

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 12th January 2020 – 11:00am
'Catching the Vision through Prayer!'
Nehemiah 1:1-11

Introduction

Last Sunday morning we turned to Habakkuk ch.2:1-4 and I talked about Vision.

Q. How are we going to see the ABC 2020 Vision fulfilled? We saw four things:

1. A Vision needs to be **Grasped** (v.1)
2. A Vision needs to be **Shared** (v.2)
3. It takes **Time** to see a Vision fulfilled (v.3)
4. It takes **Faith** to see a Vision fulfilled (v.4)

The **Grasping** of a Vision, the **Sharing** of a Vision, the **Time** it takes to see a Vision fulfilled, and the **Faith** that is needed to see a Vision fulfilled.

This morning, we're going to start a New Series in **Nehemiah**.
Nehemiah is a book all about seeing a Vision become a Reality.

Nehemiah records the last events in Old Testament history in our Bibles. It's even later than **Esther** (a book we looked at a few years ago). 40 years later. It's even later than the Book of **Malachi** – the last book in our Old Testaments. It's even later than the Minor Prophet **Joel**, who foretold the Day of Pentecost! **Ezra-Nehemiah** is one book in the Hebrew Bible and it contains the last recorded events of the Old Testament period, before God goes silent for 400 years, and doesn't say a word, until he speaks to Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke chapter 1.

Do you remember the **Four Songs** we looked at over the Christmas period?
Mary's Song, Zechariah's Song, the Angels' Song and Simeon's Song.

When God spoke to Zechariah in Luke 1:13 he said, **'Do not be afraid!'** Those were the first words God had said to anyone in over 400 years. He said,

***'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.'** (Luke 1:13-17)*

Away back in **Nehemiah's** time God was trying to **prepare his people** to get ready to receive their Messiah – the One He had promised throughout the O.T. But they weren't ready! Jerusalem, the City of God, wasn't ready. It still lay in utter ruins – from the time that the people of Judah were carried off into exile by the Babylonians in 587 BC, Jerusalem had lain in ruins ever since – burnt to the ground. It's walls were torn down, its gates had been burned off their hinges. The Temple had been ransacked. It was an absolute mess!

After **Daniel** had been in exile for 70 years in Babylon with many of God's people, the time came near for the exile to be over, and for God's people to be allowed to return to Jerusalem. He discovered this while reading in Jeremiah.

Eventually the Persians defeated the Babylonians as the Superpower of the day. And one of their kings, **Cyrus**, King of Persia gave the order for the Jews to go back to Jerusalem. He did that in the year 538 BC. (See Ezra 1:1-4).

First of all, **Zerubbabel**, took the first wave of exiles back with him to Jerusalem. His job was to start to rebuild the Temple, to get worship reinstated in Jerusalem. Well, he made a start, and managed to get the Altar erected, and sacrifices began to be offered again. But it was all in the open air – there was no Temple to house it. The prophet **Haggai** was used to encourage the people to get going again, and to get the Temple finished so the altar to the Living God was now inside, in the holy of holies, behind the heavy curtain once again (520-516 BC).

About 60 years later, **Ezra** took the second wave of people back from exile, and they managed to get the Temple back into proper working order again, as Ezra the priest took them back to the truths of God's Word, and saw revival (457 BC).

As we open the Book of **Nehemiah**, we're getting ready for the third phase of the return. The third wave of people are about to go back to Jerusalem, under Nehemiah's leadership, and this time their task would be to rebuild the **walls** of Jerusalem.

Try to get some of these people into your head from after the Exile in the O.T...

Daniel was rescued from the **Lion's Den in Babylon...**

Esther became **Queen in Persia**, the new Empire...

Zerubbabel took the first wave of exiles back to build an **Altar** to the Living God. **Ezra** took the second wave back to Jerusalem to reinstate true **Temple** worship. **Nehemiah** is now about to go back to rebuild the **Walls** of Jerusalem.

So Nehemiah was the last person that God spoke to in the OT, revealing His will to him - Revealing a Vision to get him to finish the task of rebuilding Jerusalem. Now you could think of it as just a matter of rebuilding a few walls and erecting a few gates around Jerusalem... Or you could think of it in far greater terms:

Preparing a City, and Preparing a People, ready to welcome the Messiah!

