

## MAGNIFICENT RUINS

### Out of the Ruins

The city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. It had been that way ever since the Babylonians had sacked the city in 586BC. King Nebuchadnezzar had led his army into Jerusalem and destroyed it. The Bible records it this way:

2 Kings 25

25 So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. He encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it. <sup>2</sup>The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah.

<sup>3</sup>By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. <sup>4</sup>Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah, <sup>5</sup>but the Babylonian army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, <sup>6</sup>and he was captured.

He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him. <sup>7</sup>They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.

<sup>8</sup>On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. <sup>9</sup>He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building, he burned down. <sup>10</sup>The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke

down the walls around Jerusalem. <sup>11</sup> Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon. <sup>12</sup> But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields. (2Kings 25 v 1-12)

Jerusalem lay in ruins. By the time of Nehemiah, it had been that way for nearly 150 years. When the Babylonian empire fell to the Persian empire, Cyrus allowed 50,000 Jews back to Jerusalem. Over 20 years they rebuilt the temple, but the walls of the city still lay in ruins. Without walls a city was a place of ridicule. What kind of god lives or dwells in a city that has no walls; that cannot be defended; that has no power? The state of the city reflected the honour of a god.

The walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins. God had something in mind. He was looking for someone to catch his vision. As always, God was watching and waiting. God was watching and waiting so that out of the ruin would come something magnificent.

I've only ever voted once for anything on the T.V. Only once have I felt strongly enough to respond to a request for people to vote. It was way, way back in 2001 and the Sport Personality of the year award. I voted not for David Beckham who was in his prime, but for Ellen McArthur. I voted for Ellen McArthur because at the age of just 24, she had sailed solo around the world. In my opinion that was an incredible achievement and worth voting for.

In a BBC interview she said she was prepared to do whatever it took to achieve her goal. Whatever it takes – those were her words. And she lived them. She had saved her school dinner money for three years so she could buy her first boat. In order to compete in a transatlantic race, she lived in a portacabin for 3 years to raise money; bought a yacht and lived under it in a boatyard while refitting it and then raced that yacht across the Atlantic!

When she sailed around the world single handily, she ate only freeze-dried food because body weight is critical for success. She learnt from a therapist

how to cat-nap and sleep for 20 minutes at a time so she didn't get fatigued. Fatigue on a solo circumnavigation of the world could be fatal. From her website at the time it said: "Exhausting racing conditions means sleeping in 10-minute snatches, a survival suit that doesn't come off for a week at a time and hands and wrists covered in salt sore and cuts. Dehydrated food comes in packets, if they get wet the labels come off and Ellen doesn't know if she'll be eating curry or pudding until she opens it. Sails weighing twice as much as she does, may need changing a dozen times a day."

Ellen said: "If there's one thing I've learnt, it's that deep down in your heart, if you have a dream, then you can and must make it happen."

Perhaps God was watching and waiting for that kind of passion to build something out of the ruins of Jerusalem. Perhaps he's watching and waiting now. What does he see in you? In CBC?

"His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known." (Ephesians 3 v 10)

Friends, we are the church now.... And God is watching and waiting.

In a different time and a different place, a man called Nehemiah had a whatever it takes attitude. He had a passion that God's name would be honoured.

Here's a challenging question: "What if God wants to build something magnificent out of the ruins of your life?" It strikes me that that is exactly the kind of thing God does. Perhaps we wouldn't think of our life as being in ruins – and I hope that's true for you. So, let me ask the question this way: "What if God wants to build in the areas of your life that do not bring honour to him?"

God wants us to reach our full redemptive potential – he does. Maybe there's some building that needs to happen in some area of life ... and you know what it is. What will you do? God is watching and waiting, ready to build out of the ruins.

Nehemiah was passionate that God's name be honoured and he cared enough to ask. Nehemiah cared enough to ask what was happening to God's people in Jerusalem.

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> They said to me, "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."

