



HG243: Nehemiah - Be Determined
Celebration and Thanksgiving

Nehemiah 12:27-47

Home Group Study Notes

10 July 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

What is your most satisfying accomplishment in 2022?



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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Introduction

Theologians often say that it was God who made the first garden (Genesis 1-2) but rebellious man who built the first city (4:16-17), and the two have been in conflict ever since. In the ancient world, cities were places of wealth and power. In modern times, our cities are famous for pollution, crime, poverty and rough sleepers. John F. Kennedy was famous for his maxim: *We will neglect our cities to our peril, for in neglecting them we neglect the nation.*

The Berlin Wall was infamous as a wall that divided a city, east from west. In contrast, as we've seen over the past few months, the walls of Jerusalem united the people together. How to finance and manage cities is a constant problem for world governments – none more so in the aftermath of 9/11 July 7th and the global pandemic.

Jeremiah 29:7: *Seek the peace and prosperity of the city ... Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. **Praying for Billericay.*** Nehemiah knew that the nation of Israel could never be strong as long as Jerusalem was weak, and we saw how he went about repopulating Jerusalem in ch11 and part of ch12.

As we look at the second part ch12 this morning, I believe there are five points that Nehemiah calls on the people to commit themselves to for the sake of their city, commitments that God still calls his people to commit to today for the sake of His Church.

1. There Was A Commitment To Praise

The Berlin Wall was infamous as a wall that divided a city, east from west. In contrast, as we've seen over the past few months, the walls of Jerusalem united the people together. The people, in ch8-10, had committed themselves to the Lord and now it was time to celebrate as they dedicated the completed wall to the Lord. And this has to be the correct way of doing things. What good are dedicated walls and gates without dedicated people? The people were accustomed to having workers and watchers on the walls, but now worship groups and singers are gathered to celebrate this great achievement. It's interesting to reflect back on 4:3, when the enemy taunted them that the walls would be so weak that a fox could knock them down, yet here the people are marching on the walls in great numbers.

Nehemiah's vivid account of this service of thanksgiving presents us with some important Biblical guidelines regarding the nature, centrality and purpose of worship. There are several points that could be brought out from this chapter, which has much to say to us today, such as: the variety and priorities in worship and the tradition, vitality and unity of worship.

I'm sure we all recognise the importance of worship, though we may not all agree about the form and character it should take. If I was to ask each of you to give me a definition of worship I'd have 100 different answers - we all have our own particular preferences. Which way, then, is right? Said services? Contemporary worship? High Church 'smells and bells?' Obviously, the one you that you prefer!

The most important issue which needs to be at the heart of our discussions is not what pleases us in worship, but what most honours God - which, in reality, has little to do with our own preferences. The truth is that all of our suggestions could be right, or they could all be wrong and whether they are, or not, has little to do with style but everything to do with our heart. In Revelation 4:11 we read: You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.

God doesn't command us to worship Him because He needs our worship - though it's true that worship is pleasing to Him and that He inhabits the praises of His people. God commands us to worship Him because we need what worship can do in our lives. Worship does something to us - it makes us complete, and we can only find satisfaction when we are doing those things for which we were created. Worship, therefore, is an integral part of being an Active Christian. And of course, worship isn't just what we do on Sunday's it involves every area of our lives 24/7 and includes such things as: Prayer; Reading God's word; Preaching; Tithing; Communion; Giving; Listening; Fellowship; Fasting; Lifestyle etc.

2. There Was A Commitment To Joy vs 27

Vs27: *The Levites were ... brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully.* We looked at joy in some depth a few weeks ago, 8:10: *The joy of the Lord is your strength* - it's not going to go away! But just let me say that I believe there is a difference between joy and happiness. You could say that a definition of happiness is to like the present moment because it pleases us. But joy, I believe, goes much deeper and is more wide ranging. Joy appreciates the past, the present, and the future, not because the circumstances are pleasing, but because the heart is right with God. There is a sense of acceptance and of being valued by God himself and that is what fills us with joy.

