

Nehemiah 1 - Answered prayer followed by action. His name could mean “Consolation of Yahweh”
The whole book is worth reading. For this Bible Study I will only pick out a few details. More next week!

Some background:- The answer to the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jeremiah chapter 25, verses 11 – 12) and the prayer of Daniel (Daniel chapter 9 verses 1 – 23) which we looked at last week, came when Cyrus king of the Persians and Medes conquered Babylon in the year 539 B.C. Nearly 200 years earlier Isaiah had prophesied the role of Cyrus as the one called of God, to fulfil His purpose with the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The Edict of Cyrus enabled the Jews, (and other subject peoples of the Persian Empire) to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple. The prayers of the faithful people of God who had longed for an answer over the years of exile were being fulfilled.

The book of Ezra (chapters 1 – 3) records the names and numbers of the first wave those returning and the start of the restoration of the Temple in 536 B.C. However the work soon ran into opposition from the “people of the land” (Ezra 4 verses 4 – 5). The local rulers appealed to Artaxerxes. He was the son of Ahasuerus / Xerxes who took Esther to be his queen.

How far was the witness and influence under God of Queen Esther, an influence in subsequent events? By the year 445 B.C. all work on the rebuilding of Jerusalem had come to a halt and some destruction of the new work on the walls and gates had taken place. (Nehemiah 1 verses 1 – 3)

Nehemiah’s prayer:- Read Nehemiah chapter 1. When he heard the news from Jerusalem Nehemiah was heartbroken. Like faithful Ezekiel and Daniel, he confesses not only his own sin but also the sins of God’s people. - verses 6 -7.

He then appeals directly to the Lord for help – verse 11. This prayer and fasting was not a “one off”! It continued for four months. (the month of Chisev chapter 1 v. 1 to the month of Nisan, chapter 2 v. 1). How many of us are single minded enough to pray and fast for four months with one petition in mind?

God’s answer:- Read Nehemiah chapter 2. The sadness of heart that was felt by Nehemiah showed on his face. He may have been able to hide his distress for a long time, but eventually it showed through. His master the king noticed and asked why. A brief word of explanation and a question from the king leads to an “arrow prayer” verse 4. Notice that this short prayer to the Lord God follows the four months of prayer and fasting! It was for this moment that Nehemiah had prayed and looked towards. Now was the opportunity to make a difference to the whole future of the temple and Jerusalem. There was no earthly reason why the king should give Nehemiah leave to travel. (verses 5 – 6) Even less reason to provide letters of safe conduct (verse 7) , and an armed escort (verse 9). The spiritual reason why Nehemiah was successful in his petition is given at the end of verse 8. “The good hand of God was upon me”!

Encouragement going forward:- Read again chapter 2, verses 11- 20. the work Nehemiah was called to was directly from God (verse 12). This gave him the confidence he needed to enlist others. On his first inspection of the walls he only had a few men with him. The weary officials who had been in charge in Jerusalem had, at this time, no knowledge of his plans. Nehemiah faces up to reality and shares his “testimony” in verses 17 – 18. Then the “Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials and the rest who were to do the work” (verse 16) were fired up and said “Let us rise up and build” (verse 18) It even provided an answer to the enemies around! - read verse 20.

Spend a moment looking back on your Christian life. Recognise the times when the Lord has brought you through seemingly intractable problems! These times of difficulty and hardship should give us confidence that the Lord will continue to protect and provide.

“Hitherto the Lord has helped us.” (1 Samuel 7 verse 12) has been the testimony of the people of God down the ages. It should also be ours.