

# MAGNIFICENT RUINS

## Our Excellent Best

A missionary society wrote to David Livingston and asked: “Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other men to join you.” Livingston wrote back: “If you have men who will come only if they know there is good road, I don’t want them! I want men who will come if there is no road at all.”

I want men who will come only if there is no road at all. I want men who are passionate about what I’m doing and who share my vision. I want men who will walk into the unknown. I want men whose values mean they will give up comfort and luxury and set them aside to walk towards danger and hardship. I want men who have a ‘Whatever it Takes’ attitude. I want men who will come even if there is no road at all. I want men who will come even though it will be tough. I want men who will not look for an easy way out. I want men who are prepared to make great personal sacrifice. I want men who are prepared to give their lives. I want men who will come even if there is no road at all, but who might just embark on the greatest adventure of their lives.

Nehemiah was prepared to go where there was no road at all.

### **1** 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. (Neh. 1 v 1 – 4)

**2** In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had

not been sad in his presence before, <sup>2</sup> so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was very much afraid, <sup>3</sup> but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

<sup>4</sup> The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, <sup>5</sup> and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.” (Neh. 2 v 1 – 5)

Nehemiah heard of the plight of Jerusalem: the people and the walls. He understood how the people, the city and God himself were the subject of ridicule among surrounding nations. What kind of God is the God of a city with no walls, he can't even protect his own people? Nehemiah was in Susa – a long way from Jerusalem, but he was prepared to go where there was no road at all. He prayed with weeping, he fasted, he sought God's favour, he took a risk, a huge risk. He was honest with the king even though he was very much afraid. And Nehemiah began a journey where there was no road at all.

It seems to me that fear and adventure go together when we step out where there appears to be no road at all. I remember a redevelopment project I was once involved in. Many of you will remember it too. We knocked down one church building and built a new one – this one! It was a journey that required lots of faith. How can we possibly raise £ 2 million? It was a journey that was filled with much fear! What if we can't raise the money? What if we start to build but can't afford to finish? I certainly had many sleepless nights. But friends, what a journey that turned out to be.

We prayed, we fasted, we gave and gave and gave. We asked God to surprise us – and he did. The builders built it at cost price! And for nearly the last 20 years we have been able to enjoy this building. We've been able to grow new ministries. We've been able to welcome the community into this building in ways we couldn't before. In that redevelopment project we walked where there appeared to be no road at all, but God met us along the way.

Over this last year, during this pandemic, it seemed that, many times, there was no road at all. Suddenly and without warning, we found we couldn't meet to worship. Suddenly and without warning, we found we were not able to gather together. Suddenly and without warning, we were not able to do ministry in the way we were used to. Suddenly and without warning, we could no longer engage with the community in the ways we had been. And, suddenly and without warning, there seemed to be no road at all.

Literally in the space of a few days, everything had changed. To be honest, it would have been easy to give up and withdraw. I am not great with technology and I simply didn't know what was possible. As the leader of CBC what I most needed in those days were people who would come where there appeared to be no road at all. And, friends, you came! You came!

Thanks to Ben, Justin and Meghann we began live streaming our services. First, we did them from our homes, and now we do them from the church. I never thought that possible – I could see no road, but others who are gifted in ways I am not, could see the next steps along the road, and we began to walk. There is now a team and others have helped; Richard, Ian, Mark, Toby, Alex! Others have offered as we go forward: Kim and Paul. We have cameras because we've had generous gifts from others to make it happen.

It's a road we are still walking and there's lots to do, but there are plans to enhance the technology and make it possible to have a congregation in the church and live stream the service. It is only possible because people said they'd come even if there is no road at all.

Friends, there is a team that have been creative beyond words, as we have gone where there is no road; the staff team – Sandra, Sue, Denise, Chris, Lesley, Marian and Clare forged a way through unknown terrain. They have found such creative ways to meet and connect that they leave me way behind. They have worked and thought and planned and stepped out, along the way, in new and dynamic ways. The ministry that you have witnessed over this past year has only been possible because they have chosen to go where there appeared to be no road at all.

