

## **A Time of Rebuilding The Book of Nehemiah**

I would like to start by again wishing you all a Happy New Year and I pray that God's blessing will be upon you in whatever 2021 has in store.

As we start a new year, it is natural to look at the year that has passed and look forward to what the year ahead will bring. A year ago, when we looked forward to 2020, I don't think any of us would have predicted how the year would work out and how much all of our lives would change. I am sure many of us are glad to see the back of such a difficult year. But for many 2021 still presents a lot of uncertainty and fear and for some of us, recent events have challenged our faith.

Thus rebuilding is a big theme for the year ahead. We face the challenge of rebuilding our country and our economy after the unparalleled challenges of 2020 and for some of us we also face the challenge of rebuilding our faith.

So this morning, we will look at a book from the Bible which also looks at this theme and shows how God is with his people in times like those that we are currently facing. This morning's readings come from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah.

We start by reading from Nehemiah Chapter 1:1-4:

More than a hundred years before the events of Nehemiah, the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians and many of its citizens exiled. By the time of Nehemiah the exile had ended and the Temple in Jerusalem rebuilt, but the city was still defenceless with no walls to protect it from its enemies.

So Nehemiah is uncertain and fearful of what the future look like for his nation – a feeling which I am sure that we can all empathise with. So Nehemiah brings his worries to God in prayer – you can read his heartfelt plea in the rest of chapter 1 - and then in chapter 2 we start to see how God is at work to answer his prayer. Nehemiah had an important job, he was the cupbearer for the Persian king which meant that he gave the king his wine, having tasted it first. So he had the ear of the king and because of this was able to get permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city.

It is important to emphasise the size of the challenge Nehemiah faced. Whilst Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah was smaller than the city today, we read in chapter 3 about the many gates which were rebuilt – showing that many roads converged in the city – which would have made it a trading centre. So, rebuilding the walls was not something Nehemiah could have done himself and he didn't attempt to.

Let us continue our reading from Nehemiah 2:17-18.

People from all walks of life recognised the gracious hand of God upon Nehemiah and the Bible tells us that he gathered together, goldsmiths, perfume makers, rulers, priests, merchants; all wanting to do their part to help rebuild their city.

But there were those who didn't want to see the walls rebuilt – whose purpose was better served by the city remaining weak and defenceless. Again Nehemiah and those rebuilding the walls prayed to God for protection and were kept safe in their work.

So what can we learn from Nehemiah's story?

Firstly, Nehemiah shows that when we feel overwhelmed or uncertain our first response should be to bring our pain to God in prayer. Nehemiah pours his heart out to the Lord in prayer, but he does

more than that – he also asks God to use him as part of the answer to his own prayer. As we reflect on all that has happened over the last twelve months and look ahead to the challenges that we still face in the months ahead, we can feel helpless and believe that there is nothing that we can do; but as we see throughout the bible there is no one that God cannot use to further his kingdom, so as we bring the current situation before God in our prayers we should be prepared for God to call us to do something to help answer our own prayer. It might be of the magnitude of what Nehemiah was called to do or it might be something smaller – to check on a neighbour, to support charities who in turn support others in need, to give blood. Whatever God calls us to do – ask yourself this morning is it a call which I would be ready to follow?

The work that we are called to do might seem too much for us to handle or we might face opposition or obstacles – imagine how Nehemiah felt called to leave his good job as the King's cupbearer to rebuild Jerusalem! But throughout his story we see Nehemiah remain confident because he recognises this is work that God has called him to do and when facing challenges he brings them before God in prayer wherever he is. When things seem particularly difficult, like 2020 was, we need to remember that in the darkest times God is still with us and hears our prayers to him.

In Nehemiah's case, God brings success. Let's turn to Nehemiah 6:15-16.

Nehemiah had been told that it couldn't be done. The job was too big, the problems were too great. But God's people had come together to achieve what had seemed impossible. The job would have been impossible in their strength alone but in God's strength Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt in 52 days. The Israelites' enemies realised that God's power was much larger than theirs. We see in Nehemiah's example that when the people of God come together to work in his name and towards the building of God's kingdom on Earth, they can solve huge problems and accomplish great goals! As we look ahead to 2021 and the large challenges the world faces as well as the challenges that the Church in Scotland was facing, even before COVID, this should give us confidence that what may seem impossible to us is not impossible for God.

