

Guest Preacher - Mr. Donald Macaulay

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Preacher: Mr. Donald Macaulay

[0 : 00] Let's turn back then to the passage we read, the first chapter of the book of Nehemiah. And we can read again at verse 4.

As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

So, I'm not going to read the whole prayer again. We'll go through it little by little as we look at this amazing prayer. But we have, first of all, to set the background to the situation that we have here. It's not often, perhaps, I can't remember when the last time I heard a sermon on the book of Nehemiah. It's not often that it's preached on, because it's, apart from the first couple of chapters, it is a fairly difficult book to actually preach on.

It's the last historical book in the history of the Old Testament. Even although Esther comes after it, Esther is actually chronologically quite a while before this particular book and the things that take place in it.

[1 : 27] If you've got an ESV, well, depending on the version you've got, you'll find that there's an introduction to Nehemiah that tells you the date that this took place in the year 445 BC.

Now, this is 140 years after the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

And you'll notice that a change has taken place in who rules in Babylon. It's no longer the Babylonians, but the Persians.

And the king that we have identified in verse 2 of, sorry, in chapter 2 at the beginning, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes.

Now, there were two kings called Artaxerxes. This is Artaxerxes I, Longimanus, as he was known, Longhands. Apparently he had extremely long hands.

[2 : 30] But he was the Persian emperor at this time. And again, let's place it in its historical context. You will remember that the temple had been destroyed in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

It's 140 years approximately before this takes place. And that God had told through the prophets, particularly in the book of Isaiah and Jeremiah and others, that those that were left in Judah and in Benjamin, the two tribes that were still comprising the kingdom of Judah round about Jerusalem, not only would be defeated, but that the temple would be destroyed and that the people would be taken into exile in Babylon.

Now, you have to be very clear that they're not taken into captivity. They're not slaves in Babylon. Quite the opposite.

And you will remember, of course, that among the first wave that are taken away, there are three waves, successive waves. Again, I don't want to bore you with too much history. But the three successive waves are taken away from Jerusalem.

And in the first wave are taken away Daniel and his companions, along with the royal family and various others. And it's not until the third wave that Jerusalem and its temple is actually destroyed, completely destroyed by fire.

[4 : 13] And it's quite remarkable that 900 miles away, in the surroundings of Babylon, and wherever they were allowed to live, and it would seem that the captives that were taken in, I shouldn't use the word captives, but those that were taken into exile were not only allowed to settle, but were allowed to worship freely in Babylon.

You see that very clearly in the book of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel is one of the ones who lives his life in exile, as did Daniel and various others.

But by this time, the first wave have been allowed by Cyrus. You remember the prophecy in Isaiah, where God speaks and says that Cyrus will allow the Jews to return from exile.

The first wave had already gone back, led by Ezra. And you see the book of Ezra just before this. Led by Ezra the priest, had gone back to rebuild the temple, had been given permission to rebuild the temple.

And this is the second temple that we know in history as the temple of Zerubbabel. Now, by the time we come to Nehemiah, the temple has been rebuilt, but the walls of the city have not.

[5 : 48] And the effect of that was that the people were intermingling with those who had settled there after the city had been destroyed.

And I don't mean in the citadel itself, but in the villages round about and so on. And had begun a process of intermarriage with various other of the nations, people from different nations, that had settled round about Jerusalem.

And if you have time later on, I don't see why you wouldn't have time later on to read through the rest of the book of Nehemiah at home, then you will see that in the last chapters, Nehemiah begins this process of separating those who are authentic Jews, those who could prove their genealogy from those who had become involved in mixed marriages.

And therefore, he is cleansing once again the people of Judah. It's quite remarkable when you think about it how God had foretold through the prophets that unless people repented from their idol worship, and you see that effect all the way through the book of Chronicles and so on, how the Jews had fallen into worshipping idols right up until the destruction of the temple.

But what's even more remarkable is that after the 70 years of exile, the Jews never worshipped idols again in their history.

[7 : 34] Never again. It's also quite remarkable that it's from the worship of the exiles that the synagogues come. There were no synagogues anywhere in Israel or in Judah prior to the exile.

But that is what the Jews built in exile in various parts of Babylon. That's where we see Ezekiel worshipping. And that's the custom that then started.

Herod's temple that he would build in the New Testament was not considered sufficiently holy by many Jews for them to go there to worship, except in the great solemn feasts.

Because the Ark of the... You remember that the Ark of the Covenant was no longer there. Where it went, of course, has been...

That's another interesting story in itself. It's never been proved exclusively where the Ark of the Covenant went after the destruction of the temple.

