



HG242: Nehemiah - Be Determined
The New Inhabitants Of Jerusalem

Nehemiah 11:1-3 & 20-36

Home Group Study Notes

26 June 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 do you think is missing from Billericay town centre? If you could make one improvement, what would it be?



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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Nehemiah 11:1-3 & 20-36

Home Group Sermon Notes

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It certainly feels, doesn't it, like we have invested quite a bit of ourselves in following the progress of Nehemiah's great undertaking; this massive wall building project. We've been there right through from the initial idea, the proposal, the preparation, gathering the team together, the actual execution of the work and all the challenges along the way - both in relation to the physical wall building and the spiritual preparation which we have followed in the last few chapters - this renewal of spiritual confidence and awareness; a rebuilding of faith which seems to mirror the bricks and mortar rebuilding which has also been going on. With the work now completed, we arrive at the stage which can so often go wrong - implementation.

In any large scale project or undertaking it is the moment you are most excited for and yet paradoxically you are almost dreading. If you have been organising an event - will anyone turn up? If you are starting a business - will we get any customers? A new property development - will anyone want to live in it? And this was kind of the issue that was facing Nehemiah now. We know from earlier on in Ch 7 that, although the temple was rebuilt, the walls finished and Jerusalem was large and spacious, "... there were few people in it and houses had not yet been rebuilt." So we know that there were some people living in it - in fact we even now know some of them were because way back in chapter 3 we hear about them being responsible for the bits of wall which were near to their houses. So it was not quite the ghost town it had once been, but the inhabitants were pretty much rattling around in a derelict city.

Jerusalem - the Holy City

Of course it was important that the city should be thriving and vibrant again if only for defensive reasons. As it was, it was open and vulnerable to attack and Nehemiah certainly did not want some other conquering army breaking down the walls again after all they had been through. This sparsely populated city would have proved a burden to this newly reformed nation who would feel responsible for it without being in a position to properly defend it.

But right in the very first verse (11:1) Nehemiah hints at another reason; he speaks of Jerusalem as "the holy city", and he refers to it in the name way in 11:18. This reference to Jerusalem as a holy city had its roots in prophecy. It is how Isaiah depicted it way back during the time of exile in Babylon when he says in Isaiah 52:1-2:

"Awake, awake, Zion, clothe yourself with strength! Put on your garments of splendour, Jerusalem, the holy city ... rise up, sit enthroned, Jerusalem."

So there was this vision of Jerusalem as a holy and purified city, filled with God's people; the foundation stone of a new Israel. And once this was achieved, surely He would begin to act on their behalf. The re-establishment of a populated and religiously pure Jerusalem was not just a political necessity, it could also be seen as the first stage in bringing about the purposes of God.

So why wouldn't you want to live there?

The Problem with the Holy City

Firstly, as we've said, Jerusalem was vulnerable and unsafe compared to life in the surrounding villages which were not important enough to attract attention from enemy armies.

It would also require you to re-order your view of material things and change your social priorities. In all likelihood you would have to give up land and property that you had spent time establishing and even take up a new business or trade, as the skills required for city living were going to be different to those needed for a life in the country. You would also be leaving friends and loved ones. The city could not accommodate all the large families and in any case, city living would not appeal to everybody.

You would also need to endure practical problems. Some re-building had taken place but a lot of work was still needed. You would not be moving into a new home with all the things that you were used to and you would be expected to help in the development of the city's new infrastructure. Imagine moving to somewhere now with partially built houses, perhaps limited access to electricity or running water, communications and no Wi-Fi!

So we also have this picture of Jerusalem as somewhere which is vital to the whole nation and definitely worth preserving and building up, but which is also vulnerable and not without its problems. Our faith can feel a bit like this can't it? We know the consequences of living without it, but often have the same concerns about fully committing to it. It feels a bit risky and inconvenient. Material and worldly things vie for our attention and often win. Our friends and families sometimes don't understand or aren't interested and we may be worried that they think we are a bit uncool or strange. And of course there is a lot of work to do. Following Christ doesn't mean bad things don't happen or that life is easy.

