



HG237: Nehemiah - Be Determined
A Heart For What Is Right

Nehemiah 5:1-19

Home Group Study Notes

13 March 2022 - Rachel Orford



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

What film or novel do you wish had a different ending?
How would you change it?



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 ...



HG237: Nehemiah - Be Determined *A Heart For What Is Right*

Nehemiah 5:1-19

Home Group Sermon Notes

13 March 2022 - Rachel Orford

Introduction

Before it started out, I don't suppose many people (apart from Nehemiah) would have given the "Rebuilding of the Wall of Jerusalem" project much of a chance. At the outset we hear that the wall has "... broken down and its gates have been burned with fire." But actually, so far, it hadn't been doing that badly. Supplies had been plentiful and there didn't appear to be any shortage of labour; people from all walks of life had been taking responsibility for their own section of the wall. Admittedly there had been plenty of opposition to the rebuilding work - from ridicule to threats of violence. But the Jewish community had overcome the resulting discouragement and, as we heard last time, devised workable plans to defend themselves.

But here we are in Chapter 5 and everything has ground to a halt. Whilst money and supplies for the building project are not in short supply, money and food for the workers are a real problem. There was a famine in the land and the people were weighed down by taxes which they were still paying to the king of Persia. What's more the land they were paying taxes upon was land which most of them no longer owned.

A Bad Situation

How had this situation got so bad? We know that the families of the workers were large and because the breadwinners were presumably spending most of their time working on the wall, they weren't able to work their land or do their jobs full time - and so began a downward spiral. They found themselves having to give up the property that they owned as collateral for loans to buy food; loans upon which they were being charged exorbitant rates of interest. It would be like us putting our grocery bills on credit cards with a massive APR and then taking a pay cut so that we never had enough money to pay off the balance. In the end this would lead to a visit from the bailiffs and repossession, and in post-exile Judah this could include their children being taken away to be slaves.

And in this case, the bailiffs and loan sharks were not the enemies of the Jews, but other Jews - their own countrymen! The people had come to Nehemiah because he was the governor of Judah and raised an "outcry against their Jewish brothers." A bit later in the chapter Nehemiah identifies these people as "nobles and officials" - probably the descendants of people who had come back to Judah in the first wave of returning Jews nearly a century earlier. And we have already got the impression that they were not team players. Back in Chapter 3:5 we are told that the nobles of Tekoa "would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors." While being lazy is one thing, exacting usury is on another level and it had literally become a show stopper. If Nehemiah didn't confront this problem, the work of God would be brought to a halt without a single shot being fired by the enemy.

If we are honest I think most of us are a bit fearful of confrontation. It's difficult....so we avoid it. If we don't handle it well, it can lead to conflict and it seems like there is enough of that in the world, particularly at the moment. But sometimes the consequence of avoiding it is going to be worse than the confrontation itself.

As the artist James Christensen said, “the purpose of Christianity is not to avoid difficulty, but to produce a character adequate to meet it when it comes. It does not make life easy, rather it tries to make us great for life.” To successfully handle these kinds of situation it is important for us to be sure of our motivation - to be sure of what is in our hearts. And as we read on, we find that this situation does get resolved - Nehemiah clearly handled it well.

Righteous Anger

Firstly, he got angry! That seems to be quite an odd thing to start off with doesn't it? If I get angry then it is usually the first step on the road to disaster. But my anger is often in response to some perceived wrong that has been done to me. I'm sure we all have our own triggers - people being late for appointments, someone cutting us up on the roundabout (road rage) or someone slighting us or getting one over on us.

But Nehemiah's anger wasn't about any of these things. His anger was righteous anger; these people had been wronged, exploited and made to suffer - his heart was with them. He also knew it was not what God would want. The nobles' behaviour was morally wrong. Scripture tells us that it is OK to get angry. God gets angry on many occasions. Jesus got angry at the Pharisees when he saw them pushing people down with their interpretation of the law so they could elevate themselves. Sometimes it is wrong not to be angry in the face of injustices. It is how God would respond. We need to get angry about sin. Recent world events have given us plenty to feel angry about, but even aside from this, it's worth thinking about. What exactly are the things that are pulling at our hearts to make us feel this kind of righteous anger and how could we use it as an agent for change rather than making the matter worse?