[8 : 41] Or whether it was actually destroyed for its gold, etc., and so on. Or whether, as we find in one of the apocryphal books in the Maccabees, 2nd Maccabees, that Jeremiah hid it in a cave in the mountains.

And the words that he says there is, it's still there, of course, to this day. That's the day that he was writing. There's another theory, of course, that it was taken away by the Jews themselves, some of the priests, and hidden.

And eventually it made its way to Ethiopia. And if you research the Lost Ark of the Covenant nowadays, you'll find, of course, that there is a belief in Ethiopia and a church in Ethiopia among the mountains, which is guarded by a group of priests.

No one is allowed to enter there, which supposedly holds the Ark of the Covenant. But probably the truth of that is that that is a replica that was given by Solomon to the Queen of Sheba.

However, I'm digressing a bit there, but it's interesting to go into some of these things. But what is quite remarkable is that while God allows his people to be taken into exile, the worship of God continues.

[10 : 09] And it continues not in Judah or Jerusalem, but it continues in exile. And in a sense, that shouldn't surprise us.

I suppose if you and I were exiled to Harris or somewhere awful like that over the next while, then in the same way, we would continue to exercise our faith if we were allowed to do so.

And one of the remarkable things about the Babylonian Empire and then the Persian Empire that followed it was that they continued to allow all the captive nations, even those exiles who had been brought to Babylon, they were allowed to exercise their worship and their faith quite freely.

The thinking behind that was, of course, that that would enrich. I hate to use the word diversity because it's so misused nowadays, but that that would allow the diversity of knowledge.

And remember that they were highly into mathematics and science and various other things. That would allow knowledge to increase. And you can read, of course, in the book of Daniel, Daniel was

one of the, in the first wave of the exiles, how he rose to prominence, and not only prominence, but through various different rulers.

[11:52] And by the time, and again, I'm going to cut the history short a little here, by the time we come to Nehemiah with the Persians now ruling, we find this man.

And he is, as we see in the very last verse of chapter one, he is the cup bearer to the king. Now that's quite a remarkable position.

The cup bearer basically was the guy who had to test all the wine that was served to the king in whatever meals he were in, so that if the wine was poisoned, he would die first and everybody else would remain alive, because they would realize that the wine, especially the king, that the wine was poisoned.

In other words, when he tasted the wine, there was obviously a period of time before it was served to the king, perhaps not that long, 15, 20 minutes and so on, and if there were no ill effects, then it was served to everyone else.

So it is not only a remarkable position that Nehemiah holds, but it's also a very delicate position. It's a position of extreme trust, because if anyone had access to poison the king, it was him.

[13:18] And there have been instances of where that has actually taken place. But this is Nehemiah's position. We know very little about him.

We can surmise that he's probably a Jew. Almost certainly a Jew. I don't think there's any question of that from what he actually says in his prayer.

Nehemiah. Very probably from the tribe of Judah. Probably from the tribe of Judah. Because almost all those who were taken into captivity were from the tribe of Judah, although some would have been from the tribe of Benjamin.

And it appears that he is not married. It appears. As you read through Nehemiah, the conclusion is that we see him very much alone, although he has a family, because we see in verse 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers.

Now, whether it means a literal brother, or as the word was sometimes used in Hebrew at that time, it could mean a relative, a close relative. But even if we assume that it was one of his brothers, that Hanani has come with certain men from Judah, and they have brought news from Jerusalem.

[14:46] It's amazing when you think of it that Nehemiah, like Daniel, like others, was allowed to continue the worship of God freely in the coat of Babylon.

Whether the king is aware of the fact that Nehemiah, he must have been aware of the fact that he was a Jew, but whether he is aware that Nehemiah actively carried out his worship, we don't quite know.

He probably was. Personally, I think he was from the comments that are made elsewhere. But Nehemiah is extremely upset by the news that he hears from Jerusalem.

Verse 3, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire.

Now, these are symbolic words. It means certainly, factually, that the wall is broken down and the gates destroyed by fire, but it also meant that the worship of God, and we see that at the end of the book of Eshra and so on, it means that the worship of God in Jerusalem was beginning once again to fall into idolatry.

[16:18] And this is perhaps what upsets Nehemiah more than anything. And that's what we see in verse 4. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

I wonder how many of us, given the state of the church, the state of the people of God in our country nowadays, how many of us do that?

Do we sit down? Some commentators suggest that it because he was so upset by what he heard that he couldn't stand, that he actually had to sit down.

I sat down and wept. Do you and I weep over the state of the church? Do we weep over the state of our nation?