So who were to be the inhabitants of the City? Would we be amongst them?

Leaders of the People

They pretty much had to go. You can imagine it was a requirement of the job. After all they had no right to expect other people to make this personal sacrifice for the good of the nation if they were not willing to do this. In essence it was setting a good example to the people not least in their loyalty to God.

We can all relate to the importance of leaders who set a good example. The whole culture of a nation, organisation, business and even a family can be set by the people who act as figureheads. It can be a difficult line to draw - displaying leadership qualities and still being 'one of the people'. But which of us has not been moved by the heroic example set by the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky who on the outbreak of conflict with Russia was to be found in combat fatigues on the streets of his country along with his people, in contrast to the rather bizarre pictures of President Putin of Russia seated at one end of an unbelievably long meeting table from his closest allies - in a grand presidential palace, which is completely remote and shielded from his own people and the world outside.

This applies to church leadership as much as in any other walk of life. The great majority of our leaders are doing their utmost to serve others in accordance with Christ's teaching so that they can further God's purpose in the world, with qualities that influence and morally support the congregation and others within their communities. They would have been part of the leadership team moving in to Jerusalem. Not only would they have had to uproot themselves but the other new inhabitants would have looked to them to sort out their problems too. Our leaders look after us - but we must look after them too.

Lottery Winners

It was decided that a good way to pick out who should make the move to Jerusalem was by having a lottery. We don't know the exact mechanism for how this was done, or whether it was Nehemiah's idea.

We are just told that “the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem”. This seems rather a crazy way of doing things to our modern way of thinking, but in the Old Testament the casting of lots was an accepted method of determining God’s will. Not only did we see it happening in the previous chapter, but in the book of Numbers we find God actually instructing Moses how to make divisions of land by casting lots. So in effect it would have been seen as a way of determining God’s choice of new inhabitants for the City.

Being chosen by God can be a daunting prospect. Most of us will not be called to do anything as radical as move to a virtually uninhabited city, but often it is often a call to do something outside of our comfort zone. There are many testimonies of faithful and able member of the clergy for example who recall their first awareness that they were being called to full time ministry which include feelings of horror, avoidance and denial. Scripture is full of reluctant men and women of God. Moses begged God to send someone else to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and Jonah of course just fled. The lottery-picked Israelites may have felt reluctance, not only because of the reasons we’ve already spoken about but because of feelings of being inadequate to the task. But God does not expect us to serve out of our own inherent abilities. He doesn’t give us a task and then expect us to figure out how to do it on our own. Rather, he provides everything we need to serve him through his Spirit. God does not call the capable, he makes capable the called and he would have known exactly what he was doing when he identified the 1 out of every 10 people to inhabit the city.

Volunteers

It appears, however, that even though your number came up you could still refuse to go. The lottery clearly didn’t yield enough people for the repopulation plan, because we are then told that “the people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.” These were a separate group of people who, perhaps even prompted by the Holy Spirit had developed a unique pioneer spirit. They had the willingness to endure some hardship and discomfort to accomplish a greater work for God’s kingdom.

Scripture offers us many examples of people who are called or sent by the Lord, but rather fewer who volunteer. We all know however that our churches today pretty much run smoothly because there are people who volunteer - who say “yes, I’ll do that.” Of course God does not force his people to do anything, but he gave us all spiritual gifts and we are encouraged to use them. Through scripture we see the importance of cultivating a willing heart. 1 Peter 4 tells us that “... each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” Many people don’t volunteer, not because they are unwilling, but because they feel ill equipped. They don’t know what they can offer and they don’t know what their spiritual gifts are. I’m sure we’ve all been told that everyone has a ministry not just those called to leadership - and this doesn’t have to be something grand or bold. Great things come from very humble beginnings and in fact God said through his prophet in Zechariah 4 “Who dares despise the day of small things...?” So it could be just whatever is in front of us.

