

Nehemiah - God's Prayerful Builder

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 September 2018

Preacher: Rev Kenneth I Macleod

[0 : 00] Let's turn to the chapter we read in Nehemiah, one of the two chapters. And we've been looking Sunday mornings at different Bible characters.

We've been going through the alphabet, looking at it with taking a different name each time. And today we come to N, and it's to Nehemiah. And one of the things that we've always got to remember is, particularly the way the Old Testament is set out, that God is always teaching us spiritual truths through the lives and through the historical accounts that are given.

Because we've always got to remember that God is tracing for us the whole covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, and of how he called Abraham, and of how he gave Abraham great promises, gave him the land, gave him the promises of future blessing.

And that's really where the Bible follows through the spiritual journey of God's people. And of course then when we come to the New Testament, the New Testament is built, of course, upon the Old Testament.

But so much of the teaching in the New Testament is much more theological and so on. But God has told us in the New Testament that all these characters and these historical accounts that are given to us there are for our spiritual benefit.

[1 : 29] They're there for our example. They're there for our edification. Because sometimes people say, well, what's the point in going back to looking over history? I mean, we're living where we are today.

And what's the relevance of where we are today to what happened thousands of years back? But that's what God has told us. He said, I have chosen out what I wanted recorded.

And this is for our example and for our edification. So that many of the spiritual truths that are taught there are for us today as well.

Now it's very true that you often get a particular man or a woman for the hour. And somebody who rises up just at that particular time.

And you say, well, he was or she was a person for the hour. And that is certainly true with the case of Nehemiah. Because Nehemiah had the huge task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

[2 : 30] And historically we have to ask ourselves just what happened. And just very briefly, because it's important that we do remember historically where we're at.

You remember how the Jews had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians. And the temple, which was one of the most beautiful buildings in the world, was destroyed.

All the treasures of the temple were taken. And it was raised to the ground. And also the walls of Jerusalem were broken down. And the people were taken captive.

And for 70 years they had been in Babylon. But we're told there about that in 530 BC, a new power had taken over. The joint with the Medes and the Persians.

But eventually the Persians got the supreme power in it. And when Persia took over, the king encouraged many of the Jews to return home.

[3 : 35] And that involved many who had been actually born in the captivity. And some 50,000 of them returned back to Jerusalem. And when they went back there, one of the first things they started to do was to rebuild the temple.

It was a huge undertaking. But after a while they became really discouraged by it. And they gave up. All they had managed to do was to lay the foundation. And then they set about building their own homes and such like.

And it stayed like that for a good number of years. About 16 years. And then the Lord raised up two men. Haggai and Zachariah.

Who encouraged the people to get back to rebuilding the temple. And you can read about that in the prophecy of Haggai. These are the last, well Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament.

But then there's Haggai and Zachariah and Malachi. But Haggai and Zachariah were two men that God had raised up to encourage the people. And said, look, come on, get back to building the temple.

[4 : 37] Because they had abandoned it. And they were just looking out for themselves. And God said, no, listen, you build the temple. And I guarantee you, you start building the temple and build up that temple.

I will bless you. And that's exactly what happened. There was great encouragement. And they went on and God began to bless them as he undertook the work again.

And we've always got to remember that God's house. And when we talk about God's house, it isn't just the building of God's house. Although that's part and partial of it.

But our attitude to God's house is very important. God sees our attitude to it. We sang about that at the beginning. I joyed, went to the house of God, go up, they said to me.

And we've got to remember that God has given us, he's given us everything in life. It's in him that we live, move, and have our being. And he's given us this one day where we're able to come aside from all the pressures and the demands of the week.

[5 : 39] And we live in a day where there's so many pressures and demands. And life is hurrying all the time. Where everybody's busy all the time. And the Lord says, I want you to take the foot off the pedal.

I want you to come and I want you to worship me. And that's integral to our lives. It's very, very important. And you've got to ask yourselves, and you ask yourself, as I must ask myself, what place does God's house have in my life?

