51 days to build the walls. Nehemiah starts in chapter 1, verse 1, thousands of kilometers away from their homeland of God's people.

Nehemiah is writing in his diary in the month of Kislev in the 20th year. That's about 140 years after the most devastating event in the history of Israel.

[7 : 44] An event that they were warned would happen, but it didn't cause them to reform their life together in order to stop it from happening. And if you've read the Old Testament, then you would know that God had formed a people for Himself.

He had called them by name. He had given them His law. He had given them a land. He had made His presence to dwell amongst them in the temple in Jerusalem. And as His special covenant people, Israel was to shine as a light to the world around so that the nations around Israel could see how brilliant it was to live in friendship with Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Israel instead turned away from Yahweh. They followed other gods and they made idols. They loved their wealth and their luxury.

They despised the word of God. And despite repeated warnings from God through the prophets that He would punish His people for their rebellion, they just kept turning their backs on Him.

So in 587 BC, Jerusalem finally fell to the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar and it was utterly destroyed.

[9 : 08] The elite of the people were put in chains and dragged off. The king's eyes were put out. His wife was killed. The temple itself, the place of God's presence with His people was sacked and left in ruins.

It's difficult, I think, to express the humiliation and catastrophe that this event was. Not to minimize it, but this is not like the occupation of France by Germany.

This is not the annihilation of a native culture or the brutality of ethnic cleansing. It is as if Yahweh, the God of Israel, was dead.

God had attached His name and His glory to that place and its temple in Jerusalem. And now all of the evidence points to the fact that He has abandoned His promises.

The God who would never abandon His promises. And He must be dead. And so for many, the exile was the death of hope. But after 70 years in exile, God began to do a new thing to draw His people back to Jerusalem.

[10 : 34] Nehemiah is one of God's people still left in Babylon. But He had risen to the absolute pinnacle of the Persian corporate ladder.

He was cupbearer to the king, King Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the planet in the day. Nehemiah was the only person in the kingdom who had access to the king every day and several times a day.

He had to be utterly trustworthy and an impressive individual. But his occupation is not his preoccupation.

Nehemiah's interest was not his career nor himself. It was the glory of God and the people of God. His heart lies in his homeland. God had started to bring His people back to Jerusalem after 70 years of exile.

But in verse 2, Nehemiah gets some bad news from home. Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace.

[11 : 46] The walls of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire. And verse 4 is Nehemiah's response to this news. When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.

For some days, I mourned and I fasted and I prayed before the God of heaven. He sits down and he weeps and he mourns and he fasts and he prays for the city.

Verse 4 indicates that Nehemiah's grief and distress continued for some months. Most likely, he stayed in that position or in that state for at least four months.

But his concern is more than a ruined city. It is what this ruined city represents. Jerusalem was to be the center, the light, the hope for the nations as God dwelt amongst his much loved people.

But it is in ruins. It is a disgrace. His concern is more about what it says about God and God's people.

[13 : 08] The prayer that dominates chapter 1 reveals that his deepest sorrow is over rebellion and faithlessness and faithlessness first and foremost not over broken walls.

His prayer first and foremost looks to the character of God, the God that it would appear had died. And he says, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands.

Israel's God is a great and awesome God who is not to be trifled with. All the hosts of the heavenly realm bow in his presence.

This God expects to be obeyed. But he's also a faithful God who is committed to his covenant of love. He is a God who has made us for himself, who reveals his kindness and mercy and gentleness to those he loves.

And it is this knowledge of the character of God that leads him first to confess sin and secondly to plead the promises of God.

[14 : 22] And so in the middle of verse 6 Nehemiah acknowledges the failure of God's people. He says, I confess the sins we Israelites including myself and my father's house have committed against you.

We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands decrees and laws that you gave your servant Moses. Notice that there is no us and them accusation going on here, but he is completely identifying himself with the failure of the people of God.

And this little prayer of confession here is not just some mere polite concession because as a culture or as a church we might admit well no one's really perfect in the end.

Ezekiel 36 speaks of the time when God would bring his people back from exile and as part of that returning it says in verse 31 of Ezekiel 36 then you'll remember your evil ways and wicked deeds and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and your detestable practices.

Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct O house of Israel. And so his prayer here is not just some mere acknowledgement of oh well no one's really perfect in the end.

[15 : 50] His contrition is an intense loathing of sin. and this is the same contrition and acknowledgement and remorse and loathing of our sin that the gospel requires of us when we come to Christ.

Our grasp of the wonder of the mercy of the Lord Jesus is directly proportional to our grasp of the desperate sinful state that we are in.

superficial grasp of sin leads to superficial grasp of grace. No mourning for sin leads to no joy in the gospel.

And if your psychoanalysis disagrees with that they're wrong. They're wrong. Sin is at the core of Nehemiah's problem and Israel's problem and our problem.

Every time we disobey God we are seeking to break away from him and to put a barrier in our fellowship with him and that is why Jerusalem is in ruins.

[17 : 10] You see Nehemiah could have prayed in that moment for God to restore Jerusalem to its former glory. Let's have a prayer meeting get together let's pray for those walls in Jerusalem.

Artaxerxes could have pulled out his wallet as he did but he could have pulled out a bigger wallet pulled out the treasure chest like some Middle Eastern prince with lots of oil and built a spectacular building in Jerusalem.

He could have made the walls bigger, wider and higher and he could have made Jerusalem into a resort town in the Middle East but it would have meant nothing.

It would have looked good but it would have meant nothing. And we can fix up our facilities but they will not lead to greater intimacy with Christ or joy as a Christian or to God's blessing being poured out upon us.

repentance and brokenness of heart before God is the only path to intimacy and communion with the God of heaven.