There is a group of people who have been at work in the background encouraging, pushing, pulling, challenging, and spurring me on throughout this time. We call them Deacons; Graham, Graham, Graham, Paul, Ade, Ian, Ben, Alan and now Sharon. They have agreed and disagreed, enabled and

facilitated, wrestled and considered, all to lead us on a journey where there appeared to be no road at all.

A year ago, I had some sleepless nights about whether the church finances would survive Covid-19. Overnight we lost pretty much all our rental income. But there is a team who monitor our finances and who help us through – the finance team: Lesley, Ian, Graham, Annette, Gill, Alan and David. They go where there appears to be no road at all. Through their careful and diligent work, and through your unending generosity, we ended the year with a surplus – a surplus we have chosen to give away.

Sunday mornings have been a challenge, but there's a team of people who have gone where there appeared to be no road at all. In the initial stages, when we led worship from our homes, Marian and Paul led us beautifully. Over the year so, so many of you have found creative ways to inspire us and challenge us – so many I'm worried I will miss some out – but here goes: Meg, Dave, Denise, Chris, Kim & Toby, Luke and Euan, Chris, Angela, Life groups, families... hope I didn't miss anyone! And then there are your Life Group Leaders who've kept you all connected.

The point is friends, we've only got to here today because you have all chosen to walk where there appeared to be no road at all: in ministry, in giving, in supporting, in committing to this thing we call CBC – and I say, "Thank You!"

A couple of weeks ago, we saw that Nehemiah needed to remind the people, years after they'd rebuilt the walls, that they were no longer giving their best. It is quite possible that Malachi wrote his prophecy after the people had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. It is quite possible that Malachi spoke to the people of Jerusalem after they had been on that incredible journey. These are sobering words from the prophet to the people.

When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD. <sup>14</sup> "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations. (Malachi 1 v 13b-14)

The people were no longer bringing their best. I don't know about you, but there are some things I never want to hear God say. One of the things that I never want to hear God say to me is: "Ian, you have stopped bringing your

best.” I would never want to hear him say to us at CBC: “You have stopped bringing your best.”

Friends, we have done really, really well through what has been a very tough year. We have faced some really big challenges, times when there seems to have been no road at all. Many of us have faced, and still face huge personal challenges where there seems to be no road at all.

What was true for Nehemiah is true for us. What was true for the people of Jerusalem is true for us. The truth that Malachi spoke of is the truth that perhaps we need to be reminded of. It is the truth that there is a God in heaven, the great and mighty God. He is the God who loves us beyond measure. He is the God who has always been at work, and is always at work. He is the God who is for us and always wants the best for us. He is the God who builds in the ruins and makes them magnificent.

He is the God who gave his very best for us. He is the God who gave his very best for you. He is the God who chose to go where there appeared to be no road at all and leave the glory of heaven. He is the God who took the risk and was born as a tiny, vulnerable baby. He is the God who chose to dwell with us and do life with us. He is the God who chose to walk to the cross precisely because he chose to go where there was no other road at all. He is the God who chose to go where there was no road at all to open the road to you and me. He is the God who chose to make a road where there was no road. He is the God who gave his excellent best for you and for me.

So, friends – will you choose to follow God only if there is a good road? Or, will you choose to follow God even if there appears to be no road at all? It has been a tough year by any stretch, we have done very, very well. God is calling us into an unknown future with a new vision. This is the God who can inhabit the ruins of a tough year and transform them into a magnificent future.

So, friends, how about it? Our excellent best?

Above all powers above all kings  
Above all nature and all created things  
Above all wisdom and all the ways of man  
You were here before the world began

Above all kingdoms above all thrones  
Above all wonders the world has ever known

Above all wealth and treasures of the earth  
There's no way to measure what You're worth

Crucified laid behind a stone  
You lived to die rejected and alone  
Like a rose trampled on the ground  
You took the fall and thought of me  
Above all (repeat 3x)  
Like a rose trampled on the ground  
You took the fall and thought of me  
Above all

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2021, by Rev. Ian Phillips. Live  
streamed at 10.30am.