

28th November – Advent 1 – FAITH

INTRODUCTION

Jon has asked Carol and I to begin a short series leading up to Christmas exploring our church's strapline which is – please all join in - **Sharing God's love. To live by faith, to be known by love, and to be a light of hope.** So we are starting off with Faith and he has asked us to use Nehemiah and Ruth as illustrations of faith.

We are excited to share these Old Testament stories with you because the old Testament is the foundation of our faith and Jesus's background and history.

Faith is a small word for something so huge, it is our cornerstone, our support, our confidence. Hebrews 11 v1 ***Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.***

But what is living by faith?

The stories you are about to hear are very different examples of living by faith but also have much in common. They both show as James says "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead". We see that Faith is active not passive.

Firstly then Nehemiah.

The book of Nehemiah gives us a first hand account of a man of huge courage and faith. It is a personal testimony of the actions he took to fulfil his God-given task of restoring life and worship in the Holy city of Jerusalem following their exile to Babylon. He is cup bearer to the king. Who incidentally is the stepson of Queen Esther.

The name Nehemiah means, Yahweh comforts.

Indeed He does, through the obedience, persistence and determination of Nehemiah.

Over a period of about 90 yrs, some exiles had returned to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah hears the latest news. And it devastates him. The people were in great trouble and disgrace. The walls of the Holy city, which would offer protection, were broken and the gates had been burned. Everybody and everything was vulnerable.

This awful news causes Nehemiah to respond with tears and **prayer**.

And what a great example to us; that his first response was to pray to his mighty and powerful God.

To be a person of Faith, you **need to know who you believe and trust in**.

Nehemiah actually prayed for 4 months before his step of faith.

He then takes a step of faith in order to fulfil God's will for his life. Even though he is frightened and scared he tells the king, with an arrow prayer as he does! These are great for emergencies but are not the kind that develop our relationship with God.

Nehemiah had a firmly established relationship with God and he knew he could talk to him at any time.

So, Nehemiah does something. He acts. He has a plan and he is on a mission...A MISSION FROM GOD!

Faith is active. It is not sitting still and waiting. It is **work. Often hard work**

Nehemiah's appearance before the king goes incredibly well. Not only does he get the leave he requested but also letters to ensure safe travel and access to a forest for wood to help with the reconstruction.

Nehemiah responds with **praising God**. He knew the gracious hand of God was upon him.

And later in the story he continues to praise God during opposition and trouble.

He was firmly persuaded that God's gracious hand was upon him.

His relationship with God was so secure that he knew that whatever the circumstances, the Lord would stand by him.

Nehemiah keeps looking up to his God through all the ridicule, discouragement, scorn and opposition. His eyes are fixed on His God and he gains strength and focus from him.

He trusts in God and is rewarded, by completing his task successfully in 52 days.

Faith is the language of God's kingdom. He responds towards our faith.

He longs to relate with us as a father relates to his children.

Nehemiah went back home. His **mission was at home** and it was blessed.

Our missions are often for where we are, where we work, who we see; and even who we live with! He also mobilised his skills. The ones God had helped develop over the years. Years of living and working and praying.

Let us not get distracted by other peoples missions or gifting.

God has stuff for us to do that no one else can.

Eph2v10 We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us.

Nehemiah offers us an inspiring example of living by faith...in the most intense challenges. In sorrow, fear, hard work, opposition and success.

Another example of living by faith is Ruth.

Ruth one of the shortest books in the Bible tells the story of the unfailing devotion and faith of a Moabite woman, a pagan, a gentile.

God had warned repeatedly that if the Israelites forgot His covenant, he would allow persecution and starvation, so Judah was experiencing hard times and famine. It was during these hard times that Elimelech took his wife Naomi and their 2 sons from Bethlehem and crossed the River Jordan into Moab to seek a better future.

Unfortunately, tragedy struck and Elimelech died before his time so his two sons - who would have been under pressure to maintain the family name - took Moabite wives. Mahlon married Ruth and Chilion married Orpah.

More misfortune then struck them as both Naomi's sons died. Left a widow in a foreign land without her sons to protect and provide for her Naomi decided her only option was to return to her homeland. Initially she asked her daughters in law to come with her, but then realised that as foreigners and outsiders they would have extreme difficulty in finding new husbands in Israel so she urged them to remain in their own homeland Moab.

Orpah did remain, but Ruth was steadfastly faithful to her mother in law and her new religion saying "wherever you go, I will go: and wherever you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" – (Ruth 1:16)

They arrived in Bethlehem at harvest time – and Ruth sought out a way to provide for herself and her mother-in-law by gleaning wheat with the poor gathering it up from the corners and edges of the fields that had been left behind by the harvesters.

The fields she was in happened to belong to Boaz – who happened to be a relative of Naomi. He was impressed by Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi. He told Ruth that she must stay in his fields and that his workers would look out for her – he had even instructed them to drop extra wheat on the ground so that she could have plenty to collect.

God blessed Naomi and Ruth through Boaz. Boaz eventually took Ruth as his wife and she bore him a son. Through Ruth’s son Obed she became the great grandmother of King David and direct ancestor of our Lord Jesus – and her name is forever listed in his genealogy.

Ruth also fulfilled the Old Testament prophesy to Abraham that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (ie Jew and gentile alike) – Genesis 12:3

We could say this all these events happened by chance – by chance Ruth met Mahlon whose family had fled into her land, by chance she married him, by chance her father in law and her husband and his brother all died.

By chance she insisted on returning with Naomi to Israel, to live as a foreigner herself in a strange land far from her family, her relatives and her religion – by chance she met Boaz, by chance he married her and they had a son!

However these “chances” are what Gilly and I have come to call (through our years of bible study with the American Beth Moore) - God incidences.

We may not recognise God leading us, opening doors, making introductions, putting us in the right place at the right time however when we look back we can often see how his hand orchestrated all these events. His fingerprints were all over it.

Ruth was a very young believer but God still had a great purpose for her. New Christians should be really encouraged by this – it doesn’t matter how long you’ve believed for God to have a role for you to play. Whatever season we are in – God is at work in us – weaving a beautiful tapestry.

God is working his purpose out.

CONCLUSION

Oswald Chamber says Faith is deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time.

Faith is a two way process - the King trusted Nehemiah and Naomi relied on Ruth and God has faith in us.

Faith is active not passive and it is the language of God's kingdom, he responds to our faith as a Father relates to his children.

Remember that Nehemiah prayed and praised – these personal disciplines strengthened him during his struggles to complete God's mission for him.

Let's use our own gifts, passions, situations and opportunities. Listen to God and trust in those inner promptings.

If our faith is never tested we won't be motivated to pursue God and draw closer to him.

God promises us peace, but not smooth sailing or immunity from life's problems. When darkness seems to hide his face, I rest on his unending grace.

But none of this happens unless we have a growing faith in the love and power of GOD.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, give me clarity when it comes to what I put my faith in. May it only be You and nothing else. Help me to tune out the false wisdom that surrounds me and hear the truth from Your Spirit.

Amen

Gilly Robinson & Carol Elsasser