Likewise in our day we know that the Messiah is coming again. We know that Jesus is coming back again. In the meantime, we busy ourselves in the work of Armagh Baptist Church, and we busy ourselves trying to plant a church in Keady. Why? Is it just a matter of looking after a building, and running a few services?

No! We're in the task of ***Preparing a People, ready to welcome their Saviour!***

Maybe you've heard this story before. It's all about perspective on your work:

"A man came across three masons who were working at chipping chunks of granite from large blocks. The first seemed unhappy at his job, chipping away and frequently looking at his watch. When the man asked what he was doing, the first mason responded, rather curtly, "I'm hammering this stupid rock, and I can't wait 'til 5 o'clock so I can go home!"

"A second mason, seemed to be more interested in his work. He was hammering diligently and when asked what it was that he was doing, he answered, "Well, I'm moulding this block of rock so that it can be used with others to construct a wall. It's not bad work, but I'll certainly be glad when it's done!"

"A third mason was hammering at his block fervently, taking time to stand back and admire his work. He chipped off small pieces until he was satisfied that it was the best he could do. When he was questioned about his work he stopped, gazed heavenward, and proudly proclaimed, "I'm building a cathedral!"

"Three men, three different attitudes, all doing the same job."

Nehemiah was concerned about **Walls**, but he was also concerned about **People** as we will soon see. We shouldn't just be concerned about putting up a lovely church building, and keeping it looking its best. We should be concerned about what's going on inside these **walls**, in the hearts and lives of the people who come here. And just as important, we should be concerned about the hearts and lives of the people outside these **walls**, who might never wander in here to see what we're doing. And that's why we need to go out there, and go over to Keady,
To Prepare a People who are ready to welcome their Saviour!

If you like, we're not just chipping at stones, or building walls, we're building a Cathedral – a spiritual house rising to become a place where God dwells in the hearts of men and women as they are added to His Kingdom! (cf. Eph.2:19-21).

In chapter one, we're going to see how Nehemiah **Grasped** this Vision...

1. The Report he Received (vs.1-3)

Where was Nehemiah at the start of this story? (v.1)

- He was in the Citadel of Susa, or Susa the Capital. That's in Persia. Modern Day Iran. (Iran has been in the News for this past week). Susa was one of the Capital cities of the Persian Empire. There was a summer capital (Ecbatana) and there was a winter residence in Susa, further south. We came across Susa before in the story of Esther. It's where she lived too! (Esther 1:2 etc). It's where wicked Haman tried to wipe out the Jews completely, from off the face of the earth, just 40 years previously! (Esther c.478. / Nehemiah c.438) If that had happened, there would have been no point rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and no point preparing a people for the Messiah, because the Messiah would never have been born, i.e. No Saviour!
- It was the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Persian Emperor). He came after the Xerxes that Esther was married to. He reigned 464-424 BC.
- It was the month of Chislev (Nov-Dec – So it's wintertime).
- It was 444BC – the last event before 400 years silence before Christ.

Who brought him the report? (v.2a)

- *'Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah'*
- So, some of the Jews who had already returned to Jerusalem in the previous wave of returning exiles under Ezra, had now come back to Susa, in Persia, on business. They bring a report to Nehemiah.
- So, there must have been some coming and going after the exile.

What was Nehemiah concerned about? (v.2b)

- **People** *'I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile?' (v.2b)
'The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.'* (v.3a)
- **Walls** *'I asked them...concerning Jerusalem' (v.2b)
'The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates destroyed by fire.'* (v.3b)

Do you see now what I mean when I said Nehemiah might have been concerned about the **walls** of Jerusalem, and that's maybe what he's famous for, but his first question, and the first response of his friend Hanani, was to do with the **people!**

***The Remnant** were in great trouble and shame.
The Wall of Jerusalem is broken down.*

Our task today is not about putting up church buildings, and maintaining walls of bricks and mortar – our task is to win people for Jesus, to lay a good foundation of the Gospel in people's lives, and to see them built up in their faith, and part of the body of Christ, the Church. - N.B. The church is the people, not the building!

