



HG241: Nehemiah - Be Determined
Renewing The Covenant Agreement

Nehemiah 9:38 - 10:28-39

Home Group Study Notes

12 June 2022 - Pauline Woolnough



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

God's heart is about relationship. HG relationships are important, appoint a group member to arrange your next social gathering, (but then move on!)



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

Here in chapter 10 we see the people renewing the covenant that their forefathers had made with God. It's worth remembering that God never broke his covenant with the people, it was the people who failed to keep their side of the agreement. "They solemnly promised to carefully follow all the commands, laws and regulations of the Lord their Lord." v 29 and as nothing had been changed to the terms of the old covenant this was a covenant renewal of the Sinai covenant.

The Problem of Intermarriage

They made 3 separate promises, in v 30 the first thing that they committed to was, "We promise not to let our daughters marry the pagan people of the land nor to let our sons marry their daughters." God had helped the Israelites conquer Canaan which had been inhabited by pagan people. He had forbidden them from marrying anyone outside the Jewish faith because he didn't want them to fall under the influence of an idol worshipping people. Time and again they disobeyed this command and they were led into idolatry. They lost their influence for good and also the prosperity that God's blessing and protection gave them. Intermarriage was not a racial issue, it was a holiness problem, they were intermarrying with idol worshippers. God wanted marriage to reflect the relationship between Himself and Israel in the old covenant and today, the love within a marriage should reflect how Christ loves and in particular, the love he has for his Church.

Sabbatical Promises

The second promise concerned the Sabbath. They promised in v 31 "When the neighbouring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts." That's some promise. They had committed not to work on the Sabbath themselves but this hadn't stopped some of the people trading with idolaters who were themselves working on the Sabbath. For many, not working on the Sabbath would not have economic sense, more so the 7 year command, but it all comes down to trust. The Israelite needing to provide for his family had to be sure that by giving up this one day to be obedient to God and to rest, was in fact the best use of his time and that God would provide for him. The same is true for the Sabbatical year which seems an absurd thing to do, no working the land for a year, the land was to lie fallow and again cancelling any debts in the seventh year. The people had to trust in God's wisdom and provision in order for them to be able to do this.

For some today, especially those who have to work on it, Sunday can be just like any other day. Paul gives some help for us today in Romans 14 5-6 where he assumes that there will be differences of opinions about what is right and wrong but that we should listen to each other's opinions and not let them cause division. He appears to make this a matter of conscience when he says, v5 "Each one must be fully convinced in his own mind." The Pharisees had 39 categories of actions forbidden on the Sabbath but when we look at Jesus he didn't seem to have the same concerns. In Matt 12 1-8 we see him pulling wheat on the Sabbath because he and the disciples were hungry.

The Pharisees protested but Jesus distinguishes between God's laws and the laws of men and the difference between the spirit of the law and the letter of the law. The issue with the Sabbath today is the same as it was in the Old Testament. It is about trust and about resting in Christ and only we ourselves and Christ know whether we trust him to provide and if we find our rest in Him. We can say that, because of the freedom we have in Christ we don't have to worship on a Sunday or keep that day holy, but if we are not living our lives trusting and resting in Him then we are just living as we please.

Temple Ministry Promises

The third promise they made concerned support for the temple ministry and not to "neglect the temple of God." v 39. The temple was all about God and where he dwelt and to enjoy him sacrifices had to be made and the ministry sustained. Verses 32 to 39 outline the people's commitment to support the work of the temple. Today in the new covenant we are the temple of God, the Spirit takes up residence in us when we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Paul says in 1 Cor 3:16 "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you." Although there is no building as such for us to maintain we do feel obligated to support the ministry of the church see Cor 9 6-8 says, "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." By supporting the work of the church financially it shows that we believe that God is Lord over our money, that we trust him and not money and that giving is part of our worship of him.

The Curse and Oath Promise

Now the people promised these things, but before doing so they made another promise. 10.29 says this "all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord." The people were so determined this time keep the covenant that they took a curse upon themselves if they failed to keep their promises. This says a lot about their determination but it also says something about their view of what God was like.

