

MAGNIFICENT RUINS

Thinking about Vision

My best guess is that most of us, if not all of us, would think of Nehemiah as a man of great faith, and by many measure I'm sure that's true. Nehemiah heard about the plight of Jerusalem and determined to do something about it. We know, because we have the story, that remarkably the walls of Jerusalem we rebuilt in just 52 days. We also know, because we have the story, that the rebuilding of the walls wasn't the end of Nehemiah's story, there was much more work to be done rebuilding the people.

One commentator writes: A city is much more than walls, gates and houses; a city is people. In the first half of the book of Nehemiah, the people existed for the walls; but now the walls must exist for the people.¹

There were still significant challenges to come even after the walls had been rebuilt. In fact, it would probably be true to say that this story was full of challenges. Nehemiah knew he was taking a huge risk in going to the king, right back in the beginning of the story, and asking to go to Jerusalem. His great prayer admits he doesn't know what answer the king will give, and so he asks God for success...but he doesn't know he's going to get it!

He faces all sorts of opposition. Firstly, from those outside the city – the people who don't want to see him succeed in rebuilding the walls. And, as we read on, he faces all sorts of challenges from those inside the city. Even in the last chapter of Nehemiah we read about the challenges he faced from the people within the walls. At every step there were challenges and obstacles.

Although we look back on Nehemiah's story and regard him as a great man of faith, he was human, and like all humans, there must have been times when he wanted to quit. There must have been times when he looked at what was in front of him and it looked too big, too difficult. Maybe there were times when he wondered why he'd ever begun to walk that particular road. It seems to me that as followers of Christ, as people of faith, we walk the same path Nehemiah did.

¹ Wiersbe, W. *"Be Determined"* David C Cook 1992 p 95

I don't mean, of course, that we are trying to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. What I mean is that we are walking a journey of faith and we find there are many obstacles along the way.

We want to follow Christ as best we can
We want to live lives of great faith
We want to do great things for God
We want to step out and trust him

And yet, as we do, as we do our incompetent best, we face challenges and obstacles and opposition in all sorts of ways. Some of those challenges and obstacles are relatively small and we can face them head on with courage and conviction. Some of them are big and we find ourselves struggling to keep going. Sometimes those challenges and obstacles are so big they rock us to the core and cause us to question the things we hold most dear, even faith itself.

This past year with the challenges and obstacles of COVID-19, has been a year of challenges and obstacles for many. That is certainly true for me. 2020 was supposed to be a year of celebration with Meghann and Justin's wedding. And on 4th July, we did indeed have a lovely day of celebration. But it came at the end of the trauma of months of uncertainty, dramatically changed plans, family we hardly see not being able to attend, and some dreams abandoned.

Suddenly and completely unexpectedly, my mum suffered a heart attack two weeks before the wedding. She died on 1st July, three days before the wedding. A week after the wedding, Andrew lost his fight with cancer and we all felt that loss deeply, especially Yvonne, Ben and James. Some challenges are really hard to face and overcome. Your story is not my story, but I think you probably understand what I mean.

2021 was going to be better! And then I tested positive for COVID-19. I found myself lying in the Emergency Department at East Surrey hospital being cared for by the nurses and doctors whom I have had the privilege of praying for at the beginning of their shifts. That was a challenge for me – I hate being ill and I'd never been to hospital that I can remember before that moment. I was acutely aware of the potential consequences of catching the virus, here my challenge became huge for me.

Although at the time I was mostly unaware, I know Lisa was inundated with messages of support saying people were praying. I'm very grateful for all the

messages and prayers of God's people. But the hard question I found myself asking was: "What difference will it make?"

You may be shocked to hear me say that – but it's the truth. And I wonder, if we're honest, that we don't all think that at times. I have been asked to pray for people during this pandemic who had the virus, mostly along with many others, only for that person to lose their life. Oddly, I was very conscious of that as I was unwell. I was acutely aware people were praying, and yet I found myself wondering if it would make any difference!

How come, I wondered, had some people, prayed for just as much as me, not survived? I had no idea which way the illness would turn. It was for me, a very challenging place to be, and one that challenged what I call my 'faith' to the core.

Life, and the journey of faith, has a way of throwing up big obstacles and challenges that are hard to face and cause us to question the things we hold most dear. Your story is not my story, but my best guess is, you know what I'm talking about.