Do I enjoy coming to God's house? Do I look forward to it? Am I coming to praise God? Because that's one of the things we do. We come to praise his great and holy name.

What an opportunity. Where we're able to come every Lord's Day. And we're able to say, Lord, I love you. And I thank you. And we're able to pray quietly in our own heart.

We're able to sing his praise. But we also come in order that we may hear. Because this is where God speaks to us. He instructs us. He teaches us.

[6 : 42] He edifies. Sometimes he rebukes us. Sometimes we come in with a wrong attitude. Wrong spirit. And as we're reading the word or singing, something comes in like a knife in.

And you say, oh, I need to. There's things in my life I need to change. And so God speaks to us through that. So it's very important as we come to worship him.

So God's house should have a place of importance within our lives. Anyway, the temple was duly completed. But some 60 years later after that, and although there isn't the way the different books in the Bible are set out, there was this man Esra, you can read about that, in 458 BC, that he came back with more people back from Persia to the land of Judah.

And he was influential in setting up spiritual and moral way of life. Because God's people had kind of continued to wander.

You see, the exile and the captivity, all that came about. God had warned them. He said, if you follow my paths, if you walk with me, all will be well.

[8 : 01] I'll bless you. But if you turn away from me and you follow the other ways and other practices, if you rebel against me and start worshiping idols, I guarantee you, I will take you out of the land.

I will scatter you amongst the nations of the world. And they didn't believe God. And that's exactly what happened. Because what God says does come to pass. But God said, I will, I am going to restore my people back to my land.

And that takes us now up to this man, Nehemiah. And Nehemiah is a man who has been called to this mammoth task of building the walls of Jerusalem.

And as I said, there are so many lessons to be learned. We're just going to look at this very, very briefly today. And this man, Nehemiah, although he was born in captivity, born in exile, he was a man who still had a love for God, and a man who had a love for God's land, for God's cause, and all that.

And as we know, Jerusalem had been at the very center of God's purposes and God's plans. And Nehemiah asked, that's what we read about at the beginning, he asked this man, Hananiah, one of my brothers, who had come back from Judah, and he said, How are things?

[9 : 24] How are things going back there? And he's told very simply, things aren't good. The people are discouraged.

The walls of Jerusalem, the temple's been rebuilt, but the walls are still rubble. And the people are discouraged. And you know, when Nehemiah heard that, it broke his heart.

Because of his love for the Lord and for the people of God. And so we see that Nehemiah, he's so brokenhearted.

But you see, Nehemiah asked two questions. And these two questions changed his life. I asked, verse 2, chapter 1, and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, and concerning Jerusalem.

He asked two questions. And the answer to these two questions changed his life forever. And you know, the same thing can happen to you and to me as well.

[10 : 29] You know, sometimes we don't ask the questions. Because the answer can make us feel uncomfortable. Or the answer can make us feel that we've got to do something.

And quite often we prefer ignorance is bliss. I don't want to get involved. So often we can have the attitude, like in the Good Samaritan, where the priest and the Levite saw the person in trouble and decided, I'm not going to get involved.

I'm not going to even look that way. I'm going to look the other way. And sometimes we don't ask the question. Sometimes we prefer just to be left alone so that we can live our own lives free from troubles or involvements with others.

But Nehemiah wasn't like that. He wanted to know what is the state of Jerusalem and how are the people? And as we say, the answer to that question changed Nehemiah's life forever.

We find that he wept and he mourned and he fasted and he prayed. And we read about his prayer there from verse 5. And one of the things we see about his prayer is there's real heart in it.

[11 : 40] Nehemiah wasn't playing at prayer. Nehemiah wasn't going through the motions and just saying, oh well, I'm going to offer up a wee prayer and say, oh Lord, help the people back at Jerusalem and help Jerusalem.

may someone come along and help to build up the walls again. That's not the kind of prayer. Nehemiah meant business with the Lord. You know, sometimes we can pray and if somebody said, what were you praying about?