I'm sure we have all promised God something and at the time of making that promise we fully intended to keep it but we know that if we don't manage to keep it he will forgive us, we don't expect him to curse us, do we? This is a strange idea of what God is like. What about Nehemiah 9:17 that says "But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love." The people were determined to keep their promises through the strength of their own will, without God's help and the curse acts as a deterrent to breaking them, but it also injects fear into the agreement between themselves and God. It doesn't reflect a loving relationship. You don't get the sense of a people coming before their Heavenly Father who they know loves them, who they know will help them but will also forgive them out of his love for them should they fail.

God is about Relationship

At the heart of this story and every story in the Bible is the relationship between God and his people, between Himself and his children. God is our Father and it was always his intention that we would be his children, Ephesians 1 4-5 says "Even before he made the world God loved us and chose us to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ" Before the beginning of time he loved us and chose us, he had already decided that Jesus would be sent to bring us to himself, that was the plan. Jesus did not come because we couldn't do it ourselves, (we couldn't, but..) Jesus was the plan. The Israelites had been chosen before the beginning of time to be God's chosen people, to be loved and Fathered by him but their rebellious nature prevented them from seeing this and everything goes wrong from this blindness.

It's Not About Us

The Israelites were again determined to win favour with God by keeping their promises but it was never in their power to win favour, they already had God's favour. They could keep their promises ..or not, it made no difference to God's love for them, God loves because that is what God does. It's the same for us today, it is not our job to make ourselves right with God, we can't do more to make him love us more or worry that if we do less he will love us less, that's not up to us and we can fill our days and weeks with lots of good works yet have no time for him, (think Martha and Mary). Thankfully he gave that job to Jesus and it is in and through Jesus that we are loved and accepted because that was the plan from the beginning. Cardinal Rainiero Cantalamessa preacher to the Papal household says this, "If the written word of the bible could be changed into a spoken word and become a single voice, this voice more powerful than the roaring of the sea would cry out, "the Father loves you." (Jn 16:27). Everything that God does and says in the Bible is love even God's anger is nothing but love. God is love."

Is it Jesus we are focusing on?

God is holy, awesome, mighty, glorious and almighty but He shows us his vulnerability and his desire for intimacy, fellowship and friendship when he came in the Person of Jesus and he always beckons us to come close. We can push him away at times with our lofty religious language, our rituals and also with our good and respectful behaviour and intentions, but that's not how he chose to relate with us. If you were asked to suggest what the gospels say Jesus was like what would you say? Would you say - patient, generous, brave, bold, scared, tireless, relentless, zealous, hospitable even at times angry? If you were to think of an image in your mind that said something about Jesus, you might see him at his most loving, looking down from the cross fulfilling the original plan to unite us to the Father, but is it the cross we see and what Jesus did for us there, or is it Jesus Himself we see? We celebrate the death of Christ and what he did for us with thanksgiving and gratitude, words cannot express our thanks, but are we at risk sometimes of taking our eyes of Jesus and only seeing the cross, and the place where he died.

Do we unwittingly focus more on the work of Jesus rather than on the Person of Jesus? Do you ever ponder on and watch him, e.g. cooking the disciples breakfast on the beach after his resurrection, maybe having a laugh with friends as he supplied 908 bottles off the finest wine at a wedding in Cana, I'm sure he had fun and a laugh with friends, perhaps as he is crying and grieving over the death of his friend Lazarus? Do you see the zeal and passion Jesus has for his Father as he crashes about the temple with a whip clearing it of traders, furious at the lack of worship in the house of worship, he's on fire for his Father who he loves with all his heart soul and mind. And just as he cleared the temple he wants to clear out the coldness, indifference and religion from our hearts, his new temple because he cannot tolerate it, his Father is not worthy of it.

Do you see the Jesus who needs human comfort and touch as the woman washes his feet with her hair, or as John leans on him at a meal or perhaps laugh along with Peter? Do you see him terrified in the garden wanting someone to wait with him, do you see him play with children, get tired after feeding so many and needing to get away by himself, and is it at all possible that he was simply taking a shortcut walking on water in his attempt to catch the disciples up saving himself the long walk round the shoreline? What are the images you hold of Jesus because they may help to determine how you relate to him and how you walk with him, love and enjoy him, worship him, serve him and take risks for and with him?