I'm wondering how Nehemiah was able to keep going in the face of challenges and obstacles. I'm wondering how we do too. I'm wondering if the answer is the same for us as it was for Nehemiah.

The book of Job has some very powerful things to teach us. One of them is, I think, that the world is complex and beyond our understanding. Job is never aware of what is going on behind the scenes of his life, between God and Satan. We, as the readers, are party to it, but Job never is. When God finally speaks, he takes Job on a tour of the universe, and asks Job if he knows anything about it. Job confesses that, in truth, he knows pretty much nothing about how it all works because it is simply too complex and simply beyond him.

The truth about the world friends, is that it is far more complex than we sometimes want to make it... and that mostly we will never understand what is going on behind the scenes. Job accepts that reality, and perhaps we too would do well to do the same.

When God speaks to Job, he tells him he is wrong about God, but he commends him for being honest, or straight with God. The powerful point I think, is this: Biblical faith is faith that wrestles honestly before God. It is OK to

struggle in faith – actually that’s the place that authentic faith begins. Authentic, biblical faith begins with gut wrenching honesty before God. God, it seems, commends that kind of faith. Nehemiah’s story begins in gut wrenching honesty before God as he prays.

How is your faith friends?

What becomes absolutely critical in our wrestling and our honesty and our faith, is what we think about God. What becomes absolutely critical in facing the challenges and obstacles that life and faith throw at us, is what we think about the character of God. What I cannot do in this talk, or any talk, is answer the question about why things happen, or don’t happen, in this life. I cannot answer in this talk, or any talk, why it is that some prayers seem to be answered and others are not. But what I can do, and it is really the only thing I can do, is to point you to the character of God.

What was, I believe, critical in the story of Nehemiah and the story of Job, was what they thought about the character of God. And here, we have an advantage over both Nehemiah and Job. The best, the ultimate and the fullest revelation of the character of God we have is in the cross of Christ and his resurrection. The cross shows us most fully who God is and what he is really like.

The Old Testament points towards it, but the cross shows us the truth about God in all its fullness. In a nutshell – he shows that he loves you because he loves you...

On the cross God could not have gone further than he did to demonstrate his love for you. Which means, you are of unsurpassable worth in his eyes. God could not love you more than he actually does. He would not have loved you anymore yesterday than he does today, and he will not be able to love you anymore tomorrow than he does right now. The cross shows that there is nothing you can do to earn God’s love: you cannot do anything to make him love you more and you cannot do anything to make him love you less. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you.....

Another way of saying that, is that God loves you in exactly the same way, with the same love that he loves his one and only son, Jesus Christ. You are loved with the very same love that God eternally is. That is simply breath taking, and being loved with the love that eternally is, means God will always love you in

this way! Which is a wonderful promise for the future. The cross and the resurrection together show us God's promise of the future.

There is much we will not understand as we walk the journey of faith. Challenges and obstacles will come, our faith may be shaken, but the cross shows and demonstrates fully the love the bridegroom has for his bride. And he will come, in all his magnificent love, to gather his beloved bride to himself. Another way of saying that, might be to say that God will see it through. He has gone ahead to prepare a place for you and he will come back and gather you up and take you to the place he has prepared.

On the cross, God took the evil that crucified his son and turned it into the best expression of love ever seen. When he comes to gather his bride, he will wipe away all evil, and tears and sorrow and pain. He will make all things new. The cross shows us that there is absolutely nothing in life or death that can separate us from God's great and magnificent love.

There will be challenges and obstacles that will make it difficult for us to know and feel and see God's love at times, but absolutely nothing that can separate us from his love. Nothing, absolutely nothing.

When I was lying in my bed, wrestling with things I did not understand, I had some reframing to do. The journey of faith is challenging and difficult. What we need as we negotiate our way through the complexities of life, is a vision of the real character of God.

My best guess is that that's what held Nehemiah through all his challenges. My best guess is that that's what held Job through all he experienced – even though it turned out he got some things wrong about God. My best guess is that that's what will hold us through all that we have already faced and will face in the days that lie ahead.

The cross of Christ is the best vision we have for life: the truth that we are loved beyond our imagining, now and forever!

Preached and live streamed in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 7th March 2021, by Rev. Ian Phillips.