

An introduction to Nehemiah

Before we read (or Ingrid reads) the first chapter of Nehemiah it's worth doing a little bit of scene setting.

How does the book and person of Nehemiah fit within the history and the biblical story?

How does the book and person of Nehemiah fit within the sweep of God's plans and purposes?

Here's a slide that I think will help us on our way.

On the left are maps of the three superpowers of the day.

The top map shows Babylonian Empire with an ancient carving of King Nebuchadnezzar. They overthrew the Assyrian Empire in 616 B.C. At this time the Israel that King David had held, had been split into two kingdoms for almost 300 years. There was the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah). Jerusalem was just across the border in the southern kingdom of Judah.

The second map shows the Persian Empire with a carving of King Cyrus and King Artaxerxes. Cyrus and the Persian Empire overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C.

The third map shows the Greek Empire and an ancient mosaic of Alexander the Great who defeated the Persians in 331 B.C.

The superpower before these three was...Assyria and the one that came after was....the Roman Empire. As we consider some of social, economic, political and spiritual dynamics, it really important that we note, not just the rise and fall of God's people, it's really important to note the rise and fall and temporary nature of Empires. No matter how powerful the empire or emperor, their rule and reign, wisdom and resources are finite.

The Bible is clear that there is one King who sits on the throne ***for ever and ever***. The Bible concludes with an incredible map of the cosmos...a picture of the heaven and earth...with angels and living creatures bowing and singing...
'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!' (Revelation 5:12)

Kings rule and reign in different ways. As Napoleon Bonaparte once said... *Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and myself founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon sheer force. Jesus Christ alone founded His empire upon love.*

Each of these Empires had particular ways of ruling conquered lands and peoples. For example, the Babylonians forcibly removed the political and religious leaders from their land. The thinking went something like this...*Absorb and assimilate the leaders to our way of life and living and they will become like us taking our world view, our values and practices, our gods, our ways. Those left in the land to work on the land will be leaderless, powerless and unable to co-ordinate any significant rebellion. Those assimilated will be loyal to us. Those left will not be a threat.* So the strategy was not conquer and annihilate but conquer and assimilate.

Daniel is a prime example of this. Daniel was one of many taken to Babylon. Remarkably however, we find Daniel not being absorbed or assimilated and abandoning his faith in Yahweh. Instead we find Daniel positively influencing Babylonian Kings and culture, working for and being a blessing to those who conquered him and his people, whilst remaining distinct and faithful to Yahweh. Jesus, in New Testament describes this as being **salt and light** and calls his followers to be a godly positive influence engaging with the world.

As the power of Babylon falls, the power of Persia rises. In 539 B.C. Persia led by Cyrus 'The Great' overthrows the Babylonian Empire. This is recorded in the Book of Ezra. In the original Hebrew manuscripts Ezra and Nehemiah are not two separate books but one book with the Nehemiah part clearly drawing on Nehemiah's journals.

Cyrus and the Persians did not rule and reign in the same way as the Babylonians. As well as military led conquering and assimilating, they incorporated a pacifying dimension. The Persians saw value in populating conquered people's lands with 'empowered' locals. A flourishing economy would generate more money than one in the dirt. An economy doing well would mean taxes could be extracted.

Also Persia would benefit from using 'empowered' semi-autonomous regions as buffers against other nations who were neither conquered nor friendly. There was a balancing act – enable the conquered nation enough to be helpful but not enough to be a threat. With this kind of thinking in mind, Cyrus and the

Persians were happy to send many exiles home. The Cyrus Cylinder which you can see in the British Museum confirms Cyrus' decree to send exiles home in 538 B.C. [see picture, return to slide]

In Ezra we read that this first wave of exiles to return to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. was led by Zerubbabel. And fascinatingly, we read that God is working behind the scenes.

Ezra 1:1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation...To allow the exiles to go home to the southern land of Judah to re-build the temple in Jerusalem.

So there is the first wave of exiles who return under the leadership of Zerubbabel. They rebuild the altar and the temple is completed in 516 B.C. but then the rebuilding of the city is halted. There are fears that the people of Judah and Jerusalem, now growing in number and strength, may have rebellious intent.

Then nearly 60 years later in 458 B.C. when Artaxerxes is King, he gives permission to Ezra and more exiles to go to Jerusalem. We are told in Ezra 7:9b-10 **the gracious hand of his God was on him. 10 For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.**

King Artaxerxes interestingly is also the step-son of...Esther. Both lived in the Persian capital city of Susa. What positive influence did this godly Jewish women have on him? What stories did Esther share with Artaxerxes as he grew up, I wonder? What questions did he ask her? Interesting isn't it!

This second wave of exiles led by Ezra go to Jerusalem. The kind of building up that Ezra does is social and spiritual through the teaching and preaching of God's word. Interestingly, Ezra's understanding and motivation seems very similar to that of St Mungo who famously preached and prayed... "*Lord, let Glasgow Flourish by the preaching of the word.*"

Ezra like Zerubbabel before him accomplish much but their accomplishments are somewhat stop start. They are frustrated by opposition from without and within and both stories end up strange anti-climaxes.