[18 : 26] Without the repentance there will be no return to God. There will be no return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah knew that the rebuilding of the people of God into the people of repentance and faith is where the real restoration work needed to be done and it started with him.

The second part of Nehemiah's prayer is an appeal to God's steadfast love. It's again an appeal to God's character. This is where we see he is a man of faith and of faith in the promises of God.

If you cast your eye down to verses 8 to 10, Nehemiah quotes the promises of God that God had made to Moses in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 30 describes exactly the situation Nehemiah and the people of God are in right now.

And it gives a promise that Nehemiah remembers. And here it is. Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 2. When you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all of your heart and with all of your soul, according to everything that I've commanded you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you from all the nations from where you are scattered.

And Nehemiah knows that they're right at that point of history that Deuteronomy 30 is talking about. And his prayer to God is reminding God of his promise.

[20 : 06] He has faith that when God promises something, he will do it. That's his confidence. It is this knowledge and confidence that God is awesome and powerful and faithful to his promises that sees Nehemiah make faithful, wise, gutsy decisions for the glory of God.

His confidence is not in himself as the cup bearer to the king. his confidence is not even in King Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the planet.

Look at the end of chapter 1 and how he expresses this relationship. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.

I was cup bearer to the king. He might have had unprecedented influence in the presence of the most powerful man on the planet. But compared to the almighty God of Israel, he is nothing more than a drinks boy for the king.

And compared to the mighty God, Artaxerxes, the most powerful man on the planet, is simply this man.

[21 : 28] Nothing more. Nehemiah's confidence is in his God. You see it again in chapter 2 verse 4, when the king actually asked Nehemiah what he wants, what did Nehemiah do in that moment?

He prayed. He'd been doing it for months, but in that moment, he says, then I prayed to the God of heaven. And when the king grants him his request at the end of chapter 2 verse 8, we see his faith and confidence within God.

He says, because the gracious hand of God was upon me, the king granted my requests. And when he finally tells the leaders in Jerusalem, after a little trip around the wall in verse 18 of chapter 2, that it was time to rebuild these walls, he reveals that his first confidence is in God and not the official letter which is in his pocket from the most powerful man in the world.

He had the same letter in his pocket when the three stooges, Sambalat, Tobiah and Jeshim, mocked them and accused them of rebelling a king against King Artaxerxes.

All he needed to do was whip out the letter and say, hang on a bit, his name's at the bottom of this letter saying we're on his business. But in chapter 2 verse 20, he says the God of heaven will give us success.

[23 : 00] His confidence is that when God says he will do something as he did in Deuteronomy chapter 30, then he will never abandon his promises. God is faithful to his covenant commitment to love his people.

I can see that Nehemiah was a man of faith in the promises of God. I cannot see anywhere in this book where he got a specific word from God to get up and to go and rebuild those walls in Jerusalem.

He was simply, faithfully acting on what God had promised in his word centuries before. And that is how the walls of Jerusalem got built.

And that is how God builds his people. By acting upon the promises of God. in his word. 2 Corinthians 1 says that no matter how many promises of God there are, they are all yes in the Lord Jesus.

They're all fulfilled and completed in the Lord Jesus. In Jesus, we are under a new covenant and God's purposes no longer center around the physical city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel.

[24 : 27] to get to the presence of God, we don't need to make a pilgrimage to a temple in Jerusalem somewhere. In fact, Jesus said of that temple in Jerusalem, tear it down and in three days I'm going to rebuild it.

Through his death and resurrection, we now have direct access to God through the Lord Jesus by the Spirit. He promises us the right standing before God and the intimacy before God that Nehemiah actually longed for here.

Hear the promise of God in the Bible from 1 John 1 9. And when Jesus says it, when the Bible says it, when God says it, it's true and he'll fulfill it.

And he says if we confess our sins, he, Jesus, is faithful and just and he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

That's a promise. What Nehemiah longed for, we get in Jesus. He promises to forgive us and make us right before God.

[25 : 47] And what's more, Jesus doesn't promise those who confess their sin and trust him a land carved out in Palestine somewhere. Jesus promises us a new and perfect and eternal heavenly home where there will be no need for walls and gates because there will never be a threat that can challenge what he is eternally built for his people.

And until that great and final day when we see him face to face, God promises to give his people a foretaste of our great future in the Lord Jesus that he has built for us for all of eternity by building together up and out his people, the church, on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel.

That is Jesus' promise to us in Matthew 16 in response to Simon Peter's declaration that Jesus was the Christ, the son of the living God.

He says, blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but my father in heaven, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Jesus promises in person to build his church, and it will triumph over all forms of evil, and death, and wickedness, and governments, and the media, and everything that will want to prevail against the church, cannot stop the building of God's people.

[27 : 41] That's the promise of God. He will build his church as the truth about him, as ridiculed and mocked it is, is declared and received as people respond to Jesus in repentance and faith.

That's what happened to me 20 years ago. He promised not just to leave us on our own sinful ways as well, but to increasingly transform us into his likeness as his spirit works through his word to bring about obedience.

obedience. So my brothers and sisters, love the Lord Jesus and love his church by giving yourself to the building up of his people here at St.

Paul's. Know this, we will always be flawed and imperfect. perfect. We will never meet all the expectations.

We will always fall short of expectations. I will always fall short of your expectations. But that should drive us to the Lord Jesus in confession and to give us hope for the future day when he calls us to our perfect home with all of his church from every tribe and nation and language and generation.

[29 : 15] We should be looking forward to that perfect day and the decisions we make driving us towards that perfect day. And so today, I want us to vote yes to proceeding with the redevelopment of our facilities.

But more than anything, I want us to say yes to allow God to do a radical rebuilding of our individual and corporate life as his people.

Where repentance and faith become the norm. May his vision for his church be the driving influence in our vision for his church and our love for his church.

Amen.