Probably not nowadays because, of course, it's no longer fashionable to weep about anything openly unless, of course, well, let's not go into that.

[17:27] I sat down and wept and mourned for days and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. I wonder how many of us have fasted recently.

fasting is not something that's very common in our denomination. Although, curiously, Thursday of the Communion in the old days used to be called a fast day, although I have to admit that as a child growing up in the manse, it was one of the biggest meals of the week that we had on the Thursday.

nobody seemed to pay much attention to actual fasting. Now, there is no command in the Old Testament or in the New Testament to fast.

Jesus does not lay the obligation of fasting on his disciples. It's not a command. But nevertheless, we see that it is quite a common occurrence at times in the Old Testament, especially during periods of repentance from sin.

What was the purpose of fasting? The purpose was to devote that time that you would spend either preparing food or eating food to prayer, perhaps alone or perhaps with others.

[19 : 03] And there are many who do that still. the church that we were in in Chile, it was very common. The elders would fast at least once a month and so on.

And perhaps it would do some of us good to fast once a month, who knows. But the purpose of fasting was to spend more time in close worship with God.

And that is what Nehemiah does. He continues fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And he does this for days. And we actually see from the first verse in the second chapter, in the month of Nisan, that he has done this for four months before he actually speaks to the king.

You see, in the first verse of the first chapter, it happened in the month of Kislev in the 20th year, as I was in Susa, the capital. I didn't comment on that.

Susa was actually south of Babylon and was reckoned to be the summer palace of the kings of Persia at that time. Although, this takes place in winter.

[20 : 19] The month Kislev in the Jewish calendar is equivalent to midway between November, December for us, and the month Nisan is between March and April.

So, Nehemiah's fasting and prayer and mourning takes place over approximately four months before he dares say anything to the king.

And you'll notice that it's not Nehemiah who notices or who says anything to the king first, but the king who speaks to him because he notices that he's extremely sad.

But it's very interesting for us to take a closer look at Nehemiah's prayer. It's a model of prayer for us. It's as we read it through and see the things that we see in his prayer, it serves us well to study and see how he constructs his prayer.

Verse 5, I said, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. That's a wonderful beginning to a prayer.

[21 : 42] You see how the sovereignty of God is mentioned right at the beginning. O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love.

I wonder how much time you and I spend thinking about God's covenant love. The covenant that he has made with us. Now, of course, the covenant of grace through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. But in the Old Testament of covenant, the covenant that goes back to the covenant made with Abraham and then we see it through, of course, Moses and the law and so on.

Keeps covenant and steadfast love. And imagine this man, almost certainly born in exile, almost certainly born in perhaps Babylon, perhaps Susa, we don't know, that this man is very familiar with the Old Testament, probably the Torah, that's the first five books of the Old Testament.

There may have been some of the other books written by this time, 1 and 2 Kings, perhaps, parts of Chronicles, Job and so on, that he might have been familiar with.

[23 : 04] But whatever scripture he's familiar with, he is familiar with the covenant love of God. And that is something that has not changed.

Perhaps the means of the covenant love has changed. In the old days, it was through the law that was given at Sinai. But now that covenant law is given from the cross, that the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ cleanses from all sins.

And you and I should spend more time thinking about God's covenant love for us, that all that he does, love for us, although at times, as it must have seemed to Nehemiah, at times it seems onerous, that nevertheless God has a purpose for his own glory in all that takes place in providence.

We heard quite a bit about that this morning as well. And it's perhaps difficult for us to follow many of these things. God's covenant love with those who love him and keep his commandments. And it's in a sense that he's reminding God and saying, you have promised through your covenant that you listen to your people's prayers.

[24 : 28] Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants.

day and night. I wonder how often he prayed during the day in a period of 24 hours. How often do you and I pray in the course of a day?

And it doesn't necessarily have to be, I mean, when you read this through, it's not a long prayer, really. There are much longer prayers in Scripture. But how often do we come to the God of covenant love in prayer during the course of a day?

Perhaps for many of us, we do it in our morning worship before we set about the day's business. Perhaps for others, we do it in our evening worship. Perhaps sometimes we just do it when we remember.

But there's a strong, strong reminder to us to be in constant prayer. Remember that, how does Paul put it in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5?

[25 : 36] He says, pray without ceasing. pray without ceasing. Now, there's a sense, of course, in which that is impossible. But nevertheless, what it means is that the spirit of prayer is always with us in whatever we do.

confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

Do you and I pray and confess our nation's sins? sins. Probably, as we see even in the next verse, even I and my father's house have sinned, we probably think that confessing our own sin is enough, never mind confessing the sins of everyone else.