The Humanity of Jesus

Creation declares the glory of God but Jesus reveals his face and his heart. 6 days before the Passover Jesus arrived in Bethany and at a meal Mary took a pint of very expensive perfume and poured it over Jesus' feet and he accepted this tender act of love and worship. For 3 years he had been on the go and he was tired and apprehensive about what was ahead of him. In the days leading up to his death our all sufficient God craved human contact and love, he desperately needed someone awake and nearby as he prayed and wept tears of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is how he was among his friends, this is how important his friends were to him, has he changed? Does God want to keep us at arms length?

As we see dictators strut about, self obsessed with a desire to be worshipped, take a look at Jesus waiting his turn to be baptised and then say you don't want to know this Jesus better, he is magnificent. Everything about him is perfectly wonderful. Pete Greig says "What if our greatest problem with God is not that he's too big and clever for us to comprehend, but that he's humbler, gentler and closer than we ever imagined."

The Plan from the Beginning

God has a plan and that plan has always been for us to get to know Him through His Son Jesus Christ and to be adopted, into his family and then to live in the glorious liberation of our adoption, because that is the truth that sets us free, what God the Father has done for us in Jesus. The Israelites were in a place where they felt they had to renew the covenant with God. When Jesus came and stepped into our humanity he came and stood on our side of the covenant and so we had God on one side and God on the other. He stood in our place and attacked and removed and replaced the old covenant and just as he cleared the temple of moneychangers and indifference to God so he came and removed all our brokenness and all the barriers that separate us from God and he took them to the cross. He filled the temple with himself, he is our Great High Priest in the temple and he has established a new covenant between God and us, one that will never depend upon us, but on him and one that never needs negotiations, bargains, oaths or curses.

Our Invitation and Welcome

The Israelites rebelled and failed again and again to walk with the Lord, perhaps the God they knew at Sinai was too frightening or too distant, perhaps they were afraid to approach and draw near, perhaps it goes back to the very beginning when Adam and Eve hid from God after they disobeyed him. He came looking for them and asked "Where are you?" Sin had damaged their relationship and introduced fear into their hearts and has affected the whole of creation ever since. Jesus came to restore it. The Israelites missed out, we don't need to Eph 3:12 Because of Christ and our faith in him we can now come fearlessly into God's presence assured of his glad welcome."

The bargain the Israelites struck with the Lord with their promise and curse agreement was destined to fail. As soon as any hardship or suffering came along it would be interpreted as a curse from God because they had deviated from some part of the covenant agreement. They like us cannot avoid hardship or suffering, certainly the world at present is in a great time of suffering and Jesus warned us of this in Matt 24 4-13, 25. Each of us will endure suffering ourselves or watch as those we love suffer, we cannot avoid it and if we are not careful we can let it separate us from Jesus and damage our view of God but we know that Jesus suffered on the cross and it was the noblest part of his life. Don't lose heart because of your sufferings, cling to Jesus. It is the same Jesus today that beckons us and asks us to share our lives with him, he hasn't changed and we are more like him than we know. So next time you look in the mirror remind yourself that you have been made in His image and He and His, and our Father loves everything about you.

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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. Does considering the rebellious nature of the Israelites help us to confront our own. Are we happy to see their story as one of stubborn rebellion and sinfulness whilst overlooking that fact that we are the same?

2. God was good to Israel, Israel sinned, God forgave Israel. This was a repeated pattern throughout their history. What do you find discouraging about this? What do you find encouraging?

3. The promises Israel made regarding the Sabbath required great faith and trust in the Lord's wisdom and provision. How much do you trust in the Lord to provide and how does trusting him free you from worry?

4. How do you think Jesus would fit in at one of your Hg meetings? What would he like about it? Similarly what do you think he would think if he turned up at Emmanuel on Sunday, what would he say about our worship of His Father. (Ps I do know he's there anyway).

5. Does it help to remind ourselves of the humanity of Jesus, of Jesus the man and remember that he would have experienced all the same emotions and fears that we do? Can this help us relate to him better?

6. Before the beginning of time God chose to adopt *you* as His child. Think about that for a moment then talk about whether you know that to be the truth in your heart.



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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