

Sermon – 28/12/2008 pm

A Disturbing Report

Study Text: Nehemiah 1:1-3

Students recently received their school reports. Their progress throughout the year was assessed by their teachers and a report was issued. Parents take a great interest in these reports. They use it as an occasion for rejoicing and to determine what help or direction their child might need.

It is good for us as we come to the end of another year to look back and assess our progress in the Christian life. Have we learnt anything? Have we put into practice what we have learnt? We need to ask questions of ourselves in this regard.

What about our church, this local fellowship to which we belong. Have we progressed in this past year? If not, why not? Do we really care about looking at our report card as it were? Are we concerned about the people of God and the state of the church?

Ask

The people of God living in Jerusalem were in great distress and disgrace. The remnant had returned and had rebuilt the temple – after opposition and years of neglect. Opposition continued, as did the neglect. Ezra found the people had neglected reading the Bible. They had broken God's command with regard to holy matrimony.

Ezra probably got the people working to rebuild the city wall. He had gone back to Jerusalem with the full authority of King Artaxerxes to do what was necessary for the Jews and their worship. At a later time however the king ordered the work of rebuilding the wall to cease after Rehum the commander had written a scathing letter (Ezra 4). Rehum and his companions eagerly carried out the king's command, stopping the work by force of arms, and maybe destroying whatever work the Jews had done.

This appears to be the context in which Nehemiah received a report from Hanani (1:2). Hanani had come back to Babylon from Jerusalem – actually to Shushan, the summer residence of the king of Persia. Nehemiah was in the palace working as the chief steward of the king, a position only the most trustworthy of men would occupy.

Although an exile, Nehemiah would have been living a comfortable life, tasting the king's food and wine. But like Daniel he did not forget the people of God and the house of God. The first thing we are told about this man Nehemiah is that he asked this brother about the Jews back in Jerusalem and about the holy city itself.

Nehemiah was not just concerned about their physical welfare, although this was the focus of the report he received. He was concerned for their spiritual welfare also. In fact with the walls of the city broken down the enemies could come and disturb their worship – by trading on the Sabbath day for example.

A simple question often means a great deal to a brother or sister in Christ, especially when asked with sincere concern. To ask and then listen to that person share their concerns is encouraging. Nehemiah asked this brother about his brethren who were living in Jerusalem. His concern was genuine as his response plainly shows.

Looking back over this past year I confess that as your minister I have failed to ask about your well being as diligently as I should have. It is a great joy to me when you do share your concerns – the difficulties you face in your life and ministry. It is a great joy to pray with you and for you. As we have been learning from Ephesians, the church is the body of Christ, a body in which all members are connected because of Christ. In this body there must be communication. Communication involves asking questions and listening to the answer.

Weep

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days (1:4). Some think it was ‘some’ days and others ‘many’ days. Just how many days we are not told, although we are told it was four months before Nehemiah approached the king.

Why should Nehemiah weep over the troubles of people of God far away in Jerusalem? There is no reason to think it was only relatives that he was concerned about. He was weeping for brothers and sisters in Christ who were in distress and suffering reproach. Nehemiah did not turn away saying ‘too bad’ or ‘it’s their own fault, they should have stayed here in Babylon’. Nehemiah felt compassion for the brethren when he heard of their plight – their physical and spiritual plight.

Nehemiah did not weep without hope. He did not cry out in despair. Sure he mourned for days – so much so that the king noticed his sad face (2:2). He was mourning for his brothers in their difficulties. We are told to mourn over sin, our own or the sin of others – *lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up* (James 4:9, 10). That is what Ezra did. This is what Nehemiah did. Is it something you have done?

When was the last time you wept for a fellow believer? We see others in the midst of family crises, or having a crisis in their faith but what do we do? Do we weep and cry out to the Lord for them, or do we say ‘I have enough problems of my own’. Maybe you say ‘that is the job of the minister or someone else, it is not my responsibility’.

Fast and Pray

Nehemiah was not a priest like Ezra or a prophet. He is introduced as *Nehemiah son of Hachaliah*, a man we know nothing about. It was not Nehemiah's ‘job’ to pray for the people in Jerusalem or help them, but he did. He was a man who knew how to pray and he prayed earnestly. Is not prayer an essential part of the life of every child of God. And what should we be praying about – just ourselves?

The prayer life of a child of God will constitute a major part of their report card. Has your prayer life progressed in this past year? Are you spending more time in prayer each day – or less? It is ironic, and also a great danger, that the more God blesses us and the more prosperous we become the less we tend to pray.

Moses warned the people of God when they were entering the promised land, where they would live in beautiful houses and have extensive orchards, to beware lest they forgot the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:12). Many went down this road and incurred the wrath of God. Many continue to go down this road especially in our own society. Nehemiah was a man of prayer. How about you?

As Nehemiah thought about his brothers in their distress and wept for them, he was moved to pray. He was not in a position to do anything else but pray at this point in time – although we soon see what his prayer led him to do. Nehemiah came before the throne of God in heaven bringing his heartfelt concern for his brethren. He may have felt powerless but knew that God was all powerful and that nothing was impossible for God.

God actually invites us to come to him with our concerns. *Be anxious about nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God* (Philippians 4:6). We are told to *come boldly before the throne of grace that we might obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16). Nehemiah knew the same God that we do and came before his heavenly Father just as we are told to do. Do you come before the throne of grace with such confidence? Ask in faith without doubting what the Lord can and will do for you.

Nehemiah fasted and prayed. Ezra did the same. Fasting and prayer are often mentioned together in the New Testament (Acts 13:3, 14:23). Fasting is never mentioned alone although prayer is. Fasting has no inherent value. It is just that fasting is an aid to prayer. Fasting allows more time for prayer and/or assists in the exercise of self control. Moreover, Nehemiah was in mourning and therefore giving no thought to food.

Now there is a challenge for us in our prayer life; to be so concerned about a matter, about a sin, that we do not even feel like eating. We are not told how or when Nehemiah prayed, though we can assume that it was often. The focus is upon his sincerity. He did not pray as the self-righteous Pharisee but as the humble tax collector. He wept before the Lord and he fasted.

Nehemiah's prayer, which takes up the rest of this chapter, is very instructive; but let us remember the reason for this prayer. Nehemiah was not praying for himself, for a bigger house or better job. He was not even praying for his biological family. He was praying for his spiritual family. He was praying for his brothers and sisters in Christ as they faced difficulties in a far off place. Remember he found out about them by asking. What informs your prayers? What motivates you to prayer? Let us together examine our prayer life in the light of Nehemiah's example.

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