Counting to ten is a step that is so often left out when it comes to dealing with difficult situations. But Nehemiah takes time to ponder these things in his mind. And his pondering would almost certainly have involved God. In situations when we feel angry we always need to involve God - not least to confirm whether what we feel is righteous anger or something that might lead us to disaster. At this stage it is still possible to avoid confrontation becoming conflict. Before all the important moments in his life Jesus certainly took time to consult his father. Before his baptism he spoke to him. In Luke 6 we hear that before choosing his disciples he “went out to a mountain-side....and spent the night praying to God.” And of course he prayed at length before his death.

Confrontation: How to do it Right

It was then time to confront the nobles with the accusations against them. “You are exacting usury from your own countrymen,” he said. It appears that at this stage he approached them privately; he went straight to them. He didn't have a little chat with anyone first to grumble about their appalling behaviour and whip up a sense of indignation so that he could get other people on his side.

In fact, this is the first step advocated later by Jesus when he taught about the right way to deal with sin within the church. In Matthew 18 he said “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.” It is only if they refuse to listen that you should escalate involvement, eventually bringing it before the whole church.

We don't know how the nobles responded. They quite probably didn't listen, but whatever happened Nehemiah decided he needed to take it further because the next thing we hear is that he “... called together a large meeting to deal with them.” Well this really took courage and you can imagine he must have been nervous.

He cuts straight to the chase and lays out what the issue is. As well as demanding crippling interest on loans, they are selling out their own Jewish brothers and sisters, many of whom had previously been sold as slaves to their enemies, but then bought back by Nehemiah and his men. You can understand why he had been so angry. ‘Frustrating’ doesn't begin to describe it. And it all went a bit quiet then because the nobles couldn't deny any of this. It was the truth.

Reverence for God

What gets to the real heart of the issue for Nehemiah is his reverence for God and the desire to please him. He remonstrates with the nobles “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?”

Being Jews, the nobles would have known very well that what they were doing was against God’s law. In Leviticus 25 this is what it says. “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God ... You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit.” It couldn’t be much clearer than that could it? It might have been written for a situation such as this. This is the law given to Moses by God, and the Jews not keeping God’s law had not ended well before. The consequence had been exile.

Of course we no longer live under the same Mosaic law, but we are not lawless. We live under the new covenant of God’s grace. Because of Christ, rather than trying to remember over 600 commandments of law, our focus is on loving and trusting in God and loving others. If we do these things we are fulfilling everything that God requires of us. We still find it hard of course. As Paul reminds us in Romans 3:23 “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But because of his grace, if we confess our sins to him, we will be forgiven and purified from all unrighteousness. We may not have to live in dread of exile but you can imagine Nehemiah’s real fear that his countrymen were going to mess up again!

And he knew that this internal discord was also playing into their enemies hands; it revealed weakness. When Jesus speaks about defeating the enemy in Mark 3 he warns that “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.” It follows too that a church with internal disagreement and division cannot possibly stand as witness to God’s mercy or bring people to him. It will be too busy looking inwards rather than living out an example to the world - and this is true of the wider church as well as individual congregations.

Finding a Way Back

Nehemiah needed to bring about a resolution and so he urged the nobles to restore all the land and property they had confiscated to their countrymen together with the interest. He had made his point and didn’t keep going on heaping insults on them telling them how miserable and selfish they had been which would be bound to alienate them. Instead he told them how to make it right. He gave them a way back - a solution which was fair and workable.

It still must have been a pretty tense moment. As we know, not everyone has a teachable spirit or willingness to admit they are at fault. But, apparently without a murmur, they agreed to it all. And the healing of the community could begin.

