

Nehemiah 1

Brynmawr Family Church Sermon
Stuart Wheatman, Sunday 28th March 2010

Intro-

- Tricky time lately with car problems, and just as it seemed getting sorted something else would go wrong. Car in for service, but just asked them to check head gasket first- we were hoping and praying for good news, but opposite- they put the death sentence on the car. At the same time money has come in- gifts, tax rebate, refund from gas company- God is good! We all love receiving good news, but how do we handle bad news? The temptation when we receive bad news is to give in to despair and to give up. We will look at Nehemiah and how he responded when it seemed God's purposes had been completely dashed by the enemy despite things initially seeming promising.

Read Nehemiah 1

Nehemiah exhibited a godly response to tough news

- **Background:** This really was bad news- Jews 70 years captivity in Babylonia. Then Persians defeated Babylonians and it seemed all their prayers were answered- Cyrus said they could go home. Initially 2 waves of people returned- first with Zerubbabel (and they rebuilt the temple), later with Ezra. Nehemiah is in Susa (Shushan) in Persia, where Esther was (she was the present king's step-mother). It is now 12 years after Ezra went back and Nehemiah is eagerly awaiting news on how they are getting on. The bad news comes from his brother (see also 7:2), Hanani. The news was that God's people who had returned to their homeland were now 'sitting ducks' with no wall of defense against the enemy and surrounded by hostile people on all sides- even gates burned (see v3). It was 'out of the frying pan into the fire'- things couldn't get much bleaker.
- **Godly response isn't to wear a mask.** Grief, not buried emotions- there was no hiding his emotions behind a mask- Nehemiah did not bottle things up, but wept openly and mourned many days (see v4). Pressure to wear the 'I'm okay' mask. A true brother is one we can cry in front of. True love sees us at our best and worst but is **steadfast**. There was an optimist that fell off the top of a 40 story building. As he passed the 13th floor he had a beaming smile and was heard to say, "So far so good."- there is a right time to show emotions other than wearing a smile.
- **Prayer-** His immediate response was prayer (v4)- he knew the situation was beyond his human ability. How long does it take us in a situation before we resort to prayer? Paul says 'pray continuously'- 1Thess 5:17. Phil 4:6-'Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God'. There is a saying 'why pray when you can worry and take tranquilisers instead?' Five young college students were spending a Sunday in London, so they went to hear the famed C.H. Spurgeon preach. While waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who asked, "Gentlemen, let me show you around. Would you like to see the heating plant of this church?" They were not particularly interested, for it was a hot day in July. But they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway, a door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman then introduced himself. It was none other than Charles Spurgeon.
- **Fasting-** Nehemiah's prayer was accompanied by fasting (v4). Fasting takes prayer to another level- there are some demons that will only be shifted when someone has been praying beforehand accompanied by fasting (Matt 17:21; Mk 9:29; John 10:10). During a Sunday service, a woman experienced a miraculous healing in her body - so she wrote a note to her minister to tell him of her experience. As she closed her letter, she wrote, "Do you think, Reverend, that God could do something about my WEIGHT problem, too?" The minister wrote back: "Dear Sister, this kind does not go out except by fasting."

Jesus expected us to fast- not 'if' but 'when you fast'- Mt 6:16. Some cannot fast for health reasons- why not look at something else you can go without for a season to seek God's face? What about sleep? Fasting releases power for breakthrough and revelation- Jesus in wilderness fasting 40 days and left it in power of the spirit to start ministry (Lk 4:14). When Jonathan Edwards preached "Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God" he had fasted for 3 days. 500 were saved.

He was set on getting God's attention

- **He reminded God of His promises** to Israel from the covenant He had made. We need to do the same 'Lord Your word says...'. God has made a covenant with us and we can remind Him of His covenant promises in our prayers. As we read the Bible we see thousands of promises that we can access because of the New Covenant that God has made concerning us. God keeps His part of the New Covenant, but our part of the New Covenant is faith- simply believing the promises. If we have believed for salvation based on the Word of God, why not believe for the rest? Writer and speaker Lewis Smedes says: Yes, somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God. What a marvelous thing a promise is!
- **He asked for God's attention, like it really mattered to him.** 'Please let Your ear be attentive and your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant'- (v6 & 11). How much does it matter to us if God does not hear a certain prayer we are praying? Do we pray in an apathetic way at times? Nehemiah prayed with urgency and it got God's attention- just like the blind man shouting for Jesus' attention over the crowd- Lk 18:39- 'Those who led the way were sternly telling him to be quiet; but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" - he got the ear of Jesus- do we? 'The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.'- James 5:16 KJV. God is looking for fervency in our prayer life, where it really matters to us that He answers.
- **He persisted in prayer-** 'Day and night' (v6) and 'many days' (v4) showed Nehemiah's persistence in prayer. Jesus tells a parable about a persistent widow who obtained justice because she kept on- Lk 18:1-8, and also a man who got a loaf of bread in the night because he made a nuisance of himself by keeping knocking- Lk 11:5-8. Have we really persisted until the answer has come? One cold February day a snail started climbing an apple tree. As he inched slowly upward, a worm stuck its head from a crevice in the tree to offer some advice. "You're wasting your energy. There isn't a single apple up there." The snail kept up his slow climb. "There will be when I get there," he said.

He was prepared to do his part, so that God could do His

- **He led the way in repentance.** (See v6 & 7). It seems that when God does an amazing work you don't have to look too far to find someone who was prepared to humble themselves and truly repent- Daniel before the first wave back after the exile- Dan 9:1-19. John the Baptist comes before Jesus- repentance before grace in the gospel. So often we want the grace to flow without any repentance on our part. Often, although sin is ultimately between us and God many are usually affected by the consequences of our sin. We live in a blame culture- e.g. Politician's rhetoric, but how refreshing when someone finally admits 'I messed up' even when perhaps they were less to blame than someone else. The 'cover-up' mentality will never get us very far with God. Prov 28:13-'He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.' Nehemiah's repentance moved God's heart, just like the Tax collector did when compared to the Pharisee in the parable Jesus told in Lk 18:9-14. Only those who face their sinfulness can relax in God's grace. On his 70th birthday, pioneer missionary William Carey wrote to one of

his sons these words, recorded by Timothy George in "Faithful Witness": "I am this day 70 years old, a monument of Divine mercy and goodness, though on a review of my life I find much, very much, for which I ought to be humbled in the dust; my direct and positive sins are innumerable, my negligence in the Lord's work has been great, I have not promoted his cause, nor sought his glory and honour as I ought, notwithstanding all this, I am spared till now, and am still retained in his Work, and I trust I am received into the Divine favour through him."

- **He could see his part to play in the answer.** (v11) The unique circumstances he found himself in were pointing to all sorts of possibilities in God- he was cupbearer to the king. The king trusted him with his life- maybe the king would grant him permission to rebuild the wall. What are the unique circumstances surrounding you? Who are the people you can uniquely reach in a unique way for Jesus? What resources are close by that God has put in your hands and near to you to get you out of the mud? What would Jesus do in your situation? Nehemiah was already preparing his plan of action which involved risking his life- what are we prepared to do to see our prayers being answered as we utilize the resources God has already given to us?

Summary

- Nehemiah exhibited a godly response to tough news
- He was set on getting God's attention
- He was prepared to do his part, so that God could do His

Ministry: Bring your situation before God in prayer.