Zerubbabel and the first returnees rebuild the altar and the temple. The priesthood is re-established as is the sacrificial system is restored. Some cry in delight when the foundation of the temple is laid, but the older elders who had seen the glory of the old temple, cry out in dismay because (Ezra 3:12)...the fiery presence of God is not there as it had been in the glorious days of old. For Ezra and the second group of returnees, God's law has been re-discovered and is being opened and taught. There is repentance as people are reminded of Yahweh's faithfulness and their unfaithfulness. There is rejoicing in Yahweh's character and nature his goodness and mercy. However this too is short lived.

Even with the altar and temple rebuilt, even with God's law being opened and shared things are not right.

Where is God's glorious fiery presence?

What about the kingdom of God?

What about God's kingdom extending to all nations?

What about God's promise to Abraham about his people being a blessing to all nations?

And what about the promised Messianic King?

What about God's promises as recorded in the prophets of Ezra and Nehemiah's day?

Zechariah 2 10 'Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,' declares the Lord. 11 'Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. 12 The Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem. 13 Be still before the Lord, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.'

There are so many loose strands.

There are signs of hope but then they are dashed.

There are signs of renewal and revival but they are fleeting

That's the context as we are introduced to...Nehemiah.

Although we find Nehemiah and Ezra in the middle of the Old Testament, chronologically, the story of Nehemiah comes right at the end the Old Testament. Chronologically Nehemiah goes with Malachi which is the last book in the Old Testament. Malachi is the prophet in Nehemiah's day and he's recorded going around proclaiming things like this...

3 'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the LORD Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.

And declaring things like this..⁴ ² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves...

So is Nehemiah and the book of Nehemiah the one to tie up the loose ends?
Is Nehemiah's building up work the work that will endure forever?
Is it through Nehemiah and this chapter in God's redemptive story that God's promises will be ultimately fulfilled? Let's read on and find out!

Nehemiah Chapter 1

1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

³ They said to me, '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.'

⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. ⁵ Then I said:

'LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ 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. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

⁸ **‘Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.”**

¹⁰ **‘They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹ 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.’**

I was cupbearer to the king.

So Nehemiah is cup bearer to the king Artaxerxes – more on that from Sean next week. Enough to say now that this was a privileged and trusted position. Nehemiah is the third generation to be born in exile. Zerubbabel which means ‘planted in Babylon’ was the first generation. That would be Nehemiah’s grandparent’s generation. It’s important to note that Nehemiah and his family did not return to Jerusalem with the first wave of returnees. Nehemiah like Daniel is living for God in the midst of an enemy superpower.

Susa was just under 1000 miles from Jerusalem. That’s the equivalent distance from here to Monaco, Vienna or Venice. In the 20th year of Artaxerxes reign Nehemiah gets some news that troubles him greatly.

He’s told by his brother...verse 3 **‘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.’**

Either this is fresh news detailing the trouble and disgrace that the people of Jerusalem are in, or it is news that breaks Nehemiah’s heart afresh.

Either way Nehemiah’s heart was broken for the things that broke God’s heart.

So troubled, bothered, heart-broken Nehemiah....

- (a) Makes an action plan
- (b) Shouts, *“Actions stations!”* and rounds up the troops
- (c) Gets busy sorting out the mess
- (d) Turns immediately to King Artaxerxes the highest human resource in the land
- or
- (e) something else.

In Nehemiah's urgency he...verse 4...**sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.**

In his need, in his grief, in his urgency Nehemiah turns to...God!
He turns not to the gods of Babylon or Persia, not to Marduk the god whom Cyrus on his cylinder claimed gave him victor. Nehemiah turns to and prays to Yahweh. The great I AM. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The covenantal God of love. The God of the cosmos.

5'LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ 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.

As theologian Nancy Guthrie says, "Nehemiah goes to the one who loves him and his people more than he does. He goes to the One who is more committed to the people of Jerusalem and the future of Jerusalem and he is. He goes to the One who has the power to deal with the great trouble and shame of his people. He begins to pray to his God and keeps praying."

In verse four Nehemiah says he prayed for *some* days. It turns out that Nehemiah didn't just pray for a *few* days, he prayed for four months. Nehemiah first gets this news **In the month of Kislev (1:1)**
He doesn't approach the king until **the month of Nisan (2:1)**
Four months of praying!
Four months of praying to the...

God of heaven, The Great and awesome God, The covenant God of love (v5)
The listening and watching God, The God of his people (v6)
The Law giving God, The Great I AM God of Moses (v7)
The God who welcomes the repentant (v9)
The redeeming God, The God who is strong to save (v10)

He finishes his prayer by asking God to give him favour (grace) as he approaches King Artaxerxes. Again more on that next week.

What we find is that Nehemiah's is a prayer of confession. But there is not one form of confession there are two.

