



HG233: Nehemiah - Be Determined
Don't Despair, Begin To Repair!

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Home Group Study Notes

9 January 2022 - Revd Paul A. Carr



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

At the beginning of this new year, share your hopes, fears and ambitions for you personally and, if you have any, for Emmanuel for 2022.



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



HG233: Nehemiah - Be Determined *Don't Despair, Begin To Repair!*

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Home Group Sermon Notes

9 January 2022 - Revd Paul A. Carr

This morning we begin a series of studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah that will take us, on and off, through to the end of July. This diary/memoir of Nehemiah records the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. I'm quite excited about what we can learn from this book because I've found it to be particularly relevant as we seek to re-imagine what it means to be church in a pandemic world with increasing communal anxiety and how we connect with the changing world around us.

There are two main themes to this book: chapters 1-7 examine the *Rebuilding of the Walls* and chapters 8-13 focus on the *Reforming of the Community*. In Nehemiah we find wonderful examples of obedience, prayer, determination and the value of collaborative working and there is also some great imagery. And, in the midst of all this, Nehemiah demonstrates inspiring godly leadership. There are striking similarities between with Joseph and Daniel. I have four points to this sermon!

1. Nehemiah Cared Enough To LISTEN vs 1-3

The name Nehemiah means *The Lord comforts*. We know he was a butler/cup bearer, vs11, to the Emperor, Artaxerxes I (an ancient predecessor of the Ayatollah, for Persia is now the modern nation of Iran). Nehemiah listened to what his brother and friends had to say and asked them questions to clarify what they were saying. The people of Jerusalem were in trouble. They were feeling a great sense of disgrace. Their buildings had been destroyed. The walls of the city were broken down. The gates had been burned and were no longer usable. It was at this point that Nehemiah began to think that he could, or should, do something about this unacceptable situation. John Mott once said that the call to ministry is: *The awareness of a need and the capacity to meet that need: this constitutes a call!* Nehemiah's call was discerned/formed in this way.

2. Nehemiah Cared Enough To WEEP vs 4

What makes people laugh or cry is often an indication of their character. Nehemiah was so distressed about the state of his ancestral home that he sat down, wept, mourned, and fasted. This great building programme, with all of its success and all of its challenges, begins with Nehemiah sitting and weeping. I guess many of us have been in a similar place at many times in our lives.

The New Testament equivalent that comes to mind is of Jesus entering Jerusalem before his trial and crucifixion. Remember how Jesus lamented at the political and spiritual state of God's Holy City (Luke 19:41-44). However, it was his passionate compassion that gave Him the motivation and grace he needed to fulfil the greatest Kingdom building mission of all time.

Nehemiah clearly has a deep sense of personal concern. He is willing to face the facts, to weep over them, and tell God about them - and that is clearly the best place to start.

3. Nehemiah Cared Enough To PRAY vs 5-10

There are twelve prayers in the book of Nehemiah. It opens and closes with prayer, and it shows us how much of a priority Nehemiah thought prayer was for the task God was calling him to do. In the same way, if we want the Lord to pour his spirit upon us and bless us in our mission and ministry, then we have to make prayer our priority. If we want God to move, then let's be prepared to get on our knees, weep and seek His face. Nehemiah did and God blessed his work. Of course, there will be many times when we will feel inadequate for the task, which is why prayer is so important.

In his prayer, Nehemiah reminds himself of the nature of God. A God of forgiveness, a God of restoration, a God of reconciliation and a God of renewal. When our heart is right, God can change all the external circumstances of a situation and make it into something entirely different.

In vs6b-7, Nehemiah repented of all personal and corporate sins: *I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.* This is an honest facing of his own guilt. Nehemiah doesn't say, *Lord, I am thinking of those terrible sinners back there in Jerusalem. Be gracious to them because they have fallen into wrong actions.* No, he puts himself into this picture, saying, *I have contributed to this problem. There are things that I did or did not do that have made this ruin possible. I confess before you, Lord, the sins of myself and my father's house.* There's no attempt to excuse or to blame others for this - it is a simple acknowledgement of a shared responsibility of wrong.

I served my curacy in Handforth, Cheshire (many famous by the Jackie Weaver viral video!). We lived on the Spath Lane Estate - a Manchester overspill Council Estate. The church had placed the curates house on this Estate but had never made any positive inroads into the community. It seemed to me to be a case of 'you come to us' ... so I decided we'd go to them. I established a positive relationship with the local primary school, took regular assemblies; became a 'friend of the school' and we were able to use the school for our children's summer holiday club as well as setting up a weekly Saturday morning kingz klub. Literally, 100's of children came who would never come to the church. We visited these children every week and this brought us into regular contact with their families.

There were very few amenities on this estate – apart from a pub and three police houses and a holding cell (which happened to be my study when the Diocese bought one of the houses for the curate!). This always amused me – especially after my time in the Prison Service. We began to explore the idea of renting a boarded-up shop as a café (Paula's vision), which we did, and it was open for 15 years before the buildings were demolished. I became an 'active' chaplain to the British Legion which helped break down some barriers. I also became a member of a management committee set up to oversee the changeover from council tenancy to a Housing Association.

But despite the fact that these initiatives were well received, something seemed to be holding things back and no-one was able to put the finger on 'why?'

Around this time, I attended an Anglican Renewal Ministries conference where Russ Parker (then director of the *Acorn* Healing Trust) was talking about a book he and Michael Mitton had just written: 'Healing Wounded History.' He was talking about situations where knowledge and understanding of past wrongs of a church/community have an impact on the life of the church/community in the present (Deuteronomy 28 etc.). Spurred on by this, I began to do some research into the history of the estate, to see if I could find anything that would be helpful.

