

Nehemiah 1:3-4

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Preacher: Iver Martin

[0 : 00] Can I just spend two minutes of your time, please, explaining the last item there on the notice sheet, which I hope you'll pay particular attention to, because it only happens once every five years.

As you know, our church is part of the presbytery of, our congregation is part of the presbytery of Edinburgh and Perth, and that presbytery consists of ministers and elders from each congregation.

And every five years, a committee is sent to each congregation within that presbytery to simply encourage and to help in any way they can, to ask, to talk to myself, to talk to the elders, to the deacons, and to you, the congregation.

Because obviously, the people in the presbytery don't all know what goes on here, and some of them don't know very much about what goes on at all, in fact, and very few.

I don't want to show them much detail about. So, they want us to know that they are concerned, they have a prayerful and a real concern, and an interest in Bon Accord, as they have in every other congregation in the presbytery.

[1 : 14] And one of the ways they do this is by sending this committee to meet with the congregation, and just to discuss any matters of concern that there might be.

Now, the committee is going to meet with us on the 22nd of January, that's a Wednesday evening, and it will be at 8 o'clock. Now, that's a slightly later time than the normal prayer meeting time, and the reason for that is because beforehand they're going to be meeting with the deacons' court and the session.

And the earliest they can do that is 6.30. And so, the congregational meeting is going to be at 8 o'clock, but Neil Macmillan assures me that he will not take up too much time with the preliminaries.

At the same time, opportunity will be given at that meeting for you to express any matter that you wish to bring before them. Alternatively, Neil can be contacted privately, and I've given his address there, and his telephone number and email address for anyone who wishes to make private contact with Neil.

And Neil, of course, as you know, is a very approachable fellow, and he'd be very willing to discuss any matter with you that you feel is a matter of concern.

[2 : 27] And a comment can be made, either positively or negatively, or whatever comment you feel is an important one to make to this committee. So, I think that that kind of fills in.

If you wish to have any more information about this visitation, please don't hesitate to speak to myself or one of the elders. And I hope also that there will be a good attendance at the meeting on the 22nd.

So, these are the notices then, and I'll repeat that this evening for the benefit of those who weren't here this morning. Let's turn to the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament.

The book of Nehemiah. Page 485 in the NIV Bible.

Page 485, the book of Nehemiah. I'm going to read the first couple of chapters. They are not long chapters. There's a total of 20 verses. If I read the whole of that passage from 1 to 2.

[3 : 38] The words of Nehemiah, son of Hakaliah. In the month of Kislev, in the 20th year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Han and I, 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.

They said to me, those who survived the exile, 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.

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

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself, and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly towards 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. 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.

[5 : 12] They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 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. I was cupbearer to the king. In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought to him, I took the wine and gave it to the king.

I had not been sad in his presence before. So the king asked me, Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart. I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, May the king live forever.

Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire? The king said to me, What is it you want?

Then I prayed to the God of heaven and I answered the king, If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.

[6 : 19] Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, How long will your journey take? And when will you get back? It pleased the king to send me, so I set a time. I also said to him, If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates so that they will provide me safe conduct until I arrive in Judah.

And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy.

And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

When Sanballat, the Horonite, and Tobiah, the Ammonite official, heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

Well, I want to leave it there. I thought that was the end of the chapter but it's verse 10. That's the passage I want to read. May God bless to us his word.

[7 : 29] Now we're going to sing again this time from the Green Books in Psalm 127. Psalm 127. And we're singing to the tune Evan.

We're singing from the Green Books, the supplementary versions. And we're singing 127. Unless the Lord builds up the house, its builders toil in vain.

Unless he keeps the city safe, they vainly watch, maintain. The tune is Evan. Psalm 127 from the Green Books. And we'll stand to praise God together. Amen. Unless the Lord builds up the house, its builders toil in vain.

Unless he keeps the city safe, within the watch, its builders toil in vain.

In vain you rise up with the dawn, and let our spell we keep, that you may toil for food to eat.

[8 : 58] He gives his loved ones sleep. Sons are a precious habitat, a blessing from the Lord.

The children that are born to us are truly his reward.

Like a rose in a warrior's hand, are children of one's youth.

The man whose quivers who loves them is blessed by God in truth.

Such men will not be put to shame, that will not be their fate.

