

RESTORING YOUR VISION—WITH NEHEMIAH

Dr. Steve Brady

It is all too easy to become dispirited in the work of the gospel. The toll of the years saps the idealism of youth and vision is lost. The days are difficult, the work is endless, the labourers are few and the resources limited. Many servants of God are tired *in* the work if not *of* the work. What a tonic Nehemiah is for everyone who is 'weary in well-doing' (Gal. 6:9).

In this study we follow the 'traditional' dating that locates Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem in 445 BC. To sketch in the historical background briefly it goes something like this. After the Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem in 587/6 BC a return took place in 538 BC under Joshua and Zurubabel amidst much enthusiasm (see Ezra 1-3). Sadly the momentum quickly dissipated and it took the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 BC to rekindle enthusiasm for the Temple's rebuilding, a task accomplished by 516 BC. So far so good. But there was still the 'little' problem of Jerusalem's rebuilding. Again, time passed by until the return of Ezra in 458 BC. According to Ezra 4:6-23 an attempt was made to rebuild Jerusalem. There is no certainty as to the precise date, though around 450 BC is probably correct. However local opposition and Persian decree quickly brought the rebuilding to a halt. So the scene is set for the events recorded in Nehemiah's first chapter.

Regaining Your Vision Through Prayer

The foregoing rightly anchors Nehemiah in the flow of history both secular and biblical. And because it is the latter as much as the former the book is part of the flow of Israel's redemptive history and is thus a revelation of the ways of God with his people. On the one hand it is the stirring record of one man's tenacity and fortitude which transform a ruined city and a dispirited community into the city and people of God in the face of great odds. On the other it provides an abundance of spiritual lessons on faith, courage, prayer, organization, teamwork and sheer devotion to the work of God. As John Whitcomb has put it: 'No other portion of the Old Testament provides us with greater incentive to dedicated, discerning zeal for the work of God than the book of Nehemiah. Few other books emphasize so strongly the close link there is between such zeal in action publicly and such prayer privately. If our enthusiasm is low and our manner lackadaisical we need the lesson of this first chapter—regaining our vision through prayer! To recapture

such vision will either renew our zeal for our particular 'neck of the woods' or give us a growing sense of call for some other sector of God's world. The latter became Nehemiah's experience.

God Often Gives Us A Burden For A Place

The book opens with Nehemiah in Susa, some 750 miles east of Jerusalem. Nehemiah does a rather 'dangerous' thing: he enquires about the welfare of God's people and God's work. The report he receives from, with others, Hanani, his 'brother', (a term that implies either a full uterine sibling or simply a male relative) fills him with despair. In all probability the news of broken walls and burned gates refers to the happenings of c. 450 BC rather than 586 BC, an event which was hardly 'news' 140 years on. There is no 'triumphalism' in this account. They simply 'tell it like it is'. A city without walls and gates in the fifth century BC was no city at all. What a far cry from the 'Glorious things of thee are spoken' of Ps. 87:3. Moreover those broken down walls testified not only to a physical problem but a spiritual one too. They were a witness to past disobedience, shattered dreams and present impotence. No wonder Nehemiah wept and gave himself to fasting and prayer. Yet this shocking news is part of the Lord's 'gameplan' to manoeuvre Nehemiah into his life's work. To reiterate, it is 'dangerous' to ask questions about the Lord's work. How many Christians find themselves involved in some aspect of that work because they failed to keep their mouths shut! How many more of us need to be likewise affected by the 'derelict' churches of our land, physically and spiritually. Places that once resonated with the praises of God are now deserted, or converted (!) into warehouses and temples to other gods. Churches that once sounded out the glorious gospel of Christ now sound forth a garbled mixture of secular humanism, 'pop' psychology and a politicized evangel. God help us, Nehemiah like, to weep.

There are two things to note about Nehemiah's weeping. First, it is purposeful. Then there's nothing 'parochial' about it. God's purpose is to incubate a 'burden' (now there's a good old-fashioned word!) in Nehemiah's heart for a city he has never seen and for a people he hardly knows. Well-known missionary statesman and author Michael Griffiths recalls his exposure to the missionary need of the world as an Oxford University undergraduate. Through a

missionary minded Christian Union he learned 'to know something about everywhere and everything about somewhere'. If we have not yet found our niche in God's world a daily plough and pray through Patrick Johnstone's *Operation World* would be a great start. This brings us naturally to Nehemiah's prayer.