You might think that with his stated mission complete – Jerusalem's walls complete – that would be the end of Nehemiah's story but in fact we are only half way through it. That is because Nehemiah wasn't just looking to repair the city's broken walls, he recognised that the people also needed rebuilding, that they had moved away from how God called them to live and needed spiritual renewal in their own lives.

So how does he go about this part of his task. Well let us return to God's work in Nehemiah 8:1-3 and 8-9.

Nehemiah gathers the people together to hear God's law. As Nehemiah was a layman, the governor or political leader, he got Ezra to read God's word to the people. Ezra was the religious leader who had returned to Jerusalem prior to Nehemiah's arrival and like Nehemiah had been distressed by what had become of his people and had brought this before God asking him to use him to help restore the Israelite people to God's law. You can read more of Ezra's story in the Old Testament book of Ezra which precedes Nehemiah.

Nehemiah wants the people to listen to God's word and importantly to understand it to show them how God has called them to live their lives according to his laws and how far they have moved away from him. The response that he receives from the Israelites shows that it has the intended effect – they weep openly when they realise how far they are from obeying God's laws.

It is important that we hear God's word from the Bible regularly but it is also important that we do not become dulled to its words and immune to its teachings. During difficult times like those we are currently living through it is as important as ever that we listen carefully to God's teachings to us through his word and let the Holy Spirit help us to understand what it means and how it applies to us in our lives.

Often God's word requires a response and chapter 9 tells us that having heard God's word, the Israelites responded by confessing their sins to each other, repenting for the ways that they had strayed from God's teaching. All of us in our lives have times when we stray from God's path and try to go our own way and God calls us to, like the Israelites, confess our sins and repent. But notice that in our earlier reading from chapter 8, the Israelites don't just recognise and admit their sins they weep – they grieved over them in their hearts — grieved to the point of weeping and mourning.

In Psalm 51, his psalm of repentance, David tells us that God does not delight so much in the outward signs of repentance (which included making a sacrifice), but “the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17). It is not about the shame and condemnation we feel for our sin, but a godly grief. Like listening to God's word, we can find ourselves just going through the motions when it comes to repenting, but the most important thing is the condition of our heart. Does your repentance look like a heart that is broken and contrite as it beats before God? Does it leave you weeping like the Israelites. This is the attitude of repentance that we are called to and through it we find that God is abundant in mercy toward us and that His great love and mercy led to the cross, where Christ's death pays the price for our sins and offers us a grace that we do not deserve.

So as we look ahead to 2021 and the challenges and good times still to come, the book of Nehemiah provides us with an example of how to approach it as we both look to rebuild our country and communities and also look to strengthen and in some cases rebuild our faith. Given the uncertainty, it is natural to have fears and concerns but we should follow the example of Nehemiah and bring those concerns to God in prayer recognising that God's response to our prayer may make a call on us to take action. Wherever God calls us to go this year and whatever challenges or opposition we face along the way like Nehemiah we should go forward in the confidence that God walks beside us and whatever is thrown at us, however hard things get or dark life seems, God never abandons us. He hears us when we weep and when we want to give up. Wherever we are, whatever is going on around us, we know that we can bring the burdens that we carry before God and he will help us to carry them – using his strength not our own.

To help us remain strong in our faith we should also follow Nehemiah's example and set aside time to study God's word. Whether it is already your habit or something new – maybe it could be your New Year's resolution – spending time in God's word, listening to what God is saying to us through it and trying to understand how it applies in our own lives is important to show us God's calling to us and to reveal Christ to us and his amazing gospel message. Like the Israelites it should grieve us to see how far we fall from where God calls us to be but unlike the Israelites we can rejoice that we have been saved through the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, taking the punishment for our sin so that we may all be freed and be reconciled to God. As we face whatever 2021 has in store we should remember that and be confident that there is nothing or no-one that cannot be rebuilt by God.