



HG238: Nehemiah - Be Determined
Keeping The Vision (ADCM)

Nehemiah 6:1-7:3

Home Group Study Notes

24 April 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

We have just enjoyed Easter Weekend, the first since 2019, when we have been able to worship together. What, for you, was the most meaningful part of your Easter celebrations?



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 ...



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Home Group Sermon Notes

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Introduction

I'm in my fourteenth year as Team Rector and I love being part of the Emmanuel church family. I love your friendship, support, generosity of spirit and your prayers. An ADCM is a time to look back over the past year as well as an opportunity to look forwards. I hope you've had a good read through all the reports and, like me, are encouraged and excited by all that has taken place in/through Emmanuel – despite the challenges of COVID. However, we can never rest on our successes and there are still many challenges facing us as 'the new normal' starts to taken hold. But we always have an exciting future, onsite, online and offline when God is our partner! This morning we pick up our series on Nehemiah. Here's a quick recap:

In ch1, we saw that Nehemiah was living in Babylon as a servant to King Artaxerxes when he heard that the walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed. He was moved, through tears and prayer, to volunteer to do something about it. In ch2, we saw Nehemiah's implicit trust and faith in God's guidance. In ch3, we saw how some of the people worked very hard, whilst some were lazy and wouldn't work at all.

In ch4, we saw a wonderful picture of people working with trowels in one hand and swords in the other. We recognised how, when we are doing God's work, conflict is inevitable. We also saw, quite significantly, that the greatest discouragement/threat to the rebuilding programme comes, not from outside, but from amongst the very people who should have been helping to rebuild the walls in the first place – the leaders! In ch5, we saw something of the heart to put the needs of others first. A heart that was filled with righteous indignation at immoral behaviour and a heart that was willing to make, and take, tough decisions to confront ungodly behaviour. In ch6 we'll see something of the tactics of the enemy to discredit Nehemiah's and his response of keeping the vision at all costs.

At this stage, Nehemiah's enemies were desperate. Their goal, all along, was to stop the walls being rebuilt. However, apart from the hanging of the gates, the work was nearly complete. And so Sanballat and co only had a little time in which to stop the work - and it's fascinating to observe the tactics they used and how they went about it.

The Tactic Of Deception 6:1-4 In ch3&4 we saw how the enemy couldn't stop the work by threats of attack - so they switched tactics. Sanballat and Geshem, quite conveniently and quite suddenly, become Nehemiah's friends. And so, they invite him to attend a top-level consultation on neutral ground, vs2: *Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.* Ono was situated halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria. But, as we saw in ch4, this was the home of some of Jerusalem's greatest enemies.

The invitation to work out a way of living together sounded both advantageous and tempting. Flattery will always turn people's heads. Whether that be in business, politics or church life, unwary folk have their egos pandered and their judgment deflected in this way all the time.

Many people falter in their Christian life because they listen to the advice of the wrong people. People often listen to their friends – I’m not suggesting that is wrong - but it may be inappropriate if those friends are not Christians and don’t reflect the wisdom of God. It may sound like good advice, especially if so, many others choose to follow it, however, if it picks up the attitudes and wisdom of the world, then that can’t be right.

Nehemiah senses danger in vs3: *they were scheming to harm me*. He knew they were trying to trick him into leaving Jerusalem, where he had armed support, to go to a conference where they could kill him. Nehemiah realises this and firmly declines *I am carrying on a great project, and I cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?* Leaders are often blamed for things they don’t do and criticised for things they do, do! They are often misquoted and misunderstood and rarely given the opportunity to set the record straight.

If they act quickly, they are seen as reckless; if they bide their time, they are seen to be gutless or apathetic.

Nehemiah was on a hiding to nothing, but he gives a great answer. It may, on the surface, seem a surly, blunt response, but it’s a spin-doctor’s masterpiece! Nehemiah doesn’t actually refuse but gives a perfectly legitimate reason why he should stay. *I am doing a great work. I have a great calling. God has committed a tremendous project to me, and if I leave, it will be threatened.*

To serve God must be the highest calling anyone of us could have. That’s essentially what Nehemiah is saying here – he’s not going to give it up for anything. Even though he is given a tempting offer that might be the answer to his problems, he refuses to leave his calling. *Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.*