After binding the agreement with an oath, he then carried out this symbolic act of shaking the dust out of his robes to illustrate that if they went back on their word, God would “shake out of his house and possessions every man who doesn’t to keep this promise.” He was literally putting the fear of God into them - and I don’t know about you but I would feel pretty shaken if I had received this pronouncement. But there comes a time for us too in situations which cannot be resolved, when we should figuratively shake the dust off our feet and surrender people and situations to the Lord as we emotionally let go. Even Jesus advises his disciples to do this in Mark 6 when leaving any town that refused to hear the gospel.

Doing What is Right

Nehemiah clearly knew in his heart what was right, and it was also important to him to ‘walk the talk.’ Selfishness and greed had been the source of this conflict and a pretty poor example had been set by previous governors in Judah. They had abused their privileges, disadvantaging those under them and even allowing their assistants to “lord it over the people.”

Contrast this with Nehemiah's single minded missional approach to leadership; he had worked on the wall along with the other workers, neither he nor his men acquired any land and he even provided for them all. We are talking about 150 people eating at his table at his expense and he didn't even take advantage of any of the allowances to which he was entitled. He was demonstrating that if you want to change people's hearts and if you want to silence your critics you need to set example and be above reproach. I wonder if you can think of anyone in the public arena today who might benefit from following Nehemiah's example.

But don't we all have the potential exploit and take advantage of people? What about the way we treat retail workers, restaurant staff and anyone who provides a service for us? If we don't treat these people with integrity, imagine how our behaviour would be magnified if we became world leaders! In Luke 16:10 Jesus warns that "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much." The perceived degree of sin is often a matter of opportunity rather than a question of who has a better or worse heart.

Motivation for What is Right

A lot of what we have read about in this passage is immensely practical. Firstly there is a step by step master class in how to handle confrontation; getting righteously angry about injustice and sin, taking time out before we dive in, being clear and direct about what is wrong and then finding a way back. Secondly we have a demonstration of modelling right behaviour and setting a good example; being above reproach ourselves will witness to others how living in God's love should look.

But Nehemiah did not do any of this to impress people. He didn't write all this down to show off about how devout and unselfish he was. His motivation was twofold. Firstly his heart was with God; his reverence is in evidence throughout the passage. In the very last verse he implores God to "remember me with favour....for all I have done for these people." And secondly he had compassion with the people. He was moved to righteous anger when he heard of their exploitation and he did the things he did "because the demands were heavy on these people." He was pre-fulfilling Jesus commandment found in Matthew 22 which tells us to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbour as ourselves.

He asked the nobles "Shouldn't you walk in fear of our God.....?" Of course as followers of Jesus we don't need to fear God, but what about reverence for him? Shouldn't our love for Christ make us want be more like him and encourage us to please him - to also have a heart for what is right?

© Emmanuel, Billericay. March 2022

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. Is there any potential confrontation that you are avoiding that needs to be addressed? (You don't have to say what it is). Do you think Nehemiah's example will help you?

2. Recent world events have moved nearly all of us to feel righteous anger. What else moves your heart to righteous anger? How could you use this to good effect?

3. How much do you include God when pondering your difficulties? Are there any major decisions or life events that have been helped or made better by doing this?

4. In what areas do you think that the church might be giving a poor testimony to non-believers by showing internal disagreement?

5. Do you find it easy to metaphorically shake the dust off your feet when it comes to situations that you have been unable to change? What might make it easier for you to do this?

6. What events or situations in your own life do you think might have been helped by your leaders setting an example and being above reproach?



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?

Emmanuel Church, Laindon Road, Billericay, Essex. CM12 9LD

P 01277 632120 E Emmanueloffice@billericaychurches.org W Emmanuel-church.info
FB Emmanuel Church Billericay T EmmanuelCM12 YT Emmanuel Church Billericay

Part Of The Billericay & Little Burstead Team Ministry