

Sunday 1st May 2022
Nehemiah 1:4 & 11; 2:1-9
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Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Prayer changes things
- Prayer prepares things
- Prayer is the first thing

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Come Holy Spirit, come among us and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Spirit and equip and envision us for the purposes of God.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.

I recently had some leave at the beginning of April and so the family went down to our home, our house in East Ayrshire where I think I told you last year there was some building work on going. I didn't really get much of a rest because I had 30 hours or so in the garden to do and it wasn't light work. I probably dug up a couple of ton of stone and rubble and other junk as part of my time there. In fact, there were some boulders that were so large I had to cantilever them out of the ground. I couldn't physically lift them and all this because we're hoping that this month we will get our lawn finally sewn. But there's always preparatory work to be done isn't there, and the preparatory work is the hardest work and it's essential work because without that getting done there's no way that people could come along and rake over the ground and then sow the seed. There's no way it could be done so the preparatory work had to be done but it is often the hardest and the heaviest work.

Last week we began our new series in Nehemiah and there we began with thinking about the situation of the church both locally and nationally and that, if we want a better church, a better future, then we need to engage with that preparatory work, the deeper preparatory work of the heart, which is often the hardest work. And so, last week in our first week, we thought about repentance preceding restoration and we all know probably that repentance takes time, it's not just a one-off moment where you say sorry and move on, that true repentance takes time to work through as we change the direction of our lives. And so, although we move on today, please don't forget about last week. If there were things that struck you there, if there's things that you were driven to talk with God about, keep talking with Him, keep in that place of prayer.

But today we move on and yet we move on to another preparatory step we might see. Before things will change there's something else required and it seems almost too obvious to mention but it is the place of prayer that we see in the example and story of Nehemiah. He prays. He prays for God's help and intervention but he not only prays for confession, he prays to receive God's help. And so, we read a little bit of the prayer from chapter one 'Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revealing your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.' So Nehemiah asked for God's intervention and God's help and it goes to show, as we were saying to the children with the little ornament, prayer changes things and we see that in chapter two that by verse

six and then verse eight the king is responding positively to this request from Nehemiah and I think there's a danger for us that we almost just skip over that. We think 'Of course that's going to happen you know, Nehemiah is a cup bearer, of course he's going to trust the cup bearer, so he'll automatically just say 'Yes' to that.' But we think that because we don't know the backstory maybe there is a backstory that 12 years prior to Nehemiah had been Ezra and that's just the book before, so if you ever want to read it just a couple pages back, and Ezra had been sent. He was a priest and he'd been used of God to bring a people, part of the people, back from exile but some opposition arose against Ezra and the people, and they wrote to the king about the situation and to try and change the king's mind and the king replied this way 'The letter you sent has been read and translated in my presence. I issued an order and the search was made. It was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition.' This is not good. 'Now issue an order to these men to stop work so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order. Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow to the detriment of the royal interests.' And so, what comes of Nehemiah, of Artaxerxes' letter. As soon as a copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them, by force, to stop it. Stopped because of King Artaxerxes being persuaded. And so, Nehemiah's not praying a little prayer here, he's not just asking for a wee favor, this is a change of royal policy that he's asking for. This is a big deal. Can you imagine trying to walk into Downing Street and persuade Boris Johnson to change his mind? Probably not. King Artaxerxes was Boris Johnson on steroids! That's hard to imagine admittedly, but you know what I mean. Imagine doing that. That's what he's asking. This is an audacious request but prayer changes things, because Nehemiah prayed the future of thousands of Jews, the future of Israel, maybe even our future was changed because if Nehemiah hadn't prayed there wouldn't be his story to inspire us, to challenge us, to encourage us.

And likewise, I came across a recent story and a book I've begun to read. It's a new book by Pete Greig called How to hear God, and in his very first chapter he recounts a story of a young lady called Azrin and it's an incredible story that sparked because she prays and I'd like to read it to you. I'd like to read it in its entirety because it's just such a good story so please sit back and just soak this up because it inspired me and I hope it inspires you.

