A City in Need
Nehemiah 1

Now, I don't know what it's like where you're from, but in the UK when a Prime Minister is voted out, and has to leave office, it seems that one of the first things he does is start writing his memoirs, and you get the inside story of what really went on behind the scenes.

Well, starting today, we're going to look at just such a set of memoirs. It's the book of Nehemiah. And this is Nehemiah's account, probably written in his retirement, of the extraordinary political events surrounding a crucial period in the history of God's people.

And the book begins in 445BC, in the 20th year of the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes I. And the Persian Empire has engulfed virtually the entire Middle East. And to understand the scale of that, imagine if today Iran (Persia) had conquered Iraq and Kuwait and Jordan and Israel and Egypt and Libya and Lebanon and Syria and Turkey and Armenia and Georgia and Azerbaijan and Afghanistan and Turkmenistan and Pakistan. I mean, this was huge. And within that vast empire, Israel was just a minor province.

And 100 years before, Jewish exiles had begun returning to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity that followed the destruction of Jerusalem. And 75 years have passed since the ministry of the prophet Haggai, whose book we finished last week.

And Nehemiah's memoirs cover a period of 13 tumultuous years, during which he was right in the thick of it. And Nehemiah was an extraordinary man. He was far from perfect, but as a leader he achieved what everyone else said could never be done, and in the process he rebuilt not just a city but a people. So to say Nehemiah was a visionary leader hardly does him justice.

But as Nehemiah himself would tell you, the message of his book is not that he, Nehemiah, was extraordinary, but that the God whom he served was and is extraordinary. And this is an account of God's love and power at work for people who don't deserve it, for people like us. But God does it by using a man like us, Nehemiah, a man living in a foreign country, hundreds of miles from his homeland, just like many of you, and he uses him to be a blessing to his people. So we've got loads to learn from him.

Nehemiah 1:1-11

A Heart for the City

So Nehemiah is living in the city of Susa, south-west Iran. And he's probably grown up in Persia as part of the Jewish exile. Now, I don't know what the key turning points in your life have been, but sometimes life can turn on the seemingly smallest and unimportant events or meetings, can't they? You go to a bar for a drink with your mates, and you meet your future wife. You have a chance encounter with someone, and it leads to a new job opening. And Nehemiah's life changes for ever when his brother Hanani visits him and Nehemiah asks him what is a seemingly innocuous question: v2, 'I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.'

And it seems that Hanani has recently returned from Jerusalem, and Nehemiah wants to know how things are going there for the returned exiles. And notice the order in which he asks. It's the people first, then it's the city. The first thing he's interested in is not the walls or the infrastructure per se, but the people, the survivors of the exile. He cares about the city because he cares about the people who live in it.

So Hanani and his friends tell him: v3, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." Now look at Nehemiah's response to that, v4: 'As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days.' Now that's a bit over the top and emotional isn't it? It's not exactly *English* is it? This is like some grief reaction, like he's just been told someone he loves has just died. So why does he respond like that?

Well there are two reasons. And the first one is to do with the city walls of Jerusalem and what they meant. A city's walls meant peace and security. They created a place where your wife and kids could thrive in safety; they meant protection. But a city without walls was a city that was defenceless. And the exiles had returned to Jerusalem, to a devastated city. And under Haggai they had rebuilt the temple, but without walls Jerusalem and her people were easy game for her enemies. And a renewed Jerusalem with a rebuilt temple, with God back in the centre of civic life, had plenty of enemies.

And we know from the book of Ezra that some years before, the people had attempted to rebuild the walls, but the surrounding peoples had written to King Artaxerxes dropping the heavy hint that once again the Jewish people were rebelling, and that he should forbid any further work on the walls. The king agreed and so Jerusalem's enemies came by force and in a humiliating put down for the people, tore down what little of the walls they had managed to rebuild.

So Nehemiah mourns the way he does because of the sheer human need and tragedy of his own people back in Jerusalem, because of the shame and indignity they were suffering, because of the vulnerability and the powerlessness of the people of God.

But there's a second reason Nehemiah responds the way he does. You see, here is a man who cares deeply about the honour of God's name. In v9 he quotes God as describing Jerusalem as 'the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' So Jerusalem is not just another story of human need. This is the place where God has staked his honour, his reputation. And what does a ruined, defenceless, shamed Jerusalem say about God? So it's not just the good of the people that Nehemiah cares about, it's also the glory of God.

So this book is not just about an ancient guy, rebuilding an ancient wall, in an ancient city, that has nothing to do with you and me. This is about having a heart that cares for the needy and the vulnerable and the oppressed, and wanting to do something about it. This is about having a heart that cares about the state and the health of God's people and his church. This is about having a heart that cares about God's glory and the fame of his name in the eyes of a watching world.