[10 : 30] When they contend against their foes, who face them in the gate.

Let's turn to Nehemiah. Nehemiah chapter 1. And we'll take up the reading again at verse 3. Verse 3. Or rather, verse 2.

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. They said to me, those who survived the exile are back in the province, 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. When I heard these things, I sat down and wept, and for some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah, the story of Nehemiah, is one of the most inspiring stories in the Bible. One of the great stories in the Bible, but there are other great stories, and because of their particular nature, they don't, we can't relate to them as well as we can relate to Nehemiah.

[12 : 09] For example, there's Samson, all the things that Samson did in the book of Judges. But Samson was given extraordinary strength, and he would never have been able to do the things that he was able to do if it wasn't for the extraordinary, superhuman strength that God gave him for that reason.

The difference between Nehemiah and Samson is that Nehemiah was an ordinary man who did an ordinary thing. And God, I believe, is coming to us in passages like this, and he's reminding us that ordinary things need to be completed by ordinary people.

That there is a job to be done, and it can be done by you and by me, without being given superhuman strength or abilities.

So the beauty of Nehemiah is it's accessible for you and for me today. Now this was 440-something BC, and this was after the Israelites had been allowed to go home.

You remember, of course, that the Israelites had been in exile, they had been in captivity in Babylon for 70 years, and then when Cyrus came to the throne of Babylon, he allowed the Israelites to go home.

[13 : 29] At that point, at that initial point, 50,000 Israelites went home to Jerusalem, and right away, they started building the temple. But what was started with great zeal, with great enthusiasm, quickly came to a halt.

They became discouraged. Local residents who had settled in that area began to discourage them, and it had a great effect. The temple stopped being built.

They stopped building. It was 16 years later that under the influence of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, that the people started rebuilding the temple once they began to rebuild the temple once again, and they eventually completed it.

But the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins, and one of the things that amazes me about this is how long people can tolerate ruins, how long people can tolerate something that clearly should not be something defective, and something that is broken.

It lay that way for ages, until Nehemiah, around about 445 BC, in the chapters and the details that we read in this chapter, until he was moved in his heart to go back to Jerusalem and to organise the rebuilding of the wall once again.

[14 : 53] And this he was able to do in the remarkable time of 52 days. Now that's not because he had superhuman ability. It's because everyone gathered round him, and everyone played their part in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem again.

And this enormous task was completed in a remarkably short time of 52 days. Now, I want us to think today of four, the four factors that come together in chapters 1 and chapter 2 to make up the beginning of this important work.

And I want us to notice, first of all, that Nehemiah's work began with something which was not what it should have been. It began with something that wasn't what it should have been.

And this was told to Nehemiah by one of his brothers, whether that means that it was one of his own brothers, or a fellow Israelite, we don't know.

But one of my brothers, he says in verse 2, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile and about Jerusalem. And it was during that conversation that it came to light that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins.

[16 : 11] They had been burned down, and they had been neglected, they had been left, just as they were. And that was something that made a deep impression upon Nehemiah.

You know, it's amazing how great achievements arise out of small beginnings. And this is a small beginning. It's also amazing how great achievements arise out of small conversations.

Many's a conversation has taken place that has resulted in something great taking place, but only when that conversation leads to action.

Many's another conversation leads to nothing, because it begins and ends with talk. You know, it's amazing how good we are at identifying problems.

It's a different thing altogether to take that problem and actually do something about it. But you have to identify the problem in the first place. And it has to make a deep impression on you, so deep that it has to lead to some kind of action.

[17 : 21] Now, why was it that the fact that the walls of Jerusalem being broken down was such a problem, such an issue to Nehemiah?

Why did it bring him to tears? After all, he was hundreds of miles away. He was far, far away. Was it just sentimental value? After all, he tells us in chapter one that Jerusalem was a place where his fathers were buried.

Was it just to make good a graveyard? Or was it some form of national pride that gripped the heart of Nehemiah? Was that what motivated him to go back?

No. There was something far, far deeper than that. It was what the walls of Jerusalem represented to Nehemiah. It's what they stood for that really motivated him.

He knew it was more than bricks and mortar. He knew that without the walls, there could not be truly a Jerusalem. Jerusalem was dependent upon his walls.

