

## Introduction

### Relationship with Ezra

- Probably originally one longer work.
- Covering whole period from return of first exiles, to end of Nehemiah's service as governor of Judah.
  - first return and foundations of Temple (c.537 BC)
  - Temple completed (c.516 BC)
  - Ezra comes back and starts to reform (c.458 BC)
  - Nehemiah around, overlapping with Ezra, rebuilding walls and more reforms (c.445 BC)

### Structure of book

- Chapters 1-7: Nehemiah's personal diary of rebuilding walls
- Chapters 8-12: spiritual fortifying, reading law, Ezra, penitence
- Chapters 12-13: Nehemiah's account of the dedication of the walls and final reforms

### Political background

- Susa, winter capital of Persia kings.
- Artaxerxes, same ruler as had sent Ezra up to Jerusalem to "enquire about Judah... and pray for the king and his sons!" (Ezra 7:12-26)
- General policy of repatriation, though not forced.
- Still large and probably integrated Jewish community in heart of Persian empire.
  - (cup-bearer to king influential (security); Jews not barred from high office!)

## Nehemiah's Prayer

- One of the classic prayers of the Bible, prayed by a man who comes alive through the very personal openness of his diary...

### Emotional impact of news from Jerusalem

- Hanani could be brother or kinsman - its the same word.
- Jerusalem centre of a good Jew's world, even if he'd never been there.
- Not mere ancient history - more likely background is Ezra 4:12, an attempt to rebuild the walls, one that faced opposition with royal backing.
- He's affected, deeply mourning.

### Emotion and Prayer

- Out of the storm of emotion - the grief, possibly the hatred for those who'd torn down the walls - Nehemiah fasts and prays.
- Is this a model for how we should pray? Or is it a quirk of the circumstances, of Nehemiah's nature, or what?
- Certainly easier to pray when we are caught up by something... BUT
- What do we do when we feel too dry to pray?
  - "pray just the same - those are the times we most need to pray"
- Why? Because prayer comes from the concern that comes when, through the Holy Spirit, people see reality.
  - if we are concerned, if we feel constrained to pray - then pray!
  - if we are not, we must bring our emptiness to God, asking about its cause.
- Whatever our situation, we need to Spirit's illumination on reality - depth of our sin, need of our neighbour, God's desire to intervene in a situation...

### God Centred Faith

- Nehemiah's understanding of God shapes his prayer:
  - awesome, powerful, Lord - v.5
  - covenant keeping, promise keeping God - loves his people - v.5, 8-9

- redeeming God, able and desiring to draw his people back - v.10
- God CAN and God WILL help...

### The Identification Principle

- Confession because sin cuts us off from God.
- Startling identification with his people - who'd sinned generations before!
- Stands with his people in the face of God's wrath.
- Pleading - against God? ...compare Moses & Golden Calf, Ex.32/Deut.9, or Abraham and Sodom & Gomorrah, Gen.18...
- Jealousy for God's reputation, love for his fellow Jews, and indifference to his own life and destiny.
- Lord, forgive the church for its dividedness -OR- Lord, forgive us for our...?
- Christ identified himself with sinners - eg at baptism, friend of sinners.

### The Mallet and the Fly

- All this just to pray for "success today by granting [Nehemiah] favour in the presence of [the king]"!! (Neh 1:11)
- Small request!
- Also, Kislev (1:1) to Nisan (2:1) is about four months! Long prayer!
- Summary of his dialogue with God, his concern, his desire for God to act.
- Prayer is more than asking - seeking God's will for the situation.
- Would we have prayed:
  - "Oh Lord, please help the poor brethren in Jerusalem. Help them not to be discouraged because the walls have been broken down. Help them to remember that their God is strong, much stronger than their enemies."?
- That deserves the reply: "Isn't that rather hypocritical, Nehemiah? If I'm so strong and powerful, why don't you ask the king's permission to go to Jerusalem yourself and build the walls? It is nice of you to pray, but it would be nicer of you to go!"
- Real prayer involves us putting our lives on the line too - as Nehemiah does.

### Summary

- Emotion
- God shaped prayers
- Identification with sin
- Seeking what God wants us to pray

### Questions

- What role do you think emotion should have in prayer? When have your prayers been especially affected by emotion?
- Nehemiah identifies with the sins and needs of his people. Why is identifying in these ways so difficult for us?
  - Is it? Is it important?
- Have you ever pleaded with God like Nehemiah or Moses? What has been the result?
- I find it easy to pray the "God please bless XXXX" kind of prayers, rather than taking/making time to seek God's will, to ask what should I be praying. Obviously some kind of balance needs to be found, otherwise we'd need months long PMs!
  - any insights?