Pete Greig writes:

I'll never forget the testimony of a young woman called Azrin who first shared her story with me one evening over dinner. Azrin grew up in northern Iran where six of her cousins were killed by the ruling Ayatollah's forces with whom the Kurdish Iranians are at war. Her earliest memories therefore, are of playing in the cemetery where her mother would go to mourn then, at the age of just 16, Azrin was arrested, accused of crimes she had not committed and forced to sign a declaration of guilt. She said 'I had done nothing wrong and still they held me guilty' and I detected a flicker of fire in her eyes. 'These people had killed my cousins and now they were accusing me of crimes I had not committed so I decided I might as well go and do the things they had forced me to confess. I would travel to the mountains of Iran and join the Kurdish militia. Up to this point Pete Greig writes, Azrin had always dutifully attended the mosque to pray but she

said Allah had never responded. As communists, the Kurdish militia denied God's existence and Azrin began to wonder if they were right. 'Either God was going to speak to me' she said with a flash of that same fire 'or I was doing or I would have nothing to do with him. I gave God an ultimatum.' she grinned 'I told him he had seven nights to speak to me or I would be permanently upset with him. On the seventh night, just before bed, Azrin reminded God of his looming deadline. 'Either you appear to me tonight' she said 'or that's it. I will live the rest of my life as if you don't exist.' And that night she had a dream. She dreamed that she was in a vast reception room full of many people feeling very alone until she recognized a man in front of her leaning against the wall. It was Hazrat Isa, Jesus, the holy highly honored one, highly honored in the Koran, as a prophet but not as the son of God. 'He was standing so close I could feel his breath.' she said. All around him there was a brilliant light. Nervously, Azrin addressed Jesus. She told him she was here to talk to God. He looked straight back at me and said the strangest thing 'Talk.' 'No' I protested 'you don't understand. I need to talk to God.' Again Jesus looked at me and said 'Talk.' Then very slowly he repeated the most astounding phrase 'I am God.' he said 'I am God. I am God'. Azrin's face seemed to be shining with the memory. She whispered 'As I heard this, all doubt drained away from my tired heart. We talked and talked and talked. I just poured my heart out to him, to God in Jesus, and for the first time in my life I experienced God speaking back into my life. When Azrin awoke from her dream she hurried to share the news with the local Mullah but he told her angrily that Jesus could not be God. Next, she told her family but they just laughed at her. And then, one day, as she was sitting in a park far from home, a total stranger gave Azrin a New Testament in the Persian language. It was the first Bible she had ever seen. The stranger also invited her to church where she was amazed to hear the preacher say 'God is love.' Reading her new Bible in the park afterwards Azrin finally found the words that made sense of her dream. Jesus said in John chapter 14 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.' No wonder he'd invited her to talk. Right there and then, sitting in that park, Azrin acknowledged Jesus Christ as the Son of God and, as she did so, she experienced an unfamiliar sense of hope flooding into her body, displacing the many years of despair. Azrin shared this story with me quietly and calmly but I just kept shaking my head in amazement and forgetting to eat. A couple of times I wanted to scream 'Hallelujah!'

'So, what did you do' I asked 'after you became a follower of Jesus?' 'Oh' she laughed 'I never joined the Kurdish militia. I didn't want to kill people anymore, I wanted to bring life so I trained to plant churches instead.' 'Of course' I said encouragingly 'and how's that going?' 'Well, I've planted five churches so far.' she replied casually. 'Isn't that a bit dangerous?' I asked instead, I'm already feeling a complete coward. Azrin fixed me with a steady gaze 'Pastor Pete' she said 'I was willing to die fighting to kill for the Kurdish militia, don't you think it's much better to die fighting for Jesus?'

Wow!

Prayer changes things and sometimes when you pray you have no idea what you're opening up yourself up to.

Prayer changes things, and it changed her life yet, we need to remember that prayer is not like treating God as a genie in a bottle. He's not a slot machine or a spell that we're trying to say the right words to get them working. That's not how prayer works and we do need to acknowledge also that prayer goes unanswered. Indeed, Nehemiah knows a little of that experience too. It's not obvious because we use the original words of the months, but chapter one begins in the month of Kislev which is late November/early December. Chapter two begins in the month of Nissan which is March/April time. So, he prayed for four months. I wonder if he ever thought his prayer was going to go unanswered? Change wasn't instantaneous for him either and so not all changes we pray for occur and if that resonates with you and if you feel God is silent then maybe you should pick up Pete Greig's other book which is titled God on mute, God on mute. Nevertheless, it was William Temple who said 'When I pray coincidences happen and when I don't they don't.' And the apostle James writes saying 'You don't do not have because you do not ask God.' But he also cautions that 'When you ask you do not receive because you asked with wrong motives.' Sometimes we don't have because we don't ask and sometimes, we don't receive when we do ask because we're asking with the wrong motives. Nehemiah did ask and he asked with the right motives. His focus was on God's kingdom, God's glory, God's purposes, and he prayed in line with God's promises as well, His promise to restore His people.