[18 : 18] For one thing, for its safety and for its security. They were open to attack. They were vulnerable. The city was vulnerable to attacking by enemies if the walls were not complete.

But he also knew that the walls signified the completion of the city of God. The city where God had promised to establish his name.

And Nehemiah knew that the importance of Jerusalem lay in the covenant that God had made with his people Israel. And Jerusalem stood for God in the midst of his people.

Jerusalem stood for the collection of God's people as they would meet. Jerusalem was where the temple was. And the temple was where the glory of God was. And the glory of God was the living and true God having entered into covenant relationship with his people Israel and to make himself known in Jerusalem.

It was where God met with his people and where the people of God met with him. In other words, what we're saying is that Jerusalem in its visible form was the Old Testament equivalent of the church.

[19 : 33] And that's why we sing words in the Psalms and we sing them with enthusiasm and with great meaning and we sang them just now. I joyed when to the house of God go up they said to me Jerusalem within thy gates our feet shall standing be.

Now we're not talking when we sing these words we're not singing about the Jerusalem that exists today in Israel. Wouldn't give us any joy at all to go to Jerusalem the way it is today.

What we're singing in those words is what Jerusalem stood for in Old Testament language and it represented in Old Testament language the people of God as they worshipped him.

And of course we sing those words in their New Testament context. The Jerusalem we sing about in those words stands for the church the gathering of God's people together like what we do on a Sunday coming together to worship so when we sing those words we're singing about what we're doing today.

We're worshipping the God of God because he means everything to us because he means the world to us because of what he's done in the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore it fills us with joy.

[20 : 43] It's not a superficial joy it's a deep seated joy in knowing that we are engaging this morning in covenant relationship with the living and the true God. A God who hears and a God who answers our prayer and a God who delights to meet with us.

Don't ever lose sight of the fact that every time we come here we're coming to meet with God. And it's like what they said about Moses. He knew God face to face and he spoke to God as a man speaks with his friend.

That's what we're doing because we're in covenant relationship with God and God not only tolerates us he delights to come and meet with us and teach us and encourage us and to stir us up sometimes through his word.

I hope that that's what we'll do this morning as we listen to his but Jerusalem was vulnerable its walls were broken down and that's something that Nehemiah simply could not live with.

What amazes me is how the people who actually lived in Jerusalem put up with this wreckage with this ruin this chaos for so many years.

[21 : 59] But it's amazing you know you do put up with you can learn to live with ruin you can learn to live with something that's very unsightly once you get used to it it's as if it's not there at all.

Although the first 50,000 people going back to Jerusalem and they say this is terrible if you don't do anything about it then what's terrible to one generation actually becomes the norm for the next generation.

And it's only because Nehemiah had never visited Jerusalem at that time and he heard about this and he said this is ridiculous this can't be true the walls how can you live like that how can you live with walls in such a condition walls that aren't walls at all and I'm sure the people would say well we don't know it's amazing how much you can actually learn to tolerate just because it is because it is but that doesn't mean to say it should be and the question this morning is not what is but what should be and as we consider Jerusalem as it represents the church we're also asking is there anything in the church as we know it that should not be and have we identified the problems that should not be have we identified the sections of the wall that leave us vulnerable and things issues that need to be addressed that's what that's where

Nehemiah really comes to us and speaks to us I believe this morning because Jerusalem represented the people of God the church of God and nothing was being done about the problem that existed now it's one thing to talk about it the chapter opens up with a conversation but I notice that only two verses are given to the conversation and the whole of the rest of the book is given to what was actually done about it well that's now the way it should be for the problem is that more often than all too often in the Christian church the conversation takes up the whole of the book and nothing is ever done about it it's easy to talk and it's easy to identify the problems it's a different thing altogether to actually go ahead and to do something about it and I hope that the first challenge that this chapter brings us is a willingness and an eagerness on our part when we see issues that need to be addressed walls that need to be rebuilt we must do something about it it's not good enough to just talk about it secondly

Nehemiah's work arose out of an inward and a growing prayerful spiritual concern his work arose out of an inward and growing prayerful spiritual concern Nehemiah might have reacted impulsively many people are impulsive people something within them something within their character and their personality reacts to something and say right that's I'm going to do something but that's not what Nehemiah did he took the matter so seriously that it had to arise out of an inward it wasn't a superficial concern it wasn't a knee jerk reaction it was a prayerful spiritual concern that deeply deeply moved him now that had to happen because Nehemiah in the later chapters in this book is going to come up with problems he's going to come up with opposition principally from these two characters we meet in chapter 2