You can actually say, poor, I'm not too sure. Because our prayers can sometimes be so general and so lacking in heart and lacking in focus that we're not really too sure what we prayed about.

Well, if that's the way we pray, we shouldn't be too surprised if we don't get answers because sometimes we won't know if we get an answer or not if we can't remember what we're praying about. But that wasn't the way with Nehemiah.

Poor, he was, he meant business with God. And he poured, he absolutely poured out his heart. It was urgent, it was agonizing prayer.

[12 : 46] And the Bible tells us that the broken spirit is to God a pleasing sacrifice. And so, Nehemiah is so put out by the broken down walls of Jerusalem.

And we have to ask ourselves the same question. How are the walls of our own life spiritually? Because, you know, it's possible that the walls in our own heart, and I'm speaking here spiritually, have collapsed.

It may be that when we started out in the Christian life, started out with a bang, started out with zeal, and with passion, and with energy, but as time has gone on, we find ourselves fading and failing.

The zeal, the passion, the urgency, the energy, it's no longer there. And sometimes we don't even want to look in, because we know the walls are kind of more rubble rather than standing.

And that can make us feel very uncomfortable. And so it's important that we have to look in at ourselves and say, right, how am I? How is my walk? How am I?

[14 : 01] It's personal. We have to deal with these things. And that's what Nehemiah was doing when he discovered how things were. He just went down on his knees and he asked the Lord.

He asked the Lord, for help. But we also see how humble the prayer was because he is recognizing and confessing the sin of the people.

We have acted. That's what he says that he was in verse 6 towards the end there. He's confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

You see, Nehemiah wasn't saying, ah, these people. I know, Lord, they're your people, but, oh, forgive them. Oh, no, he's including himself and so must we. We've always got to realize we are part of the problem as well.

If there's a problem, we're part of it. Because we've all come short. We all fail. So easy to judge others. So easy to look at others and say, oh, look, they've got it wrong.

[15 : 06] They've got it wrong. Do you know when you start doing that and the Lord says, hey, stop a moment. Stop a moment. look in. Look in at yourself. Look at your own attitude. Look at the way you think about others.

Even look at the way you think about me. And you know, it can be a very humbling moment and we go down and say, Lord, I'm sorry, forgive me. Well, that's kind of what was happening with Nehemiah at this time.

And you know, Nehemiah had to weep before he could work. And you and I will find that as well. Before we come to the place of rebuilding, we have to come to weep first before God because God shows us.

And again, Nehemiah's prayer was rooted in God's word. We find that so on from verse 8. But then we see that Nehemiah is prepared to be used by the Lord.

And as I said, that's always important that we are ready to be used by God in whatever. And we find here that Nehemiah had one of the most amazing jobs.

[16 : 19] And again, we can see that this is all in God's providence because at the end of chapter 1 it tells us, Now I was cupbearer to the king. Now this was some job.

This was one of the most privileged, probably sought after jobs. It wasn't like being a butler or a waiter. It wasn't like that he just carried the tray of food through to the king. The cupbearer back then was somebody who tasted everything the king was going to eat before the king ate it in case somebody had poisoned it or done something to it.

He tasted the drink, whatever the king was going to drink. He had to taste it first. And so he became an incredibly trustworthy and influential person.

The cupbearer was one of the most important people and built up an incredible relationship and rapport with the king. It was a place of great privilege because you became closer and closer to the king.

And in fact it became a very lucrative place because history shows us that many cupbearers would get money from the nobility or the people around who wanted a word given to the king.

[17 : 40] You know people would say, hey is there any chance that you could put a word in for me to the king? And you say, well okay, but you'll have to give me something. So many a cupbearer was able to line their pockets because they would have the ear of the king.

Not saying that that was what Nehemiah was doing. But it was, as we say, a very, very important and a very prestigious work. And so we find that Nehemiah has been given this position.

And you know it's very important that God's people get into places of prominence, places of influence, to influence for good. Nehemiah's influence for good was huge.