There is a confessing who God is part – that is confessing, declaring, proclaiming the wonderful truths about the character and nature of God and what he has done.

Then there is a confessing our sin part.

Both are vital in our relationship with God.

Nehemiah in his prayer is not just saying *Oh God please forgive them, those terrible Israelites – they really need forgiven*. Nehemiah acknowledges his Nehemiah self-centred choices, his family's self-centred choices as well as his people's self-centred choices. Nehemiah is saying *Oh God please forgive me, forgive us, I/we really need forgiven!*

V6 I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

Nehemiah is showing us how to pray.

It's really interesting, Nehemiah whilst being emotionally honest with God is not just coming up to God with a 'to do list'.

Nehemiah comes to God not to manipulate God but to remember who God is, what He is like and what He has done. He comes to God to remember God's promises.

In verse 8 when Nehemiah asks God to remember...who is it that has forgotten. Has God forgotten his promises? Is it God that needs to be reminded? No, it is Nehemiah and his people.

⁸ 'Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name."

God doesn't need us to remind Him about his wisdom and power and loving-kindness and justice and mighty arm to save. But as we pray, as we pour out our heart and we get to ask for his help and intervention in our life and the life of our family, community and nation and world, we get to appeal to his character and nature.

In my prayers I cannot appeal to...

...my faithfulness

...my goodness

...my wisdom

...me being worthy or deserving

But I can appeal to His faithfulness, goodness, wisdom and mercy!

In prayer we get to appeal to His faithfulness, goodness, wisdom and mercy!

And we get to pray in Jesus' name.

We get to pray to the God who...

...came down and reigns on high

...knows what it's like to be human because he walked in our shoes

...knows what it's like to live an oppressive empire and live lie to the full

...long for us to return to him so much so that he loving gave his life on the cross so we could be forgiven and friends.

We get to pray to slain and risen King! **'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!' (Revelation 5:12) ...because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign^[b] on the earth.'** (Revelation 5:9-10)

There are many ways we can pray at DMPC there are many ways we do pray – on our own and gathered together. This morning I want to give a few examples of how we gather to pray.

Take Sunday for example...

There is prayer before the service at 10:10am in the small sycamore tree hall.

There are lots of parts to the service and things *'to do!'* because of this, there is a danger that we come to God functionally. Prayer before the service helps us to centre our hearts on Jesus. At this prayer gathering we get to tell Jesus that as well as needing Him we want Him and love Him and we don't want to go through the motions, we long for His presence.

There is prayer during the service – prayers of adoration, confession, thanks and for others. Most weeks we get to join together saying the Lord's Prayer.

There is Sunday prayer at the end of each morning service. This is prayer ministry – where we ask God to minister to the person wanting prayer and whatever is on their heart. We ask God to minister his love, grace, wisdom, truth, justice, power and strength.

There is prayer on Sunday that just happens as we share with one another before and after the service which is great!

There is prayer that happens through the week as we pray, as families pray, as prayer triplets and small groups meet.

There is prayer line where you can text in a prayer request asking us the church to stand with you in prayer for yourself or for someone else or something else that is on your heart.

There is wellbeing prayer which can be arranged by appointment where me, Stef, John and Sheila Watson, Susan Menzies can spend some more time praying with you.

There is the Tuesday weekly prayer gathering. I'm going to ask Anne Allan to come and share a little bit about it.

Q1. Why do you gather on Tuesdays to pray?

Q2. Where and when does it happen?

There is also our Quarterly Revival Prayer Gathering. The next one is this coming Friday 25th 7-8:30pm where we gather to praise God and pray. All the churches in the North East of Edinburgh are invited. It has been good to meet with and pray with other brothers and sisters. It is a prayer meeting where we ask God to revive us as the slide says...

Revive, *ri-vîv* (verb)

to enliven, breathe new life into, bring back from the edge of death

to regain consciousness, strength, vigour, one's senses

to revitalise, stimulate, freshen and refresh

to reintroduce, restore, resurrect, renew

It is good to talk about prayer.
Do you know what is even better to do?
Pray!

I would encourage you if you are gathering to pray, please spend more time praying than talking about prayer. Please spend more time talking with God, than about Him.

Anne is going to come up to pray in a moment.
But before she does there is a prayer that I am asking you to consider praying.
It is this...

Lord Jesus please break my heart for the things that break yours.

Maybe it's a prayer you have never prayed?
Maybe it's a prayer you have prayed before?

This prayer comes with a caution because it is a dangerous prayer. Your life (like Nehemiah's) may never be the same again. You may be moved to see and feel afresh a particular brokenness in our world. There may be particular glorious and painful restoration work that the Lord calls you too or deeper into. This is a prayer where we are asking God to tenderise our heart. Heart-tenderising is joyful and painful process. The prayer is up on the screen. This is not a please repeat after me prayer. It's over to you.

Lord Jesus please break my heart for the things that break yours.