But there should be an obligation on us to confess our nation's sins. because we are part of our nation.

There's an old saying that says you get the government that you vote for and therefore you are complicit in whatever the government does. Now, I don't want to start a political argument with that.

[26 : 58] That's not the objective of the thing. But you and I are part of our nation and it is implicit upon us to pray for our nation.

Even Paul puts it that we pray for those in authority over us and yet I wonder how often we forget that. Confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. And some people have commented on the use of the word even there that this suggests that Nehemiah was a very devoted Christian, very devout I shouldn't use the word Christian with him at that stage, a very devout believer that he followed the rules of the Old Testament Torah as far as he was able to.

It's not surprising. You see exactly the same thing with Daniel. You remember how Daniel refused to change his habits of prayer even for Nebuchadnezzar and how he almost paid the price for that afterwards.

But you remember how God delivered him. And it's in exactly the same way that we see Nehemiah saying here, even I and my father's house have sinned.

[28 : 28] And it's from this that people, commentators deduce that his father, his people, must have been from the tribe of Judah.

We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses saying, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.

But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.

Now that shows us that Nehemiah is extremely familiar with the Torah, the Pentateuch, the first five books, the books of the law. Because he is quoting directly from what God said to Moses in Leviticus chapter 26 and verse 33, and it's repeated again in Deuteronomy 28 and verses 64 onwards.

What God had warned the people while they were still on the road to the promised land. if you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples.

[30 : 02] And that's exactly what happened. You remember of course that the ten tribes of the north, that is the kingdom of Israel, had been taken into slavery into Assyria, scattered throughout Assyria in the time of the Assyrian Empire.

and we never hear of them again. They are totally dispersed. But the two tribes that are left in the south, Judah and Benjamin, that although they are taken into exile, nevertheless God will permit them to return.

And that quite clearly in the prophets in Jeremiah and Isaiah, he states specifically that this exile will be for a period of 70 years.

Literally a generation. And to all those who had been unfaithful in worship, had been idolatrous, probably would have died out.

But along with the warning, there is a promise. But, if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though you're outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.

[31 : 33] And that's exactly what happens. Nehemiah himself is then given permission, as we saw in the second part that we read, not only to return to Jerusalem, but to rebuild the walls.

Now, you'll remember that this was in the time of cities being surrounded by walls for their own safety. And with the walls of Jerusalem broken down, it was almost certain that nobody actually lived at this time within what was known as the city of David or the citadel of Jerusalem.

They would have lived out in the country and so on. And that may well have been one of the reasons why the worship in the temple had fallen into, shall we say, negligence at this particular time.

And Nehemiah realizes that unless the walls are rebuilt, that Jerusalem and temple worship will not return again until this happens.

And you see how afraid he is about this from verse 11. Oh Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayers of your servants who delight to fear your name and give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

[33 : 16] How often you and I perhaps avoid speaking out freely about the things that should be done and said for the purposes of the kingdom of Christ.

Why? Because we are very often afraid to do so. And perhaps it's no wonder that we're afraid. It's a difficult thing nowadays in public. It's easy enough in a pulpit of the Lord's people to speak about these things. But perhaps it's another thing to do so in your school, among your classmates, to do so in your work, in your daily activities, where perhaps the consequences of what you might say could be significant.

People have lost their jobs throughout our land for standing up for the cause of Christ. We see examples of that on social media all the time, not just in this country but in others as well.

At least perhaps in this country we don't yet fear execution for it. as some do in other countries. But nevertheless there is a sort of obligation on us nowadays that we don't talk about these things in case we offend people.

[34 : 48] what is more important that perhaps you offend people than being complicit in seeing them spend eternity in hell.

It's a fearful thought isn't it? and you and I are probably equally guilty of this that we are more afraid of the reaction of people and perhaps other people than we are of seeing perhaps even those who are close to us spending eternity in hell.

and yet we still keep quiet. And Nehemiah was no different.

He's human after all. It's four months. Four months in the month Nisan that he brings up the subject to the king.

Two conformes. And we see that it is perhaps the effect of fasting and praying has made him shall we say have a sad outward appearance.

[36 : 09] He's beginning to look perhaps maybe even suffering a little bit from the effect of fasting. Why is your face sad? Seeing you are not sick.

This is nothing but sickness of heart. And then as the text says I was very much afraid. Why was he afraid?

Because to be sad in the king's presence and upset the king might well lead to not only him losing his position but perhaps to his execution.

I wonder how often we reflect our sadness at the situation of the church to other people. Why is your face sad seeing you are not sick? we heard this morning a lot about the situation of our church, the situation of our denomination not only here on the island but in other places.