So Nehemiah now has information about the people back in Jerusalem, and of the state that the City of Jerusalem itself is in. He's thousands of miles away in Persia, in the Citadel of Susa, one of the most important capitals on earth, so what does he do? What **can** he do? He can pray! - That brings us secondly to...

2. The Prayer he Prayed (vs.4-11)

(v.4) *'As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days'*

'I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven'

The first thing that Nehemiah thought of doing, was to pray!
That's not always the case with us, is it?

But thank you, if you joined with us in prayer throughout the week that has just gone by. We met night by night Monday through to Friday, for an hour or two of prayer each evening. It's been a busy week for many reasons, but it's still an important thing to do, and I want to thank you for being here, to start the New Year with prayer.

This is 2020. We're excited about the year ahead. We're believing that God is going to do great things this year in Armagh & Keady, so it's right that we began this year in prayer. Because apart from Him, we can do nothing!

Look at **how** Nehemiah prayed. He prayed earnestly. He sat down, he wept, he mourned for days. The news he had just heard about Jerusalem made him sad! When you look out over Armagh, or into Keady, does it make you sad, when you see the state that men and women have got themselves into? When you see young people literally wasting their lives, and in many cases doing themselves harm? Does it grieve you? Does it ever cause you to weep and mourn for them?

What does Nehemiah do? He continues to fast and pray before '*the God of heaven*'. He's coming before the only one who can do anything about it – the God of heaven. And look how he addresses him in prayer.

(v.5) *And I said 'O **LORD God of heaven**, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments...'*

Nehemiah's God, wasn't just the God of heaven, although he was that. Any Persian could have referred to their god as the god of heaven. Nehemiah's God was **The LORD – Yahweh**. That was his name. That's who he addresses in prayer – the Covenant-making and the Covenant-keeping God. And although we're nearly at the very last act of the Old Testament, Nehemiah is still hoping, trusting, depending on the fact, that this God, His God, keeps His Covenant.

Through all the ups and downs of life in the Old Testament – through the Slavery of Egypt, and the Exodus, through the Wilderness wanderings and the Conquest of the Promised Land, through the period of the Judges, and the United Kingdom of Israel, and the Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and through the 70 years of Exile in Babylon, and now under the powerful Persians, could Nehemiah still be expected to believe that His God, the True God of Heaven, was still able and willing to keep his Covenant promises to Abraham?

Well, we know he still believed it, because that's how he prays in v.5.

(v.5) *And I said 'O **LORD God of heaven**, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments...'*

And then he prays:

(v.6) *'Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of **your servant** that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel **your servants**, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned...'*

Notice the attitude that Nehemiah adopts in the place of prayer. He doesn't come demanding God to work, as if Nehemiah's the boss, and God is the servant. No, he begins to use a word that he uses often throughout the rest of this chapter – the word '*servant*'. Hear the prayer of '**your servant**'. I am your servant. And I'm praying for the people of Israel who are '**your servants**'. God is the LORD. He is the boss. Nehemiah and the people of Israel were the servants of God. But what had they done? '**We have sinned against you...Even I and my father's house!**'

He starts by including himself in this prayer of confession, and he goes on...

(v.7) '**We have acted very corruptly** against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your **servant** Moses.'

There's that word 'servant' again – 'Your **servant** Moses'.

Nehemiah doesn't stand aloof away over there in Susa, thousands of miles from Jerusalem, where the rest of God's people were. He could have pointed the finger at them – they're the ones to blame for all this. I haven't done anything wrong! But no, he doesn't! He gets down on his knees with all his people, and he says, we are all to blame. We have all acted very corruptly, we have not kept your commandments, and statutes and rules, that you commanded Moses.

When's the last time you and I ever prayed like that?

We look out over the City of Armagh, and we look out over Keady, and we say to ourselves, I'm glad we don't live like that! I'm glad we're not as hard as they are! I'm glad we're not as steeped in sin as they are! And if so, what are we doing? We're looking down our noses at everybody around us! That's not what Nehemiah is doing here!

What is he doing? Where did he get this different perspective? From God's Word!