And as if to emphasise this point, there is then a roll call of the new residents. The leaders are listed by name, along with the number of men under them. There are a lot of people making the move to Jerusalem. Some of the roles are mentioned - priests, workers both inside and outside of the temple, those who lead prayer and thanksgiving, gatekeepers. Special mention is made of the singers and temple musicians who were apparently answered directly to the king and we are told that the king’s agent also lived in the city. I’m sure that your heart plummets when you come across a list like this in scripture of seemingly insignificant people with unpronounceable names.

And in fact the larger part of the list isn’t even included in today’s reading. But they aren’t included here, simply because Nehemiah had some nerdy thing about making lists. He was moved to record them because he knew they were all important to God, just as we are all important to God. He remembers us all by name and he knew these people and their part in building up Jerusalem from its inauspicious beginnings.

And The Rest ...

We take up the passage just as it starts to tell us about “the rest of the Israelites who were in all the towns of Judah.” In other words they weren’t living in Jerusalem. They weren’t leaders, they hadn’t been picked in the lottery and they hadn’t felt able to come forward and volunteer. What about them? What if that’s you? What if we feel we are like one of the rest of the Israelites? We can’t all be right in the centre of things, getting a piece of the action, being there at the implementation stage of the project, feeling part of something or perhaps even being honoured. 90% of the Israelites lived in the towns and villages in the rest of the country. Verse 25 onwards tells us the names of some of the places that these other people lived. They were scattered far and wide from the coast to the Jordan valley.

The Benjamite cities were north and west of Jerusalem, and the Judaea cities were south and west. And it is easy to see how this applies to the Church today with its members scattered around the world in all walks of life, yet related as one body. No matter how far removed we are from what we think of as the action and no matter how ill equipped we feel we are, we all have our part to play. As Paul reminds us in Romans 12 “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.” Our families and friends, workplaces and communities all need to hear the good news and they all need to see it being lived out by people just like us. There are plenty of ways for us to play our parts, in the same way that the places where the other Israelites lived were towns to which the Holy City could look to for support.

Another New Jerusalem

You may identify with one of these groups of people - as a leader, someone who has been called by God, someone who willingly volunteers or someone that is not part of the action - just as the majority of the Israelites could not play a central role in the building up of the new improved Jerusalem. But we can all look towards another Holy City which God has appointed. This is a heavenly new Jerusalem which is alluded to by Paul in Galatians 4 as “the Jerusalem that is above” and then described fully in John’s vision in the book of Revelation 21. This city too starts off with no inhabitants but will come to be populated by the people of God. It is a place of beauty and splendour.

Revelation tells us that “The glory of God gives it light... on no day will its gates ever be shut for there will be no night there. Nothing impure will ever enter it...” Sounds wonderful doesn’t it? And as redeemed people, saved and washed clean because of God’s grace and our faith in Jesus, we will be the citizens of this New Jerusalem. Whether we are leaders, chosen or called, always part of the action or just ordinary, humble and faithful men and women, we will always be welcome there. No matter how seemingly insignificant we are or how unpronounceable our names.

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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. What sort of things do you think make your faith vulnerable? What action could you take to guard against this?

2. Just like the leaders of the people of Israel, our leaders (church and otherwise) often have heavy obligations. In what ways can we support them? Do you think we do this enough?

3. Have you ever felt God calling you to do something out of your comfort zone or make a radical choice? How did you discern this? What do you think of the “casting lots” method?

4. Are there things for which you would like to volunteer but don't feel equipped or good enough? Are you someone who willingly volunteers? If not, what stops you?

5. How do you think it feels to be like one of "the rest of the Israelites" - not in the centre of things? Do you ever feel you are peripheral to the life of the church? How do you think you could change this?

6. Read Revelation Ch 21 v9-27. How do you respond to this description of a heavenly New Jerusalem in contrast to the the earthly new Jerusalem with its practical issues faced by Nehemiah and his people?



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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