And so, when thinking about our situation and our prayers for the church, if change is going to come it can't be just by restructuring, there needs to be that deeper work. We need to repent, but we need to pray, we need to pray with right motives and we need to pray in line with God's promises. Like Matthew 16 would be a great promise to cling to where Jesus says 'I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it.' If we want the future of our church to be better than its present, then we must pray, because prayer changes things.

Now we might wonder 'Well, how does prayer change things?' And there's many possible answers to that, but the story of Nehemiah shows one way that prayer changes things and, in particular, prayer changes Nehemiah, prayer prepares Nehemiah and so he writes of his own account 'I took the wine and gave it to the king I not been sad in his presence before so the king asked me why does your face look so sad when you're not ill this can be nothing but sadness of heart. I was very much afraid'.

So, Nehemiah's experiencing this fear as he embarks on trying to change the king's mind and there's some debate about why he might be fearful. He might be fearful of punishment because there's some literature that would suggest that being sad in the king's presence could get you killed. But also, maybe he's fearful because he realizes that this is the moment, this is his moment to share with the king, to persuade the king to go with a different plan, to change his policy. He realizes this is the moment when the lives of thousands hang in the balance. I'm pretty sure I'd be a little bit fearful too. And yet, Nehemiah is able to overcome his fear because he spent four months in prayer and even draws on prayer amid communication with the king, in verse four. It keeps him going, it strengthens him, it gives him boldness. And how can I say that it gives a

boldness? What gives me that clue, that idea well? Back in chapter one he prayed this 'Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.' This man, this man, who with the click of his fingers, could have him killed, this man who everyone else was in fear of, this man who had ultimate power.

But, to Nehemiah, he's nothing compared to God, God who is the God of heaven, the Lord Almighty who parted the Red Sea, who defeated Pharaoh, the great and awesome God. That's his God and, in light of that God, Artaxerxes is just 'this man'. In the place of prayer, he was equipped to have boldness to ask for his request, to overcome his fear. I wonder, is part of our purpose, as part of living out our faith, is fear holding us back? Fear of saying 'I'm a Christian', fear of saying 'I go to church', fear of sharing our faith, fear of playing our part 'I couldn't do that. I'm not like that person.' Whatever it might be, is fear holding us back? Maybe it's in the place of prayer that we are prepared to overcome our fear as we come face to face with God.

But Nehemiah is prepared in other ways as well. In the middle of our chapter 2 there's a cluster of verses that show he's prepared in a number of ways and I'll just run through them very quickly:

he said 'I answered the king. If it pleases the king, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it. I may have a letters to the governors and a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park.'

Now, again, we just skip over this, but we need to realize something's going on here, we need to realize that first of all he says 'send me' and we think 'Sure, of course he's going to pray that or say that but, maybe at the start of the four months he was praying for Ezra 'Lord, Ezra is already there, would you just open the door for Ezra' because, you know, if you and I are praying for situations, don't we just pray for the people who are local, never think to pray that we'd have a part in answering that prayer, and so he probably did the same, but over that time he comes to realize 'Actually, maybe I should play a part here, maybe I've got something to give. Maybe I've got influence and skills that can be utilized, so send me' becomes part of the plan.

But then, he also formulates a plan about how to speak to the king. Notice what he says. He begins by saying about his ancestors, where they are buried and that's a clever move because the Persians had a great respect for the dead, a great respect for the dead and the living we might say and so he begins there rather than digging up old stuff about the history and about Gods and religions and anything like that, he begins with what the king can understand. That's a wise move. But also notice that he figures out he needs letters to the governors to keep himself safe. He knows the person who oversees the wood so I need to go and speak to that person. So he's formulating a plan here as if as he prays over those four months, he's led to formulate a plan, he's given wisdom and all this culminates in him in verse 8 saying 'because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.' God's grace was upon him.