[25 : 54] Tobiah and San Balat now their intention is to bring about the destruction of Nehemiah's work and Nehemiah's going to have to learn how to face with these characters he's going to have to face with opposition and he's also going to be disappointed later on in the book at some of the attitudes he's going to see amongst his own people his expectations of the people of God were shattered in certain things you'd have to read it to find out what I'm talking about so he needs to be able to go back to this very first starting point and to know that he's moved not just by some kind of whim but he's moved by true spiritual prayerful concern and we as God's people must be motivated by that same spiritual concern that same longing that same force and the force of course it's not just a force it's the presence and the power of the

Holy Spirit that dwells that dwell within Nehemiah and dwells within each one of us the Holy Spirit gives us a concern and that concern is for the people of God and for the church of God and for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and that concern has to be an active concern for that thirdly Nehemiah's work began out of his willingness willingness to do the work coupled with the opportunity being given to him you notice in chapters one and chapters two there was a willingness which arose out of prayer but it was also it was also an opportunity being given to him now that willingness was to do the work himself and it was what we call initiative he was prepared to having seen what needs to be done to go ahead and do it himself not to wait for someone else to do it if he had done that and I guess that's what all the residents of

Jerusalem were doing they knew the walls were broken down they had lived with it but everyone thought that somebody else was going to do it everybody thought somebody else was going to take the initiative but nobody did and for years and years and years it was now 70 years since the first exile had gone back from Babylon to Jerusalem 70 years later the walls are still in ruins why because everybody thinks someone else is going to do it and it took this one ordinary man living in Babylon to say I'll do it I'll organise the rebuilding and at last after 70 years he is the first man who is prepared to stand up and say I'm going to do something about this because this is so important to me you see if something is really really really important to you you'll go ahead and do it and if you don't do something then it really is a problem inside us in terms of how important something is it means that we don't recognise something is important it's all a reflection on what the walls meant to the people of Jerusalem and to the

Jewish people at that time but when Nehemiah was moved in his own heart to do something he got up and he did it and he wasn't prepared to wait for someone else to do it he got up and he did it and it's the same with the church of God today God moves in ordinary people as they see things that need to be done they have to take the initiative and do it and not wait for someone else to do it I know that God has given us leadership and that leadership should be in place should be in place but that doesn't mean to say that everyone else sits back and does nothing the church is everyone everyone we're all part of God's God's community here in Bonacord if you're a visitor you come from some other church same same applies to you where you are that applies to us who worship regularly here it's not the church is not you know how so many times you hear people talking about the church and the way they talk is as if the church is someone else

I don't know why the church doesn't do this and you think who is the church the church is you the church is me and if you think the church really if you're really convicted about what the church should be doing then do it by all means let's do it right but don't wait for other people it has to be from the people of God themselves as they're moved and convicted by the Holy Spirit let's take initiative and let's act upon what we know needs to be done if you see something that needs if there's something I mean if we had a wall outside our garden outside our house that need to be repaired you just go ahead and arrange for it to get repaired it's the same with the people of God we have to act together but also that initiative had to be as he was given opportunity to do so and that opportunity is what we call

[31 : 34] God's providence as he prayed there was one thing that stood in his way his job was the cup bearer to the king the king's butler that's a very important position he held in Babylon the king was archerxes and the king was already being quite benevolent to the Jews he was already giving them all kinds of favors and yet Nehemiah knew that though he wanted to go back and organize the rebuilding of the wall he knew that he'd have to get the king's permission to do so the king says no that's it there's no choice he has to stay where he is so there's one thing that stands in his way and so he prayed he prayed that God would change the heart of the king so the door would be open for him what happened as he prayed God answered his prayer the heart of the king was open the door was open then he could go that's the way that God works he works in terms of our willingness plus the opportunity that he gives you can't have one without the other you can't have willingness without the opportunity and you can't have the opportunity without the willingness you have to have both so let's work as a congregation towards a willingness as well as pray for opportunity to do