3. The Word he Remembered (vs.8-9)

As with so many of God's servants in Scripture, their prayer life was informed by their reading of God's Word. The two went hand in hand - Prayer & Bible Study. It's so important. Here Nehemiah goes right back to Deuteronomy, a book which undergirds all of Scripture that comes after it. Here is the foundation to our faith:

(v.8) '*Remember the word that you commanded **your servant** Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples..."*

God had clearly entered into covenant with his people, and he had clearly said that if they broke that covenant, and became unfaithful to him as their God, then he would act – he would scatter them among the peoples of the world. That's exactly what had happened to Israel in 722 BC when the Assyrians scattered them. And it's what happened to Judah in 587 BC when the Babylonians took them into exile, and laid waste to Jerusalem. But there was another part to it...

(v.9) '*...**But if you return to me** and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'*

Here's where Nehemiah could take some hope and encouragement from God's Word. If they would return to God, and keep his commandments and do them, then even if they were miles away, God would gather them up and bring them back to Jerusalem – the place He had chosen, the place where His Name was to dwell, centred on the Temple in Jerusalem. Here was hope for Nehemiah!

(v.10) '*They are **your servants** and **your people**, whom you have redeemed by **your** great power and by **your** strong hand.*

So Nehemiah reminds God that he and his nation were God's servants and they were His people. People that God had redeemed by his great power and by his strong hand. God had **bought** them back, he had redeemed them, now would he *bring* them back, really *bring* them back, and glorify his name in Jerusalem again.

(v.11) '*O Lord, let your ear be attentive **to the prayer of your servant**, and to the prayer of **your servants** who delight to fear your name, and give success to **your servant** today, and grant him mercy in the sight of **this man**.'*

So Nehemiah presented his requests to the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And 3 times in this verse he refers to himself and his people as **servants** of God.

*'Be attentive to the prayer of **your servant**.'*
*'And to the prayer of **your servants** who delight to fear you name.'*
*'And give success to **your servant** today, and grant him mercy...'*
*'In the sight of **this man**'*

Who is Nehemiah referring to?

He's referring to the most powerful man alive on earth at that time, Artaxerxes! And he refers to him as '*this man*'!

Why? Because Nehemiah has gained a right and proper perspective in the place of prayer. He has remembered that he is the servant of the King of kings and Lord of lords – He is the servant of the God of Heaven, Yahweh, the covenant-making and covenant keeping God, and it was now time to take his life in his hands and go in before this earthly king, and do something about the plight of his people. But now he's been reminded that this king is just a man.

And then he tells us this: '**Now I was cupbearer to the king.**' (v.11b)

Nehemiah has kept us in suspense up until now. We didn't know who he was, or what he did. But now, we've been told, he has one of the most important jobs in the Empire. He is one of the most trusted servants of the Emperor.

He gets to taste every cup of wine before it touches the lips of the King, to make sure it hasn't been poisoned, to make sure there's nothing wrong with it.

If it was poisoned, then he would die, before the king ever got to taste it! It was a very important, responsible position. A bit like Joseph in Egypt, or Daniel in Babylon. He was in close proximity to the Persian Emperor day in and day out.

Now he was about to act, now he was about to do something. He was about to take his life in his hands, for the sake of his people, and for Jerusalem, and for the glory of the true King, Yahweh.

The word '*servant*' appears so many times in this chapter. Whose servant was Nehemiah? Was he Artaxerxes's servant, or was he the servant of the God of heaven, the LORD, the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God, Yahweh?

He was both, but one had to take priority, leading him to act courageously...

Conclusion

All of you have your everyday jobs. All of you have occupations that take up your time week in and week out. But whose servant are you?

Are you owned and run, and bossed about by your earthly employers, or do you sometimes draw aside, and get before the Lord in prayer, and remember...

'There is a higher throne, than all this world has known'

...where one day every knee will bow. That's getting a proper perspective!

Have you got that proper perspective? And will you also give yourself to the extension of Christ's Kingdom in Armagh, and in Keady, in the year ahead?

Nehemiah Grasped his Vision in the Place of Prayer.

I hope we have this week too.

And now, through prayer, may we move forward to see it accomplished in this coming year – 2020.