The Tactic Of Scandal 6:5-9 True to form, when the enemy can’t accomplish his purpose by offering peace and friendliness, he switches back to his original tactic of threats and danger. Vs5-7: *... Sanballat sent ... an unsealed letter* where he made some unfounded accusations and ended with a threat: *Now this report will get back to the king; so, come, let us confer together.*

It reminds me of some of the anonymous letters I’ve received over the years from people who want to take me to task or complain about something or other. My practice, over the years, has been to place such letters into that most complex filing system of them all - called the waste bin. If people won’t sign their name, there’s no use in paying any attention to what they have to say. Sanballat passes on an unsealed letter because he wanted everybody involved in delivering it to read it, and so spread the lie about what Nehemiah was really trying to do. This tactic was intended to put pressure on Nehemiah to give in to their demands and fall into their trap. But he resists because he sees it for what it really is, bribery based on lies. There’s no attempt to disprove their accusation, vs8: *nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.* You’re lying.

If there’s one thing that people love to do it’s gossip. Gossip and rumours spread like wildfire. Some just love to dig out discreditable information about others, don’t they? Like some tabloid ‘investigative’ journalist. There are gossipmongers, in every organisation, hovering like vultures, just waiting for tid bits of slander they can chew, swallow and then regurgitate. An anonymous wit defined gossip as: *News you have to hurry and tell somebody else before you find out it isn’t true!* Such behaviour has no place in the Christian community (James 3:1-12).

If we find that malicious rumours are being passed around about us, we respond as Nehemiah did, which was to pray, vs9. Nehemiah asked God to help him ignore the gossip and to enable him to keep the vision and keep on inspiring, organising and overseeing the rebuilding programme. He recognized the purpose of this rumour mongering was to both demoralise himself and fill the people with fear and so he prayed for extra energy to counter that fear, both in his own heart and in the hearts of the people.

Nehemiah resolved not to worry about his reputation, or how the king might react to Sanballat’s letter - if indeed it had been sent. After all, Sanballat might have been bluffing. However, these

were matters beyond Nehemiah's control, which he must leave in God's hands.

When God's servants find themselves in trouble and humbly get on with the work God has given them to do, God's grace is faithfully given in plentiful supply to enable them to do his work.

The Tactic Of Intimidation 6:10-14 The enemy switches his tactics and reverts to intimidation - even spiritual seduction, vs10. This word comes in the form of a prophecy. Shemaiah claims to have hidden knowledge and what he has to say sounds logical: *Some people are out to get you. They are going to kill you.* And so, he goes on to suggest: *Come on up here and we will go into the temple and shut the doors. They will not dare attack you there.*

That sounds pretty plausible, but Nehemiah immediately detects something wrong and recognises this man as a false prophet. Nehemiah knows he's not permitted to go into the temple because he's a layman and only the priests were entitled to enter into the temple. Nehemiah responds, vs11: *Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!* Nehemiah realises that a prophet from the Lord wouldn't say anything out of line with the teaching of the scriptures.

There was, in actual fact, an altar of asylum in the temple courtyard to which people who were under threat could flee and be safe, but this man is proposing they actually go into the temple and shut the doors. Nehemiah has spiritual discernment, vs12-13: *I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to **intimidate** me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.* Yet another, failed, part of a carefully hatched plot to discourage the people from following Nehemiah's lead.

In Satan's war on the saints/church, we should never be duped by anyone who tells you they have a prophetic ministry. I've seen that abused on several occasions by some well-known people. It's a fact that the greater one's influence as a leader, the more one's personal standards, integrity and wisdom will be under attack. If they can be lured into something inappropriate, they'll take many 'down' with them. We've seen this in recent weeks with the resignation of Brian Houston as leader of Hillsongs, Bill Hybels and Willow Creek, Ravi Zacharias ... the list goes on.

The only way to detect and discern error is to have a knowledge of the Word of God. A survey by Christian Research showed an increase of Christians reading the Bible during the pandemic. The first time there has been an increase for decades! The survey also showed that 28% of Christians confidence in the future increased because of reading the Bible more. This shouldn't surprise us because by reading the Bible we come to know God through personal, factual and practical knowledge of His plans and purposes for His church and for His world.