God's work but then fourthly Nehemiah's work began out of his willingness to make sacrifices his willingness to make sacrifices I said before that he had a good job he had a career in front of him and yet as he had a comfortable life he would have had a comfortable residence he would have had his servants quarters and the king he had a job for life cupbearer for the king he would have had his life mapped out for him it was a difficult life and the king looked as if he enjoyed good relationships with king Archseerxes the king liked him he obviously liked him because he was used to a smile from his face as he served him with his wine there was a happy working relationship between the king and Nehemiah until of course the day when he came and he had a sad countenance he looked sad and the king knew there was something behind that sadness and so when he asked him of course why his face was sad that he told him that he was sad because of the ruin because of the wall of

Jerusalem and Nehemiah was willing as the king gave him opportunity to go back Nehemiah was willing to come away from that comfortable life at least for a while for a time and go back and face all the difficulties and the trials and the frustrations of building the wall of Jerusalem you see there has to be a willingness to make sacrifice in our work in the kingdom of God we have to be willing to come out of our comfort zones and the problem with the church in the west and this is a problem which doesn't just affect one church it affects the whole of the church particularly in the west it's not because there's a shortage of skill it's not because there's a shortage of Christians there's loads of Christians it's not because there's a shortage of opportunities or abilities it is because there is an unwillingness on the part of many

Christians to come out of their comfort zones for the sake of the people of God how willing are we this morning to make that sacrifice because God always asks us to make sacrifices for his kingdom for our part in his kingdom how willing are you to make sacrifices you know one of the most challenging verses and this was going back a few years when the temple was being rebuilt but the problem was the same and the word that God used to the people of Israel at that time in Haggai chapter 3 was this then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin it's one of the most challenging words some of the most challenging words in the whole of the

Old Testament because they reflect an attitude which prevailed in Israel at that time an attitude which kind of gave up on the house of God and decided to devote their energies on their own private affairs their private lives their careers their homes their interests their hobbies but God spoke to them and he says is this a time to be lining your walls with panel when the house of God lies in a ruin and perhaps God is saying the same thing to us on the first Sunday of a new year will this be 2003 a year of putting up with broken walls tolerating things that should not be or will it be a year of prayer of initiative of action and sacrifice that involves every single one of us not just me not just the one or two who are active but it involves every single one of us coming together and doing all the tasks which a congregation like this requires you know there's an enormous amount of activity that needs to be carried out in a congregation like this in a short time we'll be looking for someone to open the door at least on a part time basis to open the door on a

[37 : 48] Sunday for the services who's willing to do that it's not a difficult job but it's a necessary job it has to be done it's a job that results in the worship of God in the place being opened and the heating turn all of that has to happen there's the ongoing tape ministry there is the communication side of a church like this there's the intimations that need to be copied and made up every week there's the newsletter that needs to be brought together continually on a month to month basis all of these things need help there's the Sunday school there's the teens group there's the boys club the girls club all of which are opportunities to share with young people and it really grieves me to hear time and time again the difficulty that these leaders are having in not being able to find volunteers

I don't understand that I don't understand that here are real opportunities to share our knowledge and our teaching and our experience with younger people and we say how important young people are and yet when it comes down to it I know we have a youth worker but he can't do everything he needs help and yet one of the recurring problems is the lack of time available and the lack of volunteers there are to help with such a work what's 2000 in year a three what kind of a year is it going to be for this congregation it depends on your willingness to get involved you can't do everything but you can do something I know that there are tasks which perhaps you're not cut out for that's fine nobody is expecting anyone to do something which they're not good at and not cut out for but there's such a variety of work that needs to be done and such a huge load of work that needs to be done there's always going to be work for someone you know chapter 3 in Nehemiah it seems to be a kind of almost on the surface a pointless list of people who were eventually involved in building the wall it's just names and sections and who they were and what they did and it seems well why doesn't he just summarize the whole thing and say well the wall was built by a whole bunch of people no he doesn't because it's important that we get the message that this wall wasn't just built by

Nehemiah he was the organizer he was the initiator but the wall was actually built by hundreds of willing ordinary people who were prepared to just put their shoulder to the work and to do it and to get it done and not become discouraged and to see it through to the end we apologize that the complete service was not recorded however we hope to resolve this problem soon thank you for listening