

SUPERINTENDENT MINISTER'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

Many people find the Old Testament rather difficult. In some ways this is quite understandable but means that some important parts of the Bible can easily be missed. One such book is Nehemiah, the last of the Old Testament historical books, set in the time of the ascendancy of the Persian Empire. Like the Babylonians before them, the Persians had used transportation (exile) as a means of oppression. Deportation from Jerusalem meant that only the weakest people were left behind. The rest were taken to distant parts of the empire, such as Susa (in the South of modern Iran) where Nehemiah served as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I (reigned from 464-424 BC).

In the Old Testament, Jerusalem and the Temple were a focus for the national and religious life of the people of God. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians had destroyed the walls and gates of Jerusalem in 586 BC and left the city desolate, no doubt to prevent any future uprising. The Temple was also destroyed. The exile that followed was an inescapable consequence of the people's unfaithfulness to God. While the problems on the surface were physical, the underlying needs were spiritual. They needed a renewal of their national and spiritual life. However, as the walls of Jerusalem had been broken down for 140 years, it must have been easy to get used to it.

Some of the exiles had been allowed to return to Jerusalem but the news that reached Nehemiah in the royal palace was not good news. "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" (Nehemiah 1: 3). Nehemiah was hurt to hear this. He made an immediate response; he wept. He made a continuous response; he mourned and fasted and prayed. Only then did Nehemiah rise to the opportunity of leading another return of the people of God to Jerusalem to rebuild, no doubt having to counter those who were quick to say that such efforts had been tried before.

In the New Testament we find that the idea of building for God continues. This time, not with stones as such, but with 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5), that is with Christian people. In other words, it is the church that the people of God must build but we must not fall into the trap of thinking that the church is primarily a building rather it is a people.

Nehemiah was burdened because of the news he heard. Christians regularly hear news of the church and, whether it is of numerical decline or other shortcomings, there is little doubt that we have become used to it. We tend to accept numerical decline and other problems as a sign of the times in which we live, but we are less ready to wonder whether it is also a sign of the judgment of God upon his errant people. What would 'a Nehemiah' in our age and generation be doing? Would he or she be burdened about the state of the church, about its numerical collapse, about apathy, ignorance, prejudice and bitterness? Too many people content themselves with thinking that they are jogging along satisfactorily, or that their congregation is at least better than average. In short, though 'the church' is not doing very well, they are fine. This is not what Nehemiah did. Instead, just as the Lord Jesus would later do, he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed over Jerusalem.

All who love the Lord Jesus must care deeply about the whole church, for which he died, and not just some small part of it. It is good to pray and plan for the revitalising of the church, but love for Jesus and his church is not the same as keeping the wheels turning so the doors stay open. Instead the buildings, where Christians so often meet, and which take so much from us, must be places where the pure Word of God is preached, where the sacraments are faithfully administered and where, by the grace of God, new Christians are born.

What would 'a Nehemiah' in our age and generation be doing? It is tempting, especially for activists like me, to say that he or she would be charging around doing all kinds of things. The truth of the matter is that Nehemiah exemplified obedience and prayer. Before doing anything else, he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. Why does God not just rubberstamp our plans with his blessing? Why are things in the church of 2019 not as they should be? Notice the order in which Nehemiah did things - we have not got to the weeping yet.

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