And so, Nehemiah continues to do what he's done throughout this book, he prays, vs14: *Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also that prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.* (Who's Noadiah? No previous mention, a false prophet?) One thing that clearly emerges from this book is that life is a battle from beginning to end. Nehemiah ran into opposition the moment he set his heart to obey God's command to rebuild the walls. And finally:

The Wall Is Finished 6:15-19 Against all the odds, vs15: *the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.* Even their enemies had to admit that God was at work. Vs16: *When our enemies heard about this, they lost their self-confidence and they realized that they were battling against God himself.* It was God who accounted for their amazing success. Nehemiah had left Persia in April and it took him several months to journey to Jerusalem. Yet on October 2nd in the year 445 B.C. the wall was completed. This entire project was finished in just 52 days because they put their minds and hands to the task and looked to God for the wisdom and power to achieve it. Even their enemies agreed that God is at work among them. However, the enemies are still not through.

In vs16-17, we see how they continue their tactics of opposition: *Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah.* Basically, Tobiah intermarried with the Israelites and, in taking advantage of that relationship, he was seeking to undermine Nehemiah's influence by, you've guessed it, gossip! Nehemiah writes, vs19: *Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.* This is another reminder, as if we didn't need one, that the devil never quits. That he's never going to give up as long as we are still alive. If he can't undermine us with fear and flattery, he'll try gossip and false rumours – anything to drag us down.

I've been a Christian for over 35 years and the battle is just as intense, sometimes more so, than it ever was. I don't expect it to stop until the Lord calls me home because that is the nature of the world, and the spiritual battleground, in which we live. We mustn't expect our Christian life to be without its struggles. God has many blessings for us along the way, but we must never cease battling against the world, the flesh and the devil. This is what Nehemiah ch 6 demonstrates to us.

Consolidating Their Efforts 7:1-3 We come now to Ch7, the longest chapter in the book. Here Nehemiah seeks to continue the achievements he has brought about, by appointing wise successors and establishing sound policies, vs1-3: *After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do.*" He appoints residents to stand guard at the vulnerable points of the city wall: a reminder, again, that we must never let down our guard. The rest of the ch7 is given over to preserving all that God has taught and ensuring the continuing commitment of the Jews to the cause.

And so, the wall has been built and this brings us to the end of this first phase of Nehemiah's work, and it will get even more interesting as Nehemiah attempts to *Reform the Community* from ch8 onwards.

Conclusion Nehemiah needed to *Keep the Vision* in order to stand firm in amongst the opposition, pressures and temptations, deceit, subterfuge and skulduggery that were being thrown his way. I believe there are five principles that enabled Nehemiah to stand firm:

- 1) *He had a great awareness of the task that God had given him.* He had a ministry to perform, and a lifestyle to model for others. He never forgot that God sent him to Jerusalem to work and demonstrate to people how to live.
- 2) *He never forgot his own identity.* He knew who he was. He knew he belonged to God and that he was part of a wider community of God.
- 3) *He was free from the 'unhealthy' influence of others.* He refused to listen to every bit of advice that came along. He refused counsel from those who did not have access to the mind and wisdom of God.
- 4) *He was careful to put into practice what he knew.* He sets up guards, assigns responsibilities, shares the labour, and investigates carefully.
- 5) *He prayed.* He subjected everything to the wisdom of God.

Do we want to see God continually directing our lives and moving amongst us in the year to come? If we do, then let's use these simple principles as a matter of course and see what happens!



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. Read the section entitled: '*The tactic of deception.*' Whom do you listen to for advice? Do you deliberately seek out the godly wisdom of other Christians? Why is this something we should all do?

2. Nehemiah gave a great response, vs3, to those who were seeking to lead him astray. Have you ever been in a situation when you are being persuaded to change your mind and go along with something you knew to be wrong? How did you respond?

3. Read the section entitled: '*The tactic of scandal.*' Sanballat began to spread rumours about Nehemiah in order to discredit him in the eyes of the people. Has this ever happened to you? How did you respond to that situation?

4. Read the section entitled: *'The tactic of intimidation.'* Have you ever been duped, or wrongly, influenced by the inappropriate advice/counsel of someone who claims to be speaking on God's behalf? Share your experience with your House Group.

5. Read the section entitled: *'The wall is finished.'* Nehemiah's enemies had to concede that they were fighting against God – such was the success of the remarkable feat Nehemiah had accomplished. Have you experience of people responding in this way: personally, or a situation in which you were involved? Share your experience with your House Group.

6. In his conclusion, Paul suggests five principles that enabled Nehemiah to stand firm in the midst of all the opposition he encountered during the rebuilding programme. Have you used any of these principles in your own Christian life? Might you be able/willing to do so in the future? Why might it be beneficial to do so?



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