



## *Nehemiah*

Many churches get very involved in their buildings. So here is a story concerning a church building and it's especially for Neil.

It seems that there was a little old church out in the countryside: painted white and with a high steeple. One Sunday, the pastor noticed that his church needed painting. He checked out the Sunday ads and found a paint sale. The next day, he went into town and bought a gallon of white paint. He went back out to the church and began the job.

He had just done the first side. It was looking great. But he noticed he had already used a half gallon. He didn't want to run back in town and being the creative person that he was, he found a gallon of thinner in the shed out back, and began to thin his paint. It worked out great. He finished the remaining three sides with that last half gallon of paint.

That night, it rained: it rained hard. The next morning when he stepped outside of the parsonage to admire his work, he saw that the first side was looking great, but that the paint on the other three sides had washed away.

The pastor looked up in sky in anguish and cried out, "What shall I do?"  
A voice came back from the heavens saying, "Repaint, and thin no more!"

A person was coming out of church one day, and the pastor was standing at the door as he always is to shake hands. The pastor, not recognising them as a regular, grabbed them by the hand and pulled them to one side. The Pastor, one of those very enthusiastic types, said to them, "You need to join the Army of the Lord!" The person replied, "I'm already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor." The Pastor questioned, "How come I don't see you except at Christmas and Easter?" The person whispered back, "I'm in the secret service

I wonder how many today are in that category in Great Britain.

The reading for today's service in the Lectionary is Nehemiah 8. However, I would like us to explore briefly Nehemiah from the beginning up to and including Chapter 8.



But before we explore the book of Nehemiah, let us remind ourselves of the background to this period in the history of Israel.

In 722BC the Northern Kingdom of Israel falls to the Assyrians and the Israelites are taken into captivity. The smaller Southern Kingdom of Judah survives this invasion. However by 606BC the Babylonians have become the dominant power and they besiege Jerusalem and take away the first captives to Babylon. By 586BC the city of Jerusalem and its temple are destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the remaining people taken into captivity in Babylon.

By 536BC some people return from Babylon and in 535BC, Zerubbabel who is the governor begins to build the temple. It is in this period around 520BC we get the prophecies and books of Zechariah & Haggai. In 458BC Ezra the priest returns. Around 444BC we come to the beginning of the story of Nehemiah.

At the beginning of the book of Nehemiah we read that one of his brothers and a few other men visit him from Jerusalem. They bring him bad news when they say:

*“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”*

Nehemiah 1: 3b (NIV)

We then read of Nehemiah's reaction to this news:

*“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”*

Nehemiah 1: 4 (NIV)

As we consider the story of Nehemiah, I would like us to consider the church. If we look at the church today, doesn't it in some senses parallel the state of Jerusalem? The walls are broken down and the gates are no longer there. Remember in those days the gates could be locked to protect the city.

As we look at the church we see some senior people in churches deny many of the essential truths at the heart of the Gospel. Many say that the resurrection didn't happen. Others even say Jesus was not divine. Not so long ago a minister went on record as saying that 'God was dead'. We also know that churches are losing members on a regular basis.

But I wonder whether we like Nehemiah weep over the state of the church. I say this as much to myself as anyone else. It is all too easy to just accept that's the way things are and shrug our shoulders. I am sure that very few of us, have mourned and fasted over the state of the church.

We then hear what Nehemiah prayed when he said:

*“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, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.”*

Nehemiah 1: 5 – 6a (NIV)



Notice he doesn't immediately pray about problems of Jerusalem. He praises God and lifts up his name. He declares God's faithfulness and love. It is all too easy when we pray to immediately pray about and for the problem. Over the last year many of the members in Branchline have had difficult times. Often we find ourselves praying for these problems. But Chief Michael who is with us from South Africa, pointed out that we were tending to focus on the problems and not looking to God first. As we see the way Nehemiah prayed, may it remind us to praise and worship God first? To turn our eyes on Him and away from our problems.

Next Nehemiah prays:

*I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations,*

Nehemiah 1: 6b - 8

Nehemiah confesses the sin of Israel. But notice he includes himself in that category. Now as we read the story of Nehemiah, we can see that he was a man dedicated to serving God. So it is unlikely that he was committing the sins that Israel had fallen into. Never the less, he includes himself with the Israelites.

It is very easy for us to say well, All Saints, Writtle URC and Branchline are not responsible for the decline in the church. We can pat ourselves on the back and say well we have not denied any of the truths about Jesus and the Gospel. But we are all part of the church with a capital C. We may be split into many denominations, but I believe there is only one true church. Regrettably it is spread over many different streams and denominations, but we are all part of the one true church. We need therefore to identify with it, and confess the sins of the church before God, even if we haven't personally. I wonder how often we as churches in Writtle have confessed the sins of the church to God. Have we cried out to him to forgive us and to revive his church?

