



HG239: Nehemiah - Be Determined
The Joy Of The Lord Is Your Strength

Nehemiah 8:1-18

Home Group Study Notes

8 May 2022 - James Van Cleef



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

The Santa Claus god: 'He's making a list, he's checking it twice...' What are images of God popularly held, but are actually unhelpful?



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 ...



HG239: Nehemiah - Be Determined *The Joy Of The Lord Is Your Strength*

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Home Group Sermon Notes

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Introduction

What was the mindset of the people of Israel as they began to return from Exile? For seventy years they had been cut-off from the Land, from the Temple, both of which were crucial to their identity. Living in a strange land was surely unsettling, and they were perhaps left wondering if God was bothered with them anymore. How they must have longed for Jerusalem ...

Now imagine the impact on their lives as they survey the incredible work that has been completed: the walls of Jerusalem intact in fifty-two days, completed during the hottest time of the year, under constant threat, and in such a way that their enemies recognised that God was with them. They are back in the Land of God's Promise, and they are on the cusp of something for which they do not yet have the words...

For the times they are a-changin

Their mood is changing. The time is ripe for renewal. Nehemiah has appointed gate-keepers and singers, the nobles have been assembled, the genealogies are being confirmed, and offerings were collected for the Temple. And it is the month of Tishri.

Tishri is the seventh month, a month of festivals, a month of worship, of renewed dedication and devotion. It is a joyous month, a reflective and sacred month, and a month in which the people are reminded that God is with them. More than that, that God has made himself known, and that his heart has always been to draw people into communion with him. It seems this had been forgotten...

When the seventh month had come, the people gather as one before the walls of Jerusalem, and ask Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses. Ezra obliges, and while standing on a platform he read aloud the Law to the people—men, women, and children. *'And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law'* (8.3). While the Law was read, there were those who ensured the people understood what they were hearing. And this combination of attentiveness and comprehension led them to worship (8.6).

The reading of the Law caused another reaction: weeping (8.9). As they listened it seems they became aware of their neglect of the Law. Now this is the point where we need to do some thinking and reflecting ...

Santa Claus is coming to town?

One area where we do Scripture a disservice is in thinking it a book of rules, a book that proscribes behaviour, a text of jurisprudence. We hear 'law' and in our uncompromising Protestant tradition associate it with 'anti-grace' and therefore contrary to Christ. We embrace grace, yet at the same time, use Scripture as a filter to determine who is in or who is out. This kind of 'law' becomes nothing more than a tool in the hands of a Santa Claus god who's 'making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice...'

Is that the purpose of Scripture? A moral code? A how-to-be-on-the-nice-list guide? Is there more to it than that?

Yes, there is! True, morality and ethics are found within Scripture, but if we limit it to morality and ethics we will miss out its function as mediation. Specifically, it is a form of mediating the revelation of God.

The word of God reveals the WORD OF GOD

What are the opening words of the Bible? *'In the beginning, God...'* And God created. He brought forth life. He decorated the universe with beauty. He made humans. And he walked with them in Eden. God's first act, a material creation, mediates his presence, and within that creative act, he engages with his creation. He is present. It is a revelation we, in our finitude, can grasp. What is the purpose of Scripture? God, who in his fullness is manifestly beyond our comprehension, reveals himself to his creation so he could be accessible and known. For our part, we can begin to glimpse the unconditional love of God.

The revelatory aspect of Scripture cannot be ignored. Scripture, as a whole, records the revelation of God, from creation, to Abraham, Moses, David, the Prophets, and ultimately Jesus Christ. It is a progression of fullness, culminating in Jesus who is the Word of God made flesh manifesting the Father's glory (John 1.14), *'the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature'* (Hebrews 1.3). We do not merely engage with words, but with the living Word. As Jesus says, *'You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me...'* (John 5.39).

Wrongheadedness

But as a result of this kind of encounter with God, we become aware of the distance between us and him. *'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself'* (Genesis 3.10).

We see this 'pattern' in Israel. God chose Israel and covenanted with them so that they would be moulded and shaped in the ministry of God's self-revelation. In the words of Scripture: *'I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth'* (Isaiah 49.6). God reveals who he is, and chooses Israel to reveal who he is, yet because of human conflict with God's holiness, the closer he comes to his people the more his people withdraw.

We see this same pattern in ourselves: We 'see' his glory but do not comprehend his glory. We live out of our incomprehension, which leads to endless searching and great emptiness, or as Baxter Kruger, one of my favourite authors describes it, our 'wrongheadedness.'

So, when the Book of the Law of Moses is heard, comprehended by the people, their first reaction is to weep. They know that God has revealed himself, that he is with them, for them, alongside them, and yet they have held back, withdrawn, and have 'hid themselves' because they were afraid...