You see, Nehemiah could have said, I'm not going to get involved. I've got a cracking job here. I'm not going to give this up. There's so many people who would give the right hand to get the job I have.

I'm not going to get involved with Jerusalem and all that. But that's not his way of thinking. Because this man has got heart. Heart for God and heart for the place, the land and the people and everything.

[18 : 53] And so he comes to this point, this place and he's saying, what am I going to do? And as I say, we need to pray that there will be many people and we give thanks for every MP and MSP and every counselor that is a Christian or is sympathetic to the Christian faith and similarly in all walks of life because the influence can be so good.

well, here's Nehemiah and here's Nehemiah, he's in Susa, the capital of the Mede-Persian Empire, you could say the capital of the known world at the time.

And so he goes into the king and the king has one look at him and he says, Nehemiah, what's up? Because we see there, and the king said to me, why is your face sad seeing you're not sick?

Now, you know this, you could lose your head in those days. For coming into the king like that. The king demanded, he didn't want any gloom or doom around him.

That was one of the things that was forbidden. But Nehemiah was so sad, he was in such a sad state, he couldn't hide the way he was feeling.

[20 : 08] It's like the chameleon today, sometimes we cannot hide how we're feeling. Well, Nehemiah couldn't hide it. So the king said to him, why is your face sad seeing you're not sick?

This is nothing but sadness of the heart. As we say, Nehemiah was very, very much afraid at that particular point. Because the king, if what he was going to say the king didn't like, that was it.

In those days, the king could just say, get him out, execute him, get me another cup bearer. That's the way it was. And so we find, verse 4, the king said to me, what are you, first of all, why are you so sad?

And he told him, verse 3, let the king live forever. Why should not my face be sad? When the city, the place of my father's graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.

then the king said to me, what are you requesting? So I prayed to the God of heaven. Now we know that Nehemiah was a man of prayer because we saw his prayer earlier on from verse 5.

[21 : 23] But this is a different type of prayer. This is pressurized prayer. This is prayer on the run. This is prayer where you don't have time to stop.

This is prayer where you only got a second. And you know, if we are in the habit of coming to the Lord, then this is very often the type of prayer that we are engaged in every day.

You're doing it at work. You're doing it in your home. You're doing it in all different situations. Every so often you're confronted by something and you say, oh Lord, help me, I'm out of my depth here.

I don't know what to do. Or sometimes in relationships where there's difficulty, Lord, help me to say the right thing. help me, Lord, not to offend them. Help me, Lord, to, we're doing it all the time.

Asking the Lord, Lord, give me direction. Where to go, what to say, how to deal with this. It's part and partial of life. And that's exactly what Nehemiah is doing here.

[22 : 25] It's just this silent, quick prayer. Prayer, pressurized prayer, prayer on the run. And so he prays and the Lord answers.

The Lord gives him, obviously gives him the wisdom, what to ask for. And at a human level, what he's asking for is quite extraordinary. You see what he says? If it pleases the king, will you allow me to go back to the land of my father's, my father's graves, and can I rebuild the city walls?

Here's the cup bearer, one of the most important men the king has, and he's saying, king, I want to go back home, and I want to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

But more than that, I want you to write out letters to give me a safe passage with your stamp on it, because you're the king over everywhere, to give me a safe passage home.

But more than that, I want you to send a letter so that I can go to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest. So that I can get timber to build.

[23 : 38] It's a huge thing he's asking. And no wonder he was terrified going to the king. But you know what? God was with him every step. And it tells us in the Bible that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, and he will turn it whichever way he will.

Isn't that amazing? The actual word comes from irrigation, where you have an irrigation, where you have a little channel of water running this way.

And that's how the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He can turn it any way. Do we have that belief in God today that he's able to do that?

Well, here's an example of it happening. Here's this mighty king, the most powerful man in the world at the time, and he is in complete compliance with everything that his favorite employee has asked for.