Then and only then does Nehemiah lift up the situation and pray into it. He says:

*O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man."*

Nehemiah 1: 11 (NIV)

Notice how he prays for favour in the presence of the man. In the next sentence he says that he is cup bearer to the king. For Nehemiah was the cup bearer to King Artaxerxes of Babylon.



King Artaxerxes, (King A), notices that Nehemiah is downcast and asks him what is up. It is interesting that Nehemiah did not put on a brave and false front before the king.

When I was younger, I was a member of a very evangelical church. We used to sing a chorus about being H.A.P.P.Y. If somebody asked you how you were feeling and you told them you felt low, rather than the standard answers, 'I'm fine'. Then they would say you can't feel like that bro'. They'd slap you on the back and say something like God loves you everything will be fine.

But we are human beings, with feelings and emotions. Are we not allowed to express them, as does Nehemiah? The result is King A asks him what is up. Nehemiah explains that he the walls of Jerusalem are down and the gates have been destroyed by fire. The King then says what do you want? Nehemiah asks if he can go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls and re-hang the gates. The king asks him how long he needs and Nehemiah sets out the time he requires.

The king then gives him letters of authority to go and build the walls of Jerusalem. He even gives him a cavalry escort to protect him on his journey.

So often we think, particularly in this politically correct and multi-faith society that we will be opposed by non-Christians. But God can use the most unlikely people to build his kingdom.

CTiC is trying to see if we can get Chelmsford to be a fair-trade town. The council have agreed to support this move. Every autumn when 'Harvest for the Hungry' takes place they get great support from the Meadows shopping centre. Other companies lend them space in their warehouses. So why should we think the world will always oppose us? God can and does sometimes use such people, as he does in this example with Nehemiah.

So Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem. But notice he doesn't immediately rush to do anything. My mother had a saying she was fond of quoting to me, when she said:

*Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can. It's seldom found in women, and it's never found in men.*

If it had been me, I would have got all the key people together and started giving them orders. But after three days, Nehemiah gathers a few men around him, and at night goes round the walls and gates of Jerusalem.

Notice that he gathers a team around him. I believe God uses teams. When Paul established churches, he used to appoint elders. So often in some churches you finish up with a one man or one women ministry. But I personally believe that churches should be lead by a small team of men and women.

Then notice that Nehemiah finds out what the situation of the walls is really like. The army set great importance on reconnaissance or 'recces' for short. Before the army sends in its troops it likes to find out what the situation is.



Then Nehemiah speaks to the priests and gets the people building the walls and repairing the gates. In fact the gates seem to have been rebuilt before the walls were finished. This was probably wise, as even a broken down wall provides some obstacle to attacking troops; whereas an empty gateway provides very little defence.

But then they start to meet opposition from those around them. At first the opposition takes the form of sneers at the Jews. But Nehemiah and the Israelites, largely just ignored these verbal insults. However, when the walls started to take shape the opposition grew more serious.

So the builders arm themselves. As the opposition grows more serious, Nehemiah splits the work force into two halves. One half carry on building. However, the other half, Nehemiah places behind the weakest parts of the walls, and they have their weapons in their hands. Even the builders have their weapons close at hand. The Nehemiah places a trumpeter close by him. So if the enemy attack at one of the weak places, the trumpet can be sounded and all can rush to the defence at the place they are being attacked. This can include the builders who will put down their tools and pick up their weapons and assist those who are defending the walls.

If we like Nehemiah start to co-operate with God in building his kingdom through the church; If we start to build up the broken walls of the church and start to re-hang the gates, through which the king of glory can come. Then we will experience opposition. But this will not be human opposition, but the enemy of God will start to attack us and our churches. How we need those who will position themselves behind the weak points and pray? We are not all called or equipped to go on the front line of building the kingdom. We are not all capable of being evangelists. But we can get behind the work of re-building the church and God's kingdom by praying. As we saw at the beginning we can pray like Nehemiah.

We need to start by exalting God and praising him. We then need to confess the sin of the church. Finally we need to cry out to God to be gracious and grant favour on our work.

In the midst of this building, Nehemiah has to deal with injustice in the form of usury. Some people were lending the exiles who had returned money. Many of the exiles were effectively getting into debt, and others were growing rich. So Nehemiah gets involved and sorts this out.

Unfortunately there may be some in the church who will try and grow rich at the expense of others. Fortunately it is rare, but it is something that may happen. Remember, Jesus had to drive out the money lenders from the temple. Some years ago some of the 'television evangelists' in America were growing rich from the donations they had exhorted from those who watched their programs. From this they had lavish houses and loads of expensive cars. So as we re-build the church and God's kingdom, we need to watch that people in the church are not being exploited financially.