Now, let's remember from our teaching series last year, that grace equips us, grace changes us, grace sustains us. All that he received, as he recognized that he had a part to play and there was a plan to formulate and he needed God's grace to keep him persevering and being able to say to the king 'This is my plan and please honor it.' So again, thinking about our future, if our future is going to be more fruitful, if we're going to see that the empty, vast empty spaces in this church filled once again, we need to be praying so that we are prepared, so that we overcome our fear, so that we receive wisdom about how to go forward, so that we receive grace that we might play our part and be equipped and sustained to keep playing our part. Because, why else Jesus does say in Matthew 16 that he will build his church? In Matthew 18 he also says 'Go' and Matthew 28 he says 'Go and make disciples of all the nations' He says to you and me and there's a tension there. He says 'I will build my church' but 'you go make disciples'. So Jesus has no plan B. It's you and me. He's not just gonna click His fingers. It's through you and me that He will fulfill His purposes and He will extend His kingdom and He will build His church. So, we need to be praying.

And that leads us to our final point, the most crucial point of all, about everything we learn about prayer in chapters one and two, and it's this: prayer is the first thing, prayer is the first thing. Notice that in chapter one he quickly gets into sharing his prayer which is really a summary prayer because, as we said, he's been praying for four months so this is not the only prayer he prayed but this sums up the flavor of what he was praying but his prayer comes before his reputation, his title, prayer was the first thing to Nehemiah, is it the first thing in our lives. Is it the first thing in the church? Because, I think, we prioritize action. For a number of reasons, it is easier maybe or we may be like to be seen as busy, we like to be seen as doing something. And let me just give you an example of this. How many plaques around church do you see that are because someone was a prayerful person? How many statues, how many buildings are named after someone who was faithful in prayer? Whereas, more often than not, they're named after someone who was busy.

So, prayer is the first thing for Nehemiah, before reputation or title, prayer came before action. It's very obvious. Chapter one, he prays, chapter two is when he finally gets down to some action. Are we similar or not? And in some ways we're not similar I think because we hear sermons about prayer but no one's come alongside us to teach us how to pray. We've not been discipled in that and all I can say is the best way to learn to pray, is to pray, and to be around people who pray, which is why I love going to the Thursday evening time of prayer because I listen to other people's prayers and I learn from them and that's how I learned to pray. You know, I never learned to pray just by someone giving me a chance in church or listening to Sunday prayers. The most influential time of that influenced me and how to pray and have confidence to pray myself was when I was at the Christian Union and they said 'Oh, we've got a prayer meeting at halfway Wednesday morning, do you want to come along?' In my naivety I said 'Yes' and I went and as I kept going, I grew in boldness to pray.

Does prayer come before action for us? and in prayer before restoration. Chapter one prayer and the rest of the story unfolds from there, the story of restoration. So, if we want to see a different future, then prayer needs to be the first thing for us as well.

So, how are we going to do that, church? How are we going to do that? You can do it individually, of course. You can maybe set some time aside for that and to be praying for us as a congregation, for us as a denomination. You could do it in your Fellowship Groups. Many of you are in a Fellowship Group and you probably pray for needs locally and in your own life but, could you create some space to pray for the church locally, nationally. If you're in a team, I know that many of our teams when they gather, they begin with prayer and they end with prayer and that's good but, could we create a wee bit space in the agenda to pray for the church – and, just to give the elders a heads-up, you can guess what we'll be doing at the start of our time together of Kirk Session very soon, we'll be praying.

But I don't know if you're aware every Sunday morning, prior to the service, a few people gather for prayer. It was something that was started well before my time, I have no idea who started off, I'm sure someone can tell me. Numbers have dropped a little over time but there's still some faithful people gathering for prayer each Sunday and so I want to call you to join that time of prayer, to join us at quarter past nine to quarter to quarter past 10 to half past 10 for prayer, to pray for the service, to pray for us as a church, to pray for our wider life as a denomination, and I'd ask please that any and everyone in the building drops all tools, prayer before action, so band, choir, tech, door duty, Sunday School, teas and coffees, whoever it would be, with down tools and if that cuts into your prep time could you come a wee bit earlier. I know that's cheeky to ask, but it's just for four weeks. I should have said that for four weeks and you can keep coming of course but for four weeks can we try and make that space between now and Pentecost Sunday on the 5th of June which is when we next share Communion, could we make that space, can we make that commitment and gather for prayer. Because, if you look at the testimony of the church over 2000 years, when these people gather for prayer, change happens and, who knows what that might lead to this great and awesome God, this living Jesus, who breaks into people's lives and astounds them with His love. Who knows what He'll do next if we will be a people who pray. So let's take a moment to pray just now, let us pray:

Lord, very simply, what is of me, just blow it away and help us forget it, but what is of You, take it deep so that our lives change. Help us to be doers of your word rather than just listeners, which is so easy to do. Shape us and change us for Your purposes, for Your glory. And so, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen