

Heroes of the Bible

It is fast approaching Lent, where has this year gone? If you are not sure when it is Ash Wednesday is the 17th Feb. So, what are you going to give up for Lent? Giving things up can be difficult, can't they? especially if we have been doing that thing for a long time.

Or maybe, you want to start something new! Well, if you keep going for the whole of Lent, then it will become a new habit, and providing it is a healthy habit, you will feel a lot better Easter Sunday, and beyond.

We start this morning with a devotional Prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have walked where we walk, and now you help us in our weakness: blessed be your name. Lord Jesus Christ, you have been tempted as we have, and now you have come to help us in our danger: blessed be your name.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have suffered for us, and now you help us when we reach our wit's end: blessed be your name. Lord Jesus Christ, you were deserted and betrayed, and now you are with us when all things have gone: Lord Jesus Christ, companion Christ, friend and saviour, we adore you, we love you, we need you, help us to follow. Amen.

We continue with our series Heroes of the Bible. The title simply means, those people in the Bible that have spoken specifically into a time of your life, the way God used them, something that made an impact on you. I have had some good feedback from last week's message on Jonah, so I hope you will get something out of this week's hero Nehemiah, whom I admire greatly. Some of you may remember I spoke on Nehemiah a few years ago, this is not the same message.

Nehemiah is a great example of stopping something for God, and starting something new for God.

Nehemiah

If you remember from last week, Jonah tried to run away from God, when God asked him to go to Nineveh. Both these men know God, both know what God

can do, both men have passion and faith when they prayed. But unlike Jonah, Nehemiah was running to God, and not running away from God. For Nehemiah, people mattered more than things. He was the cup bearer to King Artaxerxes, an especially important role in the palace, it meant that he had the trust of the king.

Nehemiah knew stories that had been told about this once great city, Jerusalem, and at the start of Chapter one, he has a conversation and learns that Jerusalem and the surrounding area is a disgrace.

In the month of Kislev in the twelfth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace, 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: "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 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 family, 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 to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

Lord, let your ear be attentive 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 the cupbearer to the king. May God bless this word to us.

Nehemiah's first reaction was to weep, such was his passion for his homeland, and then he prayed!!

Nehemiah's prayer is reminiscent to the Lord's Prayer, v5," **Lord, the God of Heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and keep His commands.**

v6, confession of sin - **Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be your name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.** Then confession of sin - **'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.** Nehemiah was upset about hearing his ancestral home lay in ruins, and his face projected that upset. He had compassion; compassion that overflowed when he heard the news of the broken walls of Jerusalem.

He wanted to do something about it, he wanted God to hear his prayer and use him in fixing the problem. This was not just a matter of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem that was the easy part. This was about bringing honour to God and rebuilding a community; a community that had faith and would look to God for their protection and provision, not just for their own protection, but working as a team to support each other.

I enjoy reading biographies and seeing the journey people make in getting to their destination, whatever that may be. One book I read just before we came to Sandy, was called *Leading*, by Sir Alex Ferguson, the most successful manager of Manchester United to date. I'm an avid United fan so it was a good book for me to read, but don't hold that against me please. Chapter 1 is called **Becoming Yourself**, and on the opening page Sir Alex says, **'How does someone become their true self? When I was young, I never gave the topic much thought but, as a player I became increasingly interested in the subject. If you are leading people, it helps to get a sense of who they are – the circumstances in which they were raised, the actions that will draw out the best in them, and the remarks that will cause them to be spooked. The only way to figure this out is by two underrated activities: listening and watching. There is a reason that God gave us two ears, two eyes and one mouth. It is because you can listen and watch twice as much as you talk. Best of all listening costs you nothing,** coming from a true Scotsman.

He goes on to say, that any young player that United invested in, he would tell the scouts to talk to the Mother to get her onside and secure her approval. The reason being, that Dads are more likely to live in their son's boots, but the Mother wants to know that her son will be looked after, who is going to protect him?

(Leading, Alex Ferguson with Michael Moritz. Published by Hodder & Stoughton. Page 11)

So, why do I share this with you? I think for me, I have learned a lot when I have shut my mouth and opened my eyes and ears. And reading through the Bible, you can see the people that stand out from the rest as they talk less and see and listen more. That was true for Nehemiah. He listened to God, he listened to the reports that came back from the region, and he kept his mouth shut until he was asked to speak.

Nehemiah was on God's agenda not his own. I think so many of us fall into the trap thinking that God should be on our agenda, even using scripture to prove a point, when in fact we should be on God's agenda.