I found out that 30 years before, nearly 80% of the population of 'old' Handforth had signed a petition against the estate being built. I also found out that a meeting had taken place in Saint Chad's - because it was the largest building in the community at that time - where one of the Churchwardens, a retired Major had said: 'We don't want their riff raff here' - it became the headline in the Manchester Evening News.

As you can imagine, people moved onto this estate with a huge amount of anger; suspicion and distrust towards the church and community and this was passed on from generation to generation. No one wanted to be married or have their funeral services in church. As far as they were concerned, the church didn't exist - though some began, albeit slowly, to appreciate all that we were trying to do for them. A public meeting was called by the Housing Association, and, because of my experience/knowledge of the local community, I was invited to speak. The local school had about 500/600 people present and when it was my turn, a 'negative' murmur went round the hall (Daniel in the Lions Den!)

Rather than give my prepared talk, I felt as though God was saying to me that I should apologise for the past and for what the church had and hadn't done over the years. And so, I asked for their forgiveness for the mistakes we'd made and how we wanted to play an active part of their community. I also pledged to do all we could in the future to work alongside them. When I finished my talk I received an emotional round of applause and the rest, as they say, is history. The change was quite remarkable and heralded a new beginning for the congregation and community. I'm only sorry my curacy came to an end and that I wouldn't be around to see the fruit of my work.

I believe knowing something of the history of a church and community, and 'healing the mistakes' of the past is the principle that Nehemiah is teaching us here. This explains why I addressed many of the issues I did when I first arrived. But is there anything that we still need to deal with? Nehemiah teaches us that it is only with God's help we can actually change ourselves and recover from the damage and ruin of the past. And, whilst Nehemiah is the story of the rebuilding of the walls, its much more than that. It's also a story of the restoration of a people from ruin and despair to a new walk with God.

4. Nehemiah Cared Enough To VOLUNTEER vs 10-11

In vs10-11a. Nehemiah requested specific help to begin this process: *O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man* (The King).

Nehemiah could have felt overawed and overwhelmed by the task ahead. He could have been filled with despair, but he wasn't - he knew he could do something about it. He hears the call of God on his life and responds, as all of us should with: *Here I am Lord, Send Me.*

Nehemiah knew it wasn't going to be easy, but he knew what he had to do. It was going to take the authority of the top man in the whole empire to get him on the move. Nehemiah believes that God will help him. And so, he starts to pray, and asks for grace and strength to carry out the steps that are necessary to begin the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem.

God is still looking for people, like Nehemiah, who care enough to listen to the facts, weep over the needs, pray for God's help and volunteer to get the job done. I believe God raises up in every church, in every generation, people who answer the call on their lives to do His will. I believe that God, more than ever, is looking for people who will make a difference in the difficult places of life to do His work, people of:

- **Vision:** to see beyond the improbable
- **Faith:** to make a start and to believe that God can use them
- **Courage:** to do what it takes to finish the job.

Craig Greenfield: *"I have found that if I pray for God to move a mountain, I must be prepared to wake up next to a shovel!"* Nehemiah wasn't a prophet, but he spoke and acted in a manner reminiscent of the best of them. He didn't belong to the priesthood, yet he supported the priests with enthusiasm and shows priestly characteristics in his everyday life. He wasn't a king, but his work reminds us of great regal enterprises.

Conclusion

I've entitled my talk today: *Don't despair - begin to repair.* For Nehemiah, it was the walls of Jerusalem. What might it be for you? What might be causing you to despair in your life? What is in ruins that you'd love to see rebuilt? What might God have highlighted in your own life, or past history, that needs to be healed, repaired and restored?

A broken relationship; a difficult, almost impossible, situation; it may be illness; a family disaster; death or disease. You may be about to lose your job or be heavily in debt. It may be depression - it could be anything and everything, but it's often only when we are in a desperate state/situation that we cry out for God's help. Nehemiah didn't know where to start, but he began with tears, prayer and the ever-increasing realisation that God had promised to be with him, always.

Perhaps, like Nehemiah, we should pour out our hearts before God, in tears and prayer and tell him all our hurt, our fears and our pain. And as we do so, let's remember that God is in the business of both repairing, rebuilding and restoring people's lives.

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Emmanuel Church Text for 2022

*"But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
the purposes of His heart through all generations."*

Psalm 33:11



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1. Have you ever had a ‘... *deep dissatisfaction with what is, and a clear grasp of what could be*’ in your Christian life? What might this be for you, and in the life of Emmanuel at this moment in time?

2. Nehemiah cared enough to pray in response to the news about Jerusalem. What different aspects of prayer can you find in vs2-11? How can these be used in your own prayer life and within the prayer life of Emmanuel?

3. Paul spoke about ‘healing wounded history.’ Are you aware of any areas in: your own lives; our community; or church, where we might need to make a deliberate effort to ‘heal the past’ in order to enable people to ‘move on’ and to allow God’s blessing to be made known?

4. Nehemiah saw a need to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and knew he had the capacity to meet that need. What needs do you see around you at: home; work; society; and church where you could be the answer to that need? What ‘needs have yet to be met’, where you/we could meet them?

5. Have you ever not volunteered for a task, which you knew God had laid on your heart, only to find that the task has not been completed and continues to be left undone? How does this make you feel? Would you respond differently if given another opportunity to do the same thing again?

6. Paul suggested that God is looking for people with: *Vision; Faith and Courage*. Do you have any examples when these have been at the forefront of your own Christian experience? Share some examples with your group.



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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