

**What is your passion?
Building for the Glory of God
Nehemiah chapter 1**

William Booth (1865-1912)

William Booth, the man who started The Salvation Army, was born in Nottingham. When he was a boy his family descended into poverty and at the age of 20, after a year of unemployment, he was forced to move to London to find work. God laid on his heart and on his wife, Catherine's heart, the terrible condition of the poor - out of the 30 million people who lived in Victorian England 3 million were in abject poverty. William and Catherine came to the conclusion, based on the story of the paralysed man who was brought to Jesus by his four friends, that some people can't help themselves. Unless someone else rescues them, they sink into despair, "Their vicious habits and destitute circumstances make it certain that, without some kind of outside help, they must hunger and sin, and sin and hunger, until, having multiplied their kind, and filled up the measure of their miseries, the gaunt fingers of death will close upon them and terminate their wretchedness." They began to formulate plans to help that 10% poor: (1) the homeless, (2) the unemployed, (3) those addicted to alcohol, (4) criminals and (5) suffering children. At the heart of their plans was preaching the Gospel, "I must assert, wrote William, in the most unqualified way that it is primarily and mainly for the sake of saving the soul that I seek the salvation of the body."

Lord Shaftesbury (1801—1885)

Travel back 50 years and we meet Lord Shaftesbury, born into a wealthy home. Some early life experiences opened his eyes to the world of poverty. One day he came across a poor man's funeral. The pallbearers who carried the crudely made coffin were drunk and as they stumbled along they shouted bawdy songs. On another occasion he saw a man walking along the street with a small lad carrying a round brush on a long pole, "that is chimney sweep and his lad" he was told. These little boys would climb up sooty chimneys to clean them. Their lungs choked with soot; many of them became seriously ill, some of them died. Through these experiences the Lord burned into Shaftesbury's heart a passion to help the poor and he championed their cause in parliament with one law after another.

William Carey (1761—1834)

If we travel back another 50 years we meet William Carey, a shoe-maker from Northamptonshire. He became a Christian one Christmas when he felt convicted of using a counterfeit coin—he knew it was counterfeit—to buy something. He was overwhelmed by shame and God used this experience to bring young William to repentance and faith. He read Captain Cook's "The Last Voyage" which stirred his heart to think about the world beyond little England. He became a pastor and God laid on his heart a passion to reach the world with the Gospel to - something very rare in those days—people in

England only thought about England. (In fact when he mentioned his passion to reach the world he was slapped down by an older man in the immortal words: “Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!”)

Undaunted, and without the help of Google, he composed a most remarkable document “An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens” which tabulated the statistics for every country in the world, how many people lived there, what was their religion, how many Christian believers, and so on.

God laid on the hearts of William and Catherine Booth, Lord Shaftesbury, William Carey - and a great host of other believers in history - a burning passion for the Kingdom of God on earth. All of them in different ways, served the single great end of working to build the kingdom of God.

This term, God helping us, we're planning to go back two and a half thousand years to Nehemiah: God laid on his heart a glowing passion to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Our prayers for these sermons are:

1. That the Lord will give MPC courage as we seek to reach Malvern with the Gospel, from this Easter time onwards
2. That we will be encouraged in the kingdom works we already undertake, whether Seniors and More, Explorers, Trailblazers and Connect.
3. And that all of us will be inspired to put the kingdom of God first in our daily lives, whether that's in our homes, our neighbourhoods, or places of work.

Today, from Nehemiah chapter 1, we see how God called Nehemiah to his great task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem; the genesis, the beginning of his call; and there are many things the Holy Spirit would have us learn from this chapter.

The Story

Nehemiah was a very high official in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes, we're talking 446 BC, so around 2500 years ago. His main role was to protect the king from assassination. He would take a sip of all the wine the king was given to test it for toxins. A highly trusted—though possibly dangerous!—occupation, which gave him daily access to the king.

Here's the background: God's people had been removed from their promised land, about 150 years earlier. Because of their unrepentant sin, God allowed King Nebuchadnezzar to attack and destroy Jerusalem in 586 and deport many Israelites to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple, burnt down the city and tore down the walls. Decades later, some of God's people were allowed to return to Judah, in line with prophecies made by Isaiah and Ezekiel. The temple had been rebuilt, and

an attempt had been made to rebuild the walls - but with no success (Ezra 4). That's the background, as I say, in the year is 446 BC.

“In the month of Kislev (our November-December), while I was in the citadel of Susa (one of the capital cities of the Persian Empire), Hanani, one of my brothers came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile and also about Jerusalem.”

So Nehemiah is going about his daily work one day when a group of Jews show up in Susa. Were they on business? We're not told. Nehemiah discovers that they are in the capital and asks for an interview. Nehemiah wants to know how God's people are getting on. We must stop here. Nehemiah wants to know how the cause of God's kingdom is going. He cares about God's kingdom!

Although he lives in comfortable - and even opulent - surroundings with everything a person could desire, his heart isn't set on worldly wealth and prestige, his heart is set on God's kingdom. His true passion is God's people and the well-being of God's kingdom. And this, brothers and sisters is the biggest challenge of Nehemiah chapter 1 - where is my heart and where is your heart? With all the legitimate duties and responsibilities of this present world, what is the central passion of our lives? With Nehemiah, it was the prosperity of God's kingdom and the wellbeing of God's people.

“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.”