<sup>4</sup> When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1 v 1-4)

Nehemiah was a cup bearer to King Artaxexes. Being cup bearer to the king was far more than simply being his butler. It was a position of great responsibility and privilege: he would taste the wine before it was handed to the king to show it was not poisoned. A person with that kind of access to the king had to be respected and trusted, and he would have had considerable influence. Being a Jew in that position he would be especially scrutinised, his character under the microscope.

Nehemiah is in Susa, with a good, extremely responsible job, serving a foreign king, while the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins. There were Jews in Jerusalem, there had been ever since Cyrus allowed them back a 100 or so years before Nehemiah. None of what had happened was Nehemiah's fault. But Nehemiah can be the best he can be, in the place in which he finds himself.

And, perhaps, friends, so can we. Perhaps there is something here about being the best you can be, even in a place you wouldn't choose to be. It seems to be true with the people of God: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Esther, Daniel, Jeremiah, to name but a few. And maybe you!

So why is Nehemiah interested in knowing what is happening in Jerusalem? Why did he question Hanani when he returned from his visit there and ask what was happening? Because he cared – he cared about the honour of God's

name. In Nehemiah's day, God's instruction was that his people worship in the temple in Jerusalem. The temple had been rebuilt, but the walls of Jerusalem still lay in ruins. Nehemiah knows that a city with broken walls does not bring honour to God's name.

All his life Nehemiah had known about Jerusalem and that its walls lay in ruins. But now something is stirring in him – so now he asks Hanani to tell him the truth of what he sees. And God is watching and waiting. I'm wondering what might be stirring in you at this time. I'm wondering what might be stirring in CBC at this time. I'm wondering what might be stirring that might lead us to a new vision for this time.

When Nehemiah heard the news from Jerusalem, he began to weep. I wonder what causes you to weep. Perhaps COVID-19 and all that it has brought, has caused you to weep. Perhaps there are other things in your life that have caused you to weep recently. People weep about things that touch them deeply and profoundly. Many people have been touched deeply and profoundly by the events and circumstances of these past months. Many of us hold deep sadness in our hearts.

I wonder when you last wept because God's name was not honoured. Perhaps weeping and vision, somehow go together.

Nehemiah had a burden to see God's name honoured, by the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. What burden do you carry? We will probably all carry different burdens, but maybe some we carry together. Maybe there are some things that you and God need to work on together – that's for you to figure out. Maybe there are some things that, as the people of God have in this place and this time, we need to figure out together with God.

Nehemiah didn't run away or try to escape from the burden he felt. He pursued it – and he experienced the great blessing of seeing the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt. He saw God's name honoured once more. But, for Nehemiah, hearing and weeping was not enough, for him, hearing and weeping moved him to do something.

Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.... (Nehemiah 1 v 11)

Nehemiah decided he would ask the king to let him go to Jerusalem. Asking the king for anything was a very risky business. If you pleased the king, you

may have a good life, if you displeased the king, you may have no life at all. By going to the king, Nehemiah was literally putting his head on the block. Nehemiah was prepared to risk his life and act. Does that remind you of anything? Does that remind you of anyone?

Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his  
own advantage;

<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross! (Philippians 2 v 6-8)

He cared enough to give up his reputation, status, security, for you. It seems to me that vision and sacrifice often go together. For Nehemiah, God's honour was at stake. Perhaps we feel the same as we look out on the world today, and perhaps the question becomes: "What will we do?"

Ellen McArthur lived her dream because she was prepared to do whatever it took to make it happen. Nehemiah asked for success in the presence of the king, because he was prepared to do whatever it took to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, to bring honour to God's name. Jesus left all the glory of heaven because he was prepared to do whatever it took, to win you back.

I'm wondering: How about you friends?

God, it seems, is in the habit of making something magnificent out of the ruins. He can do that in your life. He can do that in our life. What if he's watching and waiting in 2021, ready to make something magnificent out of the ruins. As he looks at us, what will he find?

Preached and Live Streamed by Rev. Ian Phillips, from Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2021.