Yeah, he says, go back, I'll send, and he not only sent Nehemiah with letters, he sent horsemen, he sent officers from the army to accompany him.

[24 : 48] Nehemiah's getting even more than he asked for. And we see God's hand is at work with Nehemiah. But one last thing, well, there's two last things just in that word.

First of all, what Nehemiah does at night when he gets back to Jerusalem, he goes round at night, he doesn't tell them his plans, he goes round and he checks everything out. And then he forms his plans, and then he tells what he's going to do.

You know, some people think that faith is blind, they talk of blind faith, that if you're going to do God's work, let's go, let's just do and see where God will take us. Well, there might be a place or a time for that, but that's not normally the way.

God expects us to have plans, to have a strategy, to know what we're going to do. And what we're to do is to bring our plans to the Lord, because it's very often it's the Lord who's put the plan in our heart, first of all.

And we say to the Lord, Lord, if this is the right way, bless me and open the door further. If not, show me the right way and be willing to be redirected by the Lord.

[26 : 03] But Nehemiah forms his plans and the Lord is blessing what he's doing. The second thing is this, there's opposition. You know, if ever you're doing anything for God, there's going to be opposition.

And here's these guys have risen up, Sanballat and Tobiah, and they're going to lead a revolt. And if we went through Nehemiah, we'd find that they were doing everything they could to obstruct the rebuilding of the walls.

Guaranteed. If you are on God's side and you're standing for God, and you're doing and being where God will have you be, Satan will oppose you.

He will stir up, just, there will be the Sanballats and there'll be the Tobias, who will come along and try and muck things up.

And maybe they will for a wee while, but they won't succeed because as Nehemiah says at the verse 20, the God of heaven will make us prosper and we his servants will arise and build.

[27 : 13] But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem. And the Lord will see to it that his people will in the end be victorious.

We've got to ask ourselves, as we put all this to ourselves today, have we got the heart, the spirit of Nehemiah in our own personal lives? And also with regard to the service of God?

Do we want the easy life where we say, well, let other people do that? I don't want to get involved. Or are we willing to say, well, Lord, here am I, send me. First of all, we have to ask ourselves, whose side are we on?

Are we on God's side? Or are we still on our own? Because if we're on our own, we're serving somebody. It might be ourselves we're serving. But you know, the greatest way to go in this world is to walk our steps keeping with God.

May we seek today to do that. Let us pray. Lord, our God, we pray that you will bless us, that you will help us, that you will encourage us as we go forward in life.

[28 : 20] We face many challenges and obstacles and problems, but we give thanks, oh Lord, that we can depend upon you. We pray that you will lead us and direct us in the way that we should go, and that we will know your peace and your protection.

We know your help, your strength and grace. Be with each one of us and bless us and take us to our home safely. Bless a cup of tea, coffee in the hall afterwards. Do us good, we pray, and take away sin in Jesus' name.

Amen. We conclude singing in Psalm 147. This is from Sing Psalms, Psalm 147, page 192, and the tune is Petersham.

verses 1-6, O praise the Lord, how good it is to sing him songs of praise, how pleasant to give thanks to him for all his gracious ways.

The Lord builds up Jerusalem, and he it is alone who reaches out to Israel to bring the exiles home. He heals his people's broken hearts, restores the bruised and lame.

[29 : 34] He sets a number of the stars and calls them each by name, and so on. Verses 1-6, Psalm 147, page 192. O praise the Lord, how good it is to sing him songs of praise, how pleasant to give thanks to him for all his gracious ways.

song. The Lord builds up Jerusalem, and he is in the Lord, who reaches out to Israel to bring the exiles home.

He heals his people's broken hearts, who restores the bruised and lame.

He sets the number of the stars, and calls them by name. Great is our Lord, and great in power, his wisdom is profound.

power, the Lord sustains the meek, but casts the wicked to the gourd.

[31 : 16] Now may the grace, mercy, and peace of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest and abide upon each one of you now and forevermore. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.