Finally the walls are completely rebuilt. The gates are re-hung and the city is now complete and ready. Nehemiah then appoints gate-keepers, singers and priests. How we need people to act as gate-keepers in the church. The only thing that should come through the gates of the church is the king of glory. As the psalmist cries out in Psalm 24:

*Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.*

Psalm 24: 7 – 9

See also the prominence given to the singers and the priests. For worship was at the heart of Israel. Praise was not some optional extra, but part of the very life of the people. I haven't the time to develop the importance of praise. However, I know this is something very close to Neil and Carol's hearts. In fact they used to run a course with the title 'Call to Worship'. So maybe you should invite Neil and Carol to bring some teaching on this vital aspect. We need to recover praise and worship within the life of the church. This needs to be something we take purposely and not something we just take for granted.

Finally after the walls are rebuilt, the gates re-hung and all the people appointed, all the people assemble together. This is in fact is in chapter 8 which is the reading for today. As they assemble together Ezra the priest, who returned some time before Nehemiah reads the law to the people.

When we hear this word law, we tend to have a negative reaction to it. For to us the law is all about rules and regulations. It is about judges and punishment in the form of prison sentences. However the Hebrew word Torah that is normally translated as law in our Bibles didn't have this meaning.

Rather it meant the wise words that parents give to their children so that they may lead lives that are not full of grief and difficulty. It is words of life, to help avoid wrong areas and more importantly to live in the centre of God's will and hence his purpose for us. There we will know true joy. That doesn't mean we may not experience difficulty and sometimes say bereavement. But in the midst of it we will be walking the way that please God and does bring true joy.

Remember Jesus summed up the commands in a positive way when he said:

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”*

Matthew 22:37 – 39 (NIV)

This was at the heart of the Torah. We are no longer under a set of rules but as Paul says in his letter to the Romans we are controlled by the Spirit. And the spirit effectively puts a law or torah within our hearts. So we long to please and serve him as did Nehemiah.



As Ezra opens the book of the law and starts to read, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord and all the people lifted their hands in the air and said, *'Amen! Amen!'*. Many people in some churches don't like all this lifting up of hands. Yet hear in the Old Testament before Jesus had come and ushered in the wonderful Gospel, the people worship with God with up lifted arms. I know we English people find this difficult, and I sympathise as I am one of those who finds it difficult to raise my arms in worship. (Mark you I am usually playing the guitar, so perhaps I have some excuse). But we do need to worship God with all our hearts. We need in some cases, like myself, to learn to unlock our emotions and worship God with all that we are.

Then it reads that the people bowed down with their faces to the ground. It is interesting that when people are touched by the Spirit, most of them fall backwards, face up. Yet here people are face down. But from the text, I don't think they fell down, rather this is a position they adopted. It expressed how great and majestic God is.

Do we as we look at the weak state of the church, take our eyes off God? Shouldn't we rather remember that God is the creator of the universe. He is mega powerful. He is awesome not only in power, but also in his glory. I personally think if we saw him in all his power and majesty we would probably all fall over.

Yet this God loves us, and sent his son to die for each one of us. He responds to us, as a loving and gentle father. But remember gentleness is not weakness. Although he is the ruler of the universe, we can call him Dada, for that is what the word Abba means in Abba father.

Nehemiah then tells the people to go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks. God is not just about a false spirituality. No God is concerned and in every aspect of our lives. He is just as much interested in, and involved in all our practical matters.

Interestingly there is a great sense of fellowship in a shared meal together. We know the early church met in each other houses for meals. It was at these love meals that they broke bread together to remember Jesus.

Finally Nehemiah says to them:

*"This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

Nehemiah 8:10b

So this day as they rejoice in the completion of the rebuilding of Jerusalem is sacred to them. Having achieved so much he tells them not to grieve the Lord. In other words don't go back to your old ways. Above all he reminds them the Joy of the Lord is their strength. We need to remember this as well as we seek to re-build God's church and through it his kingdom.

Title: Nehemiah  
Author: Graham J Marriott



At the end of the chapter the people build booths out of branches, and lived in them. This was to be regular festival as they remembered the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

I hope this story of Nehemiah may be an encouragement to us all. It is all too easy to get down hearted and defeatist about the church. But let's be like Nehemiah in his opening prayer. Let's praise and worship God. Let us be willing to ask for forgiveness for the sins of the church. Then lets us be people who help in the rebuilding of God's church. For the church is meant to be the agent through which he builds his kingdom here on earth.