Nehemiah knew of his contemporary Ezra, and what he was trying to do, establishing a community with returning exiles with God's Word at the core. But it was not easy, as there was opposition. Nehemiah was leaving a secure job, lavish surroundings, living in the palace; for broken walls, such was his passion for the people that were returning to Jerusalem. You see, it is not enough to just identify a problem, we can all do that, our churches are full of people that can identify problems! What we need to do is identify the problem and set about sorting it out.

Like John Howard and Elizabeth Fry, they campaigned to bring reform the prison system many years ago. Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce campaigned tirelessly to end the slave trade.

Tom Barnardo, T.B. Stephenson, George Muller, and C.H. Spurgeon, all carried the needs of orphaned children on their hearts and took practical steps to provide them with food, shelter and security. These eighteenth and nineteenth century Christians were people like Nehemiah, they all looked out from their own little world where it was safe and secure, they identified an issue that made them burn with passion until they did something about it.

Question is, where is our passion?

Through this lockdown we have seen certain local heroes rise above others. People like Captain Sir Tom Moor, and Marcus Rashford. Marcus plays for Manchester United; he has come through the young player academy. As a boy growing up, his mother did not have enough money to feed all her children and sometimes they would go hungry.

In fact, she talked to United and asked them to take Marcus two years early so that he would be fed and be secure. He started at the academy at the age of 11. Marcus knows what it is like to have nothing. But now he has something; he is using his voice and calling on the government to help support families in crisis due to this pandemic. He saw a need and he is doing something about it.

So, when I ask the question, where is our passion? I think I'm asking myself 'where is my passion?! What gets me up in the morning? I think for me, I have grown tired of having to fight negative attitudes, and I have forgotten God, and the passion He has given me. Do not start thinking poor Mike and call me up and say Jesus loves you, I know that! I am just being honest with you and doing a bit of self-reflecting.

As I said earlier, the first thing Nehemiah does is pray. He is a gifted leader, but he cannot do this re-build on his own. So, he calls out to God.

There are many people in our churches that find it difficult to pray, and even more so, to pray out loud. There is that thought, 'what happens if I say something wrong.' Yep, been there, done that! But as a wise Christian man once said to me, it is God you need to please not man, and God is pleased because you have spoken to Him.

Nehemiah is **committed** to prayer. It is natural for him to pray, immediate and spontaneous. He turned instinctively to God. P.T. Forsyth used to say 'that in some form or another everybody prays. If we are not praying to God, we are facing towards something else.'

Nehemiah was **genuine** in prayer. He identifies with the dejection of Jerusalem's people: he sat down and wept. The people's needs were close to his heart, even though he was miles away, he was in Susa, and the people he felt for were in Jerusalem.

He was **sacrificial** in prayer. Nehemiah mourned and fasted, denying himself food for several days. In those days' mealtimes were not the same as they are now.

They could take several hours to get through, but not eating, that meant he had time to concentrate on his prayers.

He was **persistent** in his prayers. Day and night Nehemiah would bang on God's door and poured out his heart to his Lord. There was no one else that could help so, Nehemiah looked to the only place where he knew his help

would come from. Psalm 121:1-2, **'I lift my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth.**

He was **encouraged** in prayer. Nehemiah was encouraged by the prayers of people that had gone before him. People like, Moses, Solomon, David, Jehoshaphat, Daniel and his contemporary Ezra. He gained insight and confidence in seeing and hearing the results of these guy's pray life, it gave him the incentive to be bold in his prayers. If you are struggling with prayer, maybe following his example might help!

Nehemiah was **confident** in prayer. The problems with Jerusalem have made him enter the presence of God. Because Nehemiah wants an answer to prayer, he boldly approaches the Throne of God, as he prays, the awesomeness of the sovereignty of God, overshadows the problem. Within moments, he is exalting a God who is sovereign, mighty, holy, loving, faithful, vocal, attentive and merciful. Wow! how cool is that?

Raymond Brown says in his book, The Message of Nehemiah, **'Nehemiah rejoices that his Holy God is also compassionate. He identifies his needs in the presence of a God of infinite grace who has made a covenant of love with his people. As he prays, Nehemiah draws especially on the rich teaching of both Deuteronomy and Daniel. Scripture enriches his adoration, supplication, petition and intercession.**

Its assurance about God's love and power is deliberately reminiscent of Moses' words to the Israelite people on the threshold of the promised land and those of Daniel as he pleaded with God for his people. God's love is not fickle and changeable but constant and reliable. He is a faithful God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him.

For me, Nehemiah is a class act, he loves the Lord and is not afraid to serve him.

Let us pray.

Leave this space for you to pray your own prayer if you feel the Lord has spoken to you through His word today.

Blessing

Mike