God Always Calls Us To A Battle in Prayer

One of the most influential Christian books of the last decade was Gordon MacDonald's *Ordering Your Private World*. If what we are before God is often revealed in our prayer lives then Nehemiah's prayer reveals a very well-ordered 'private world'. It is one of the great prayers of the Bible. A number of components may be isolated.

Worship

Nehemiah does not start with his problem. He starts with God (5). There's no hint of folk religion here that merely tells a 'friendly star'. He addresses the God who has revealed himself, the great 'I am', the God of heaven, who is faithful to his covenant promises of love—his *hesed* love—the love that clings on in mercy and steadfastness to his people. The adoration Nehemiah pours forth is not mechanical, a sort of priming the pump to get the deity interested. It is a 'delight' (11) for him to worship such a God. A guide at Westminster Abbey was once asked where he worshipped personally. 'Oh, I am so busy showing folk around the Abbey,' he replied, 'that I never get to a place of worship myself.' Busyness in God's work is never a substitute for getting to a place of worship in our lives.

Intensity

Twice Nehemiah asks for God's ear to be attentive (6, 11). Three times the little Hebrew particle *na* appears, omitted by the NIV, translated by the AV's 'I beseech', a phrase used by a person seeking to beg a favour from someone in a position to answer the request. There is therefore an element of pleading and earnestness, a sense that only God can help. Much of our praying fails just here. If God does not show up—well, we will have to do it some other way! God help us!

Confession

Though comparatively brief it is panoramic. National, ancestral and personal sins of omission ('we have not obeyed') and commission ('we have acted very wickedly towards you') are freely owned and confessed. Genuine confession is not only a 'coming clean with God' but the intention to forsake the wrong also (see Proverbs 28:13).

Request

This is the element that causes most of the 'philosophical' difficulties about prayer. There is a growth industry of 'spirituality' that is strong on meditation

and weak on supplication. However, petitionary prayer is at the heart of biblical praying. And how biblical this petition is! It reverberates with Scripture (Lev. 26:33; Deut. 9:29; 30:2-7). For the general will of God we need to know the Word of God. When we do there are things we don't ever need to enquire about, since God already says they are wrong! And there are promises to claim repeatedly because they are always right. Here then is no address to bind fate but a cry to a redeemer God who has brought his people into relationship with himself ('your servants', 10). Around the axis of God's revelation in Scripture, his redemption in Christ and our personal relationship with him most of the difficulties of petitionary prayer can be resolved. In answer to whether petitionary prayer is mere coincidence, to Archbishop Trench, amongst others, has been attributed the delightful maxim: 'when I pray I have lots of coincidences; when I don't pray I have none.'

Patience

'Day and night' does not indicate that Nehemiah was praying twenty-four hours a day every day. Rather in the apostolic spirit of 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thes. 5:17) his morning and evening prayers were focused on one great objective, the welfare of Jerusalem. The element of persistence is indicated by a comparison of the dating of 1:1, *Kislev*, with 2:1, *Nisan*, i.e. a four month period. Some prayers are a long time in being answered. A man in my church had the joy of seeing his wife converted fairly recently after praying for her for over forty years. Delays, as we know, are not necessarily denials.

Sacrifice

Sometimes our praying stops at the merely devotional. We feel better. There's nothing wrong with that of course (so Ps. 55:22, 1 Peter 5:7). Nehemiah went further. He 'mourned and fasted'. The only obligatory fast for Israel was on the day of atonement ('deny yourselves', Lev. 16:29) though others were added (Zech. 8:19). Although the Lord warned about potential hypocrisy in this area, the assumption is that fasting will take place ('when you fast', Matt. 6:16). Too busy to pray? Ever thought of skipping a meal to do so?

Faith

Faith-healing, snake-handling, name-it-claim-it enthusiasts are more than enough to give faith a bad name. Yet without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Faith puts the world in focus. The most powerful man of the day, Artaxerxes, is only 'this man' in prayer (11). Nehemiah asks God to give him success with the king. That's risky since royal policy had only comparatively recently stopped Jerusalem's rebuilding (Ezra 4:21). Still, there are times when faith must be spelt 'r-i-s-k'. Such a time had arrived.