Now to be clear, their weeping is not an inappropriate response. Becoming aware of living in ways that are counter to the way of life God has revealed may lead to a change of heart and mind; the weeping may well have been because they realised they had neglected so great a salvation and wanted to be restored and reconciled with God.

'Those who sow in tears...'

But weeping is not the whole story, for the reading of the Book of the Law of Moses was nothing less than a reminder of God being amongst his people. Therefore, the people are told not to weep: *'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep'* (8.9). Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites further say: *'Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength'* (8.10).

In this context, to be locked into weeping is to not move into the overwhelming grace of God's presence. The Word of God has been heard, and the purpose of the Word is to reveal God. Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites knew that if the people did not move past their remorse for losing their identity in God, then they would do no more than wallow in self-pity. Renewed hearts and minds lead to renewed lives. They are to step into the flow of self-giving love of God.

The strength, or protection of the people, was never going to be found in tormented self-abasement, but within their reconciled relationship with God. The 'joy of the Lord' is God's pleasure as people come to know themselves as his people, living in a community of Trinitarian love and established by grace. This identification in God leads to celebration, to joy! **Ephesians 3.14-21**. How could we mourn and weep?

Note that the Scripture does not say, 'Your joy in the Lord is your strength.' If I place my joy first, three things happen. First, I totally misunderstand the word joy, and instead of seeing it as sharing in the celebration of God, I will see it wholly in terms of my happiness. Second, my focus becomes about making sure the Church, and its people therein, meet my needs. And third, I will create a disconnect from the mutual life we are to have in Father, Son and Spirit, and my faith will atrophy. I will become an irritant, protesting about all who do not add to my happiness. The toys will go out of the park...

'If my people who are called by my name...'

In contrast to any self-centred thinking, the people choose to re-engage with God. They want to reconnect with all that reminds them of the truth that God is with them, that their identity is bound up with God and with each other. At the instruction of Levites, the people go home to eat and drink and *'to make great rejoicing, because they understood the words that were declared to them'* (8.12). There is continued study of the Law, and the people become reacquainted with the Feast of Booths. It seems that up to this point, the feast was a harvest festival. But now they are rejoined to its origins in the Exodus, which celebrates deliverance from Egypt by God's hand. Its theme could be, 'Never forget you are led by the hand of God!' Israel's ancient Exodus aids in their current renewal as they return from Exile. The joy of the Lord is clearly their strength! God has not forgotten his people.

God was 'hidden' in plain sight

How did Israel not know about this Feast? How did they get to the point where they had lost their connection with God? Throughout their history, God was speaking, but they didn't always want to listen. God had not moved, but they had, and despite God being with them they couldn't 'see' him. Out of their wrongheadedness they misunderstood and misconstrued the grace of God. In Exile, the threat of being mired in self-pity was real, which would have caused many to abandon hope. But as they came out of Exile, what they found—rather, by whom they were found—was God, who in the words of George Matheson's hymn, is the 'love that will not let me go.'

What kind of renewal is needed here? Is it possible that as we continue to move out of the abnormality of the last couple of years we have lost, in some measure, our sense of the joy of the Lord? Has God been quarantined? When things aren't 'normal' how easy is it to slip into patterns of living that neutralise our connection with God? What might we need to rediscover that will reignite our passion for Jesus?

The Feast of Booths is referred to as 'the Feast' in John's Gospel, and is the backdrop for two of Jesus' great declarations. On the last day of the feast, when there is a final outpouring of water amidst the sound of trumpets and people singing Psalms 113-118, Jesus says, '*if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink*' (John 7.37). And when the lights that illuminated the Temple were being extinguished, he says, '*I am the light of the world*' (John 8.12). Our renewal and refreshing is found in Christ alone: He is our light, our strength, our song! **Amen!**

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BUT THE PLANS OF THE LORD
STAND FIRM FOREVER, THE
PURPOSES OF HIS HEART
Through all generations.

PSALM 33:11

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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 something in your life or the life of the Church that when you look back you see the hand of God upon it?

2. Christian festivals (especially Christmas and Holy Week) are invariably used for mission and evangelism. How can believers make the most of them so that we are renewed and refreshed in our faith?

3. If the Scriptures point to Jesus, and Jesus reveals the Father, do we hold ideas of God that have not been revealed by Jesus?

4. Do we ever hide from God because we cannot cope with his unconditional love and grace for us? How do we cope with those who choose to wallow in self-pity?

5. *‘Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!’* (Psalm 126.5) What do you understand that to mean? How may it be helpful to us as followers of Jesus?

6. Has the abnormality of the last couple of years impacted our connection with God? In what way are Jesus’ words in John 7.37 & 8.12 timely for Emmanuel?



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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