And it was precisely these things that so moved Nehemiah. But they didn't need to, did they? I mean Nehemiah could have had every reason not to be bothered, to show nothing more than a little passing concern: 'Tut tut, that's so bad, but can't do much about it. When's the next ski trip?'

After all, Nehemiah was alright, wasn't he? He lived in Susa, and Susa had walls. He calls it in v1, 'Susa the citadel' – Susa the fortress. And Susa was prosperous and wealthy. It had beautiful buildings and wonderful parks – no ruins and rubble in Susa. No worry about broken down walls enemies outside in Susa. Nehemiah was safe. Why worry about a city without walls when you've already got them? Why worry about Jerusalem when you live in Susa? Why worry about the poor and the needy or the persecuted when you're safe?

You see, it can be hard to identify with those who have no walls when you are wealthy. As Proverbs 18:11 tells us, 'A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination.' Why care about the poor, why care about the church, when I'm ok, behind my high wall?

But there's another reason Nehemiah could have brushed all this off: he had a great job! He tells us in v11, 'Now I was cupbearer to the king.' Now, we hear *cupbearer* and we think waiter, someone near the bottom of the food chain. But being cupbearer was one of the top positions in the royal court, second only to the princes. The cupbearer ensured the king's safety: he was the one who made sure the king didn't get poisoned. So his integrity and trustworthiness had to be beyond question, he was a man who had the king's confidence.

So Nehemiah's made it. He's trusted at the top, he's got influence. But don't you think it's interesting that he waits until the end of the first chapter to tell us that? Why sneak it in at the end like that? Well, maybe this guy wasn't defined by his job. Maybe he didn't get his identity from his position or what the king or others thought of him. Maybe the fact that he had made it was not the most important thing about him.

But whatever it was, his work was not a reason for him not to care passionately about God and his people. It was not a reason for him not to pray or act or sacrifice for the good of others and the glory of God.

But there's one final reason he could have dismissed Hanani's report as requiring nothing of him. He could have said, 'That's dreadful! I wish *someone* would do something. But I'm not the right man. I'm not like Haggai, I'm not a prophet, I'm not a Bible teacher. In fact, there's a very good Bible teacher in Jerusalem already, Ezra, he's a good man, have him do something about it.' But Nehemiah doesn't look at what he can't do. Sure he's not a theologian, he's a practical man, an organiser, a doer. But it is precisely those skills that he deploys for the sake of God's glory and the good of his people. And just because you don't think you have an upfront teaching role, does not mean that God has not positioned you where you are at work or on campus or in your family to enable you to serve his purposes.

You see, the secret to Nehemiah's willing response was how he saw himself: v11, 'O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant.' Was he King

Artaxerxes' servant? Sure. But Nehemiah knew where his ultimate allegiance lay. And all of us will serve one god or another, won't we? And if it's not God we serve it will be some other god, some other idol, whether that is success or career or money or comfort. But when you realise you are God's servant, and when you have a heart for the city, for the advance of God's kingdom, for the defence of the defenceless, and for the glory of God's name then all these opportunities of service open before you.

But Nehemiah faces a problem, doesn't he? If he is to do anything about this, he has got to persuade the King to change his mind and overturn his previous ruling that the walls should not be rebuilt. And history was not on Nehemiah's side. The king had recently faced a number of rebellions. So if Nehemiah goes asking to strengthen Jerusalem and rebuild her walls he risks being seen as just another rebel. And kings do not take kindly to rebels.

So what's he to do?

Praying for the City

Nehemiah knows that if the situation the people of Jerusalem are facing is going to change, he needs God to intervene.

Now when I was a medical student there were some surgeons who even the most cynical of students revered. These men were surgeons to the Queen, they had performed the very first transplants, they had written world-renowned text books. And when they entered the lecture theatre, everyone would go quiet – which is some achievement for medical students! Or if you saw them coming down the hospital corridor, surrounded by their team, every one made way as they swept past. These men were like gods.

And of course, that's how the Persians saw their kings, as demi-gods. Which is what makes Nehemiah's description of King Artaxerxes all the more remarkable: v11, "Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of *this man*." Artaxerxes, is just a man. But Nehemiah's other master, he has all the power.

And AW Tozer wrote that 'what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.' So let me ask you, what comes into your mind when you think about God? What do you believe about him? What do you think about his power, about his mercy, about his heart towards the poor or the lost or the wealthy or the proud? You see Nehemiah could risk and do what he did because of what he believed about God.

Verse 5, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God." So, Nehemiah knew that God was not just his God, he was the Lord God of heaven, great and awesome. God over Artaxerxes, over Susa and over empires. And in comparison to this God, the king and Susa and Jerusalem are just grains of sand in the desert. But when you are in the middle of trouble, the problem you face can seem huge: a destroyed city, a king who has already said no, a marriage in trouble, work or finances under stress, your future in doubt. These things can seem huge to us. But that is because we are looking at them from ground level. But from above, from the perspective of the supreme sovereign of Heaven, the greatest of

problems are tiny. And Jerusalem's problems are dwarfed when Nehemiah starts praying to his God. And church, we need Nehemiah's God.