[37 : 19] sadness of this is nothing but sadness of heart. And it's a very difficult thing for us to figure out, if we can figure it out, what God is doing in his providence among us at this time.

there are some who think, maybe they're right, who knows, that God is speaking to us as a church, speaking to us as a denomination, that we have lost our way.

And that is why we are seeing such a significant decline, not only throughout attendance, when you consider morning attendance compared with evening attendance, and I see it so much as I go from church to church, where I'm invited to preach, morning attendance and evening attendance are two different animals altogether.

So few people come back in the evening. Now, of course, there are some who have the burden of children to look after, others, perhaps because of various other reasons, old age and sickness, etc. But there are plenty others who could be here. Plenty of you who could be here this evening, and I'm speaking directly to those who are watching online.

[38 : 51] You could be in the Lord's house this evening. At least we can be thankful that you're watching online. But wouldn't it be so much better if you were here to worship along with us.

Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? Perhaps for the state of our nation, just like Nehemiah, for the state of our nation, for the situation that we find ourselves in, for a royal family and a government in England and in Scotland and so on, who seems to have very little knowledge of the word of God and very little interest in maintaining the principles of the word of God in our lives.

And Nehemiah is very much afraid. But what does he do? Look at the end of verse 4 in chapter 2. The king said to me, what are you requesting? So I prayed to the God of heaven. Now obviously this not was a prayer that was uttered out loud in the presence of the king.

It was a prayer in his heart, a prayer that he must have put up perhaps just in a matter of seconds. Lord, help me in this situation.

[40 : 33] Lord, guide me in what I should pray for, what I should say. And you notice that the answer to the prayer is that he has given the courage to say exactly what is on his heart.

If your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father's graves, that I may rebuild it. The king could have taken that as a threat to his own empire, to his own position, to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as is suggested later by those who oppose Nehemiah when he comes to Jerusalem, where he becomes the governor for two terms.

The king could have seen that as a threat to his own authority, but he doesn't. And one can only see the hand of God in Artaxerxes agreeing to what Nehemiah wants.

How long will you be gone? When will you return? So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. He doesn't say what the time was, but you can see that later on as you read through.

And he is further emboldened to ask for letters for the governors of the province beyond the river Euphrates that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the forests, so that he would be given the resources necessary to carry out the work that he wanted to do.

[42 : 19] When you take courage and stand up for the word of God and the principles of the word of God, it's amazing how God sometimes, not always, but sometimes, removes the difficulties out of your path.

Time has passed. Nehemiah's prayer is a wonderful prayer. It's a prayer that you and I should come back to again and again, to remind and see how to remind the Lord of his promises.

There are so many promises in scripture that are so important for you and I, and yet we often forget them. How often do we come to God to complain rather than to remind him of his covenant promises, what he has promised throughout the Old Testament and in the New Testament, that he will never leave you nor forsake you, that if you put your trust in him, he will be with you always. May the example of Nehemiah bless us this evening as we consider it. Let us pray. Our Father in Heaven, we thank you for this prayer.

we thank you for the example that it is to us. We pray, O Lord, that we would come to you seeking, that you would bless us, enable us to stand up for your principles and for your word, to pray

constantly for the revival to take place throughout your church.

[44 : 02] And we thank you that we hear of that taking place in various parts of the world. But we pray for people here in this island, in our native land, that once again the spirit of the word of God would be poured out to bring a generation to a saving knowledge of you, to raise up men who will once again lead in the work of the gospel, to raise up ministers and to raise up a generation that will worship you.

Be with us now as we conclude our evening worship and pardon our sins through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Let us conclude then by singing in Psalm 127, page 420.

and we can see how it fits in, all these psalms that were sung, how they fit in with the text we were looking at.

Except the Lord to build the house, the builders lose their pain. Except the Lord the city keep, the watchmen watch in vain. It is vain for you to rise betimes or late from rest to keep, to feed on sorrow's bread, so gives he his beloved sleep, and so on to the end of the psalm.

Psalm 127, to God's praise, except the Lord to build the house. Amen. Except the Lord to build the house, Lord to house, lose their pain.

[45 : 56] Except the heart, the city keep, the watchmen watch in vain.

tis pain for you to rise betimes, or late from rest to keep, to feed on sorrows, bread so gives, his He is his beloved sleep.

The children are God's heritage, the world's fruit is reward.

reward. The sons of youth, our sorrows are, for strong men's prepared.

O how he is the man that have his quiver filled with those they unashamed in the gate shall speak unto their foes.

[47 : 56] the grace of Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all now and forever.

Amen.