An ancient city without walls or gates was both an embarrassment to the occupants and a serious security risk - because everyone in the city was in danger of imminent attack.

What happens next reveals the true heart of Nehemiah.

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

He sat down - isn't that what you are told to do before bad news is given, in case you keel over? I was on holiday when my sister called me to tell me the news that my mother had passed away. Her first words on the phone were, “Roy sit down.”

Nehemiah sat down and wept at the news he had just heard. He mourned and fasted and prayed for days.

There's a place for deliberate, deep and prolonged sorrow in the life of a follower of Jesus. It's called lament and the Bible is full of it:

“And when Jesus drew near and saw Jerusalem, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19)

When was the last time you or I felt as deeply as Nehemiah - or better Jesus - about the state of God's people, about the kingdom of God? Have we wept over the moral chaos in our national church, the CofE who recently decided to bless what God condemns? Have we grieved over the many towns and cities of our nation without any true Gospel witness? Have we mourned over a son or a daughter, a mother, a father, who is far away from God?

Compared to Nehemiah's heart, compared to the heart of Jesus, where is my heart? Isn't the truth, often as cold as ice? Last year Yvonne and I went to Poland as you know, to visit church friends Karol and Marta and their church. We discovered that the evangelical church in Poland is tiny. 90% of the municipalities of that nation of 38 million have no Bible witness. Was I concerned? Yes. Did I weep, I confess not.

*“Weak is the effort of our heart,
And cold our warmest thought.”*

May God revive my heart, our hearts!

Nehemiah could have made a thousand excuses why he could not help! He was not a builder! He was doing a very important job already! If the last attempts to rebuild the walls failed, what chance did he have? And what if the king says no, that will put a real strain in his day to day relationship! And what if the king got cross with him? Artaxerxes would not be the first despot to kill a man for asking the wrong question. And besides palace life was comfortable, I mean why get caught up in something that might bring all manner of troubles into your life? Just chill man!

Nehemiah could have made a thousand excuses why he personally could not help.

But the divine fire in his belly would not go away and he was determined to do what he could to help God's people and the cause of God's kingdom.

In one moment, through this almost accidental meeting, Nehemiah's life was transformed, from comfortable wine-taster to dangerous wall-builder! Are you prepared for such a call? It might come this year! Fifteen years ago Sarah Wilkins was a primary teacher in a comfortable school in Clifton, and then through a series of circumstances God called her to serve him in dangerous South Africa.

Are you open to God leading you in different direction, presently heading? I ask that especially of you young people? But everyone! You have plan A for the future, but God may have plan B. Open to plan B?

Nehemiah decides to ask king Artaxerxes for help to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but first he asks God to soften the king's heart so the king would be receptive to his request:

"Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man." (verse 11)

What is so remarkable about his prayer, which he has written down for us to read, is the lead up to this request, the pre-amble if you like. Before he gets to the request:

There's worship:

"O Lord, God of heaven, the great an awesome God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands."

There's humble pleading:

"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." (Says much the same again in verse 11)

There's confession:

"I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house have committed against you. We have acted wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commandments, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses."

Why were God's people in such a mess? Why the walls destroyed and the gates burnt down? Because of the sin of God's people. "I'm to blame too" says Nehemiah! The Church of England has gone astray, brothers and sisters, because we Bible believing evangelicals haven't been loud or clear enough about the Bible's clear teaching on marriage and sexuality! We're to blame too!

There's humble argument. Did you know that the Bible is filled with argument prayers which tell God why he should answer?

"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, if you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the nations, 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 to the place I have chosen them from there and bring them to the place as a dwelling for my name." Lord you have promised to bring your people back if they repent! They are doing that, so fulfil your promise!

“They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand...” How can you not save your own bought people? You've just got to hear my prayer!

If you have a wayward son or daughter, you can pray like this, “Lord you have promised in the way they should go, they will not depart from them. Now consider my son or daughter who was brought up in your ways but has wandered from you; bring them back according to your promise.”

Hold God to his promises!

One simple request, “Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.” But preceded by worship, earnest pleading, confession and humble argument.

Three Lessons to take away

1. A lesson in prayer—there's more to prayer than requests

Is our prayer life balanced? Let us make sure that along with requests, our prayers are filled with worship, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God,” humble pleading, “let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you today,” confession of sin, “we have acted wickedly before you,” and holding God to his promises.

2. A lesson in lament –there's nothing wrong with tears.

Nehemiah wept and mourned for days. The plight of God's people deeply affected him. “There's a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven,” wrote Solomon, including, “a time to weep as well as a time to laugh, a time to mourn as well as a time to dance.” In our churches, we think we need to fix someone who is weeping, because something is wrong with them! Not so, says Nehemiah, and not so, the Man of sorrows acquainted with grief.

3. A lesson in priorities—what is your true passion?

But if I am not mistaken, the greatest lesson of Nehemiah chapter 1 is about our life priorities. Though Nehemiah was a cup-bearer to a mighty king, his number one concern was the cause of God's kingdom. Is that true of you and I? Though you are _____ (fill in the blank), at school, just married, family, in employment, retired, what is your true and greatest passion?

The answer is easily revealed by what we love most, think about most, talk about most, and spend most of our free time and disposable money on. To the crowds whose minds were filled with worry over material things, what food to eat, what clothes to wear, Jesus said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6)

And to us, Jesus says the same, “Seek first the Kingdom of God.”