Availability

One can almost imagine Nehemiah's prayers along

these lines: 'Lord, that work needs a man of vision and drive. They are like a ship without a rudder there in Jerusalem'. *Pray on, Nehemiah!* 'Lord, they need someone to approach the King and alter royal policy'. *That's correct, Nehemiah.* 'Lord, please prepare and raise him up soon.' *I have, Nehemiah.* 'Who, Lord?' *You!* 'Whooo? Meee?' *Yes, you!* Nehemiah quite simply was willing to be the answer to his own prayer. Often the person who gets the vision gets the job. Perhaps our prayer has not been answered because we are unwilling to be the answer to it. Genuine faith works.

A seemingly insignificant sentence pulls the whole chapter together, 'I was cupbearer to the king' (11). Many of us feel powerless to change the situation around us. We are not well-connected. We are not particularly clever. But we are concerned for the welfare of our particular 'Jerusalem'. We do well to pray. Some Christians, however, do find themselves by birth, or gift or sheer effort, or a combination of all three, in positions of authority and influence. Nehemiah was such a man. He was the king's cupbearer, a position of great trust, since the king's life depended upon him. This provides us with our final section in this study.

God Never Leaves Us Without The Benefit Of Preparation

If royal policy was to be overturned then Nehemiah was the right man to attempt to do it. Moreover, as we know from the book itself, he was the right man for the job back there in Jerusalem. 'Cupbearing' may seem a far cry from 'wall building' but the distance is not nearly so great as may initially be imagined. After all Nehemiah hardly walked into Artaxerxes' palace one day and simply applied for the post of cupbearer. The 'untold story' of Nehemiah's rise to high office can only be guessed at. But a humble beginning supplemented by a thorough education, a 'fast track' entry as a 'starred-first graduate' to the Persian civil service and hard work, loyalty and service had paid dividends. He had been 'faithful in little'. He had been well-trained in much. He now had a great deal to offer his king—and his God.

Did he have to overcome adversity in the form of racial and religious prejudice? Probably. Many people feel tremendously hampered by their background. Some, of course, are born with a 'silver spoon' in their mouths. But if the 'spoon' was a substitute for parental love and closeness they may battle with an inability to be in touch with their emotions well on into mature years. Others have been born in poverty, graduated from the college of 'hard knocks' and carry chips on their shoulders for their poor start in life. Nehemiah is an encouragement to all. His name means 'whom the Lord has comforted'. After all if

'redemption' means anything it means that God redeems *people*, with all their backgrounds, idiosyncrasies, prejudices and foibles. It seems to me as a pastor that those who find the art of successful Christian living have stopped making their backgrounds the foreground. If I am a Christian then I am a child of God, called to be different since in and because of Jesus I am *different*. My positive prospects far outweigh my negative retrospects. I am *comforted* indeed.

Nehemiah's position of course was not fortuitous. He was the right man in the right place at the right time for one simple reason. As he puts it in another context it was 'because the gracious hand of my God was upon me' (2:8). Though the book bears his name it ultimately is not about Nehemiah. It is about the Lord and his ways with mankind. When God has a piece of work that needs to be done those he calls to it will inevitably find that he has been preparing them in all sorts of ways for the task. Perhaps I may be permitted a personal illustration. Upon leaving school at sixteen I entered local government as a clerk in the passenger transport department. The administrative training has been useful in the pastoral ministry, though not nearly so useful as the 'personnel' training. When you have sorted out an irate Liverpool 'docket' who wants to know what happened to his 4:55 a.m. number '33' bus, because its non-arrival cost him his bonus, well, the average church member is child's play! So, when the work goes well and there is an element of 'success' what wise Christians we are to attribute that to the 'good hand' of our God rather than to mere human giftedness, wisdom and training. Thank God he never leaves us in the lurch for what *he* wants us to do: 'the good works that God prepared in advance for us' (Eph. 2:10).

Conclusion

Lost your vision of God, of his work? Ask God for a new or renewed burden for your 'somewhere'. After all if we are in the place, or headed for the place the Lord wants us in, then *nowhere* is insignificant. But be ready for the call to arms in prayer. Too busy? Well, feel free to fast and save your money on that lunch-time sandwich. We may be hungry. We dare not be prayerless. Otherwise we will lose our sense and vision of God. Finally, thank God that if he is calling you to a task as different as wall-building is from cupbearing, he has probably equipped you already more than you realize. And do remember that even if the work seems beyond your capability it certainly is not beyond the 'God of heaven's'. Ask Nehemiah.

Dr. Steve Brady is Senior Minister of Lansdowne Baptist Church, Bournemouth.