But Nehemiah knows that God is not just the God of power, he is also the God of unflinching, never-failing, covenant love: v5, 'The great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him.' So Nehemiah knows that it's not just the problems of the city, but his own heart and love for the city that are dwarfed by God's heart and God's love for the city, that any compassion you and I feel is tiny in comparison to God's compassion.

But it didn't look like that on the ground, did it? If you were in Jerusalem right now, it probably felt like God's love was absent, not endless. And Nehemiah knows why. It's that God is not just all-powerful and all-loving, he is also totally holy. But the people of Israel had not stayed faithful to God, they had not kept covenant with him, and as a result had been expelled from the promised land and sent into exile.

Now when you know that, it would be easy to point the finger wouldn't it? To say, you're going through what you're going through because of sin in your life. But Nehemiah doesn't do that. He doesn't assume the position of religious judgmentalism. Because whilst he knows what God is like, he also knows what he, Nehemiah, is like. And he is no better than anyone else. Verse 7: '*We have acted* very corruptly against you.' So Nehemiah doesn't stand apart from the people finger pointing, he identifies with the people in their sin and their need.

Now you can look at society or at the state of the church and you can point out all the faults and the weaknesses and everything that's wrong, and think it's someone else's fault. But Nehemiah stands with them. He acknowledges that he is as guilty and underserving of God's steadfast love as they are.

But he doesn't wallow in sin. He doesn't excuse it, he doesn't try and whitewash it, he doesn't use any weasel words, but neither does he throw a pity party. Instead he throws himself and the people on God's mercy. He knows that God has saved his people before, v10: 'They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.' He knows that it is God who has brought the people back from exile, and so he prays that once more God would come to the rescue.

So if Nehemiah knew all this about God how did he know it? Because if we want the strength to look trouble in the face and pray and act the way he did, we need to know God like this, don't we?

Well, look at v8: 'Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses…' Remember your word, O God. And if you know your Old Testament, you'll know that Nehemiah's praying is saturated in Scripture. Nehemiah knew God's purposes for Jerusalem, from the Bible. He knew the consequences of sin and the punishment of exile, from the Bible. And he knew what God had promised for those who turned back to him, from the Bible. And, in particular he knew all this from the unsexy bits of the Bible like the covenant blessings and curses of Deuteronomy, some of which he quotes back to God virtually word for word.

So Nehemiah is a man marinated in the word of God, and he could pray like he did, and act like he did, because he knew God through his word the way he did.

So Nehemiah had a heart for the city and he prayed for the city. The question is though, how can you and I develop this same kind of heart for the defenceless, for the oppressed, for the persecuted? How can we care about God's people and God's glory and God's church, the way Nehemiah did?

A Saviour for the City

Well, Nehemiah wasn't the only one who wept and prayed for Jerusalem, or who travelled to Jerusalem to save her people. 400 years later Jesus would set his face to go to this same city, not to rebuild its walls, but to be crucified outside its walls. And he prayed and he wept for this city. And as the people of Israel had experienced exile at the hands of the gentiles, so Christ was taken out of the city, exiled from the city, and crucified at the hands of gentiles. And if the people of Israel knew what it was to be separated from God's love and presence, Christ knew more, as he prayed, 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me?'

And he did it all for you. He went to the cross so that you need never know what it is to be sent into exile from God, so that you need never know what it is to be forsaken, but rather come and find true security in the city from above, the New Jerusalem.

And think about Nehemiah's job: cupbearer to the king. Well, Christ came as the one who would drink that poisoned cup – the cup of God's wrath for your sins, as he prayed in the garden, 'Father, let this cup pass from me, yet not my will but yours be done'. And he drank it to the dregs at the cross, so you would never have to taste it. He is the ultimate cupbearer. The King who drinks the poison for you, his servant.

And whilst Nehemiah left his place of privilege and security to serve the powerless, Christ left his place of glory and came as a servant, to serve you when you were powerless. And as Nehemiah identified with the people in their sin, Christ did so more and fully identified with your sin. In Paul's words, he became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

So how can you and I identify with the needy and the oppressed and the sinful in the city? When, like Nehemiah, you know you are just like them, and that Christ had to die for you. You see, when you think you are better than everyone else, either you go to the poor and the defenceless and the sinful in arrogance and pride, or you don't go at all. But when you know that you don't deserve God's grace any more than they do, but that Christ came for you, you'll go to them in love and compassion.

And you can sacrifice for the cause of building up the church and the people and the glory of God, here and elsewhere, when you know, deep inside, that Christ sacrificed everything for you. And when you know his love for you like that, you'll find his love for others. And your heart will grow and not shrink, and you'll pray and you'll act for the glory of God and the good of his people.