Happiness is basically something for the present moment, but joy is intended to endure for all time. Happiness depends upon events, but joy depends upon being acceptable in God's eyes and being co-labourers with him. Happiness comes from without, but joy comes from within. Circumstances cannot change joy. Happiness quickly fades, but joy lasts forever.

One of the principal elements of true celebration is the expression of joy and that is something that ought to characterise all Christians. As someone once said: *Why is it that if a comedy film produces laughter, the film is regarded as successful; if a theatre tragedy brings tears to the audience the production is regarded as touching; if a football match thrills the spectators, the game is reviewed as exciting; but if the congregation are moved by the glory of God in worship, the audience are accused of emotionalism?*

Some people suggest that being joyful doesn't have its place in church. They say it's too irreverent and detracts from what church is all about! Quite a number of people have said to me over the years: Why can't you stand still when you sing? Why do you have to raise your hands? Why do you have to shake that awful tambourine ... I happen to believe that it's OK to smile when we come to church. A book which has had a great impact on my Christian development is a book called: *Desiring God* by John Piper. It has as its subtitle: *Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. It sounds heavy going but it's an excellent book to read.

Piper's argument, quite simply, is that God is to be enjoyed rather than endured - and he's right. One of the chapters focuses on Worship, and this is what he has to say: *Truth without emotion produces dead orthodoxy and a full church (or half full) of artificial admirers. On the other hand, emotion without truth produces empty frenzy and cultivates shallow people who refuse the rigorous discipline of thought. But true worship comes from people who are deeply emotional and who love deep and sound doctrine. Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of Biblical worship.*

As the apostle Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15:19: *If Christ was not raised from the dead then we, of all men, are most miserable.* Sometimes Christian worship feels as though Jesus is still dead and buried in the tomb!

The Israelites were joyful because the wall was finished and there was nothing monotonous or depressing about their worship. They wanted to celebrate joyfully, and it could be heard for miles. There are, of course, times of sorrow and sadness in our lives, but God promises to give us *a joy unspeakable and full of glory* because of what Jesus did for us on the cross and continues to do in our lives day by day.

3. There Was A Commitment To Purity vs 30

The third principle of true celebration can be found in vs30: When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall. How do we define purity? Purity is: being honest about ourselves; seeing the bigger picture of what God's plans and purposes are; freedom from dishonesty; a sincere heart. The Psalmist puts it this way in Psalm 24:3-5: *Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from God his Saviour.*

The state of our hearts is of greater importance than what we say in the words of our liturgies or in the songs we sing. I don't believe the Lord is moved by eloquence or captivating tunes if He discerns unworthy and unacceptable things in our lives. We need a periodic cleansing of our hearts and this is what is highlighted here. The priests and the Levites purified themselves, the walls, the gates and the people because they recognised that God requires purity. Remember Matthew 5:8: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

Many people seem to be afraid of the word purity. They think it describes a self-righteous kind of person. But purification in the Christian life stems from the same philosophy that motivates us when we wash dishes. We don't set our table with dirty dishes, do we? If you do, don't invite me to dinner! No, we wash our dishes frequently because they ought to be clean. We don't want to serve our guests great food on dirty dishes. And God does not do his work through dirty vessels!

The Bible teaches that we purify ourselves, not through ritual but by confessing our faults, our failings, our sins, our mistakes and believing that God has forgiven them. That's why the confession at Communion is so important. And, as I suggested a few weeks ago, it's not **if** we have sinned, but that we **have** sinned. We don't hide them. We don't blame somebody else for them. We confess them. Then, having done all those things, God cleanses us, forgives us and restores us to his favour. Remember those familiar words from 1 John 1:9: *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

4. There Was A Commitment To Thankfulness vs 31

The fourth principle of true celebration is found in vs31: *I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks.* The people were thankful. They were thankful for the godly leadership of Nehemiah. They were thankful for God moving king Artaxerxes heart to permit Nehemiah to go back to Jerusalem, which enabled this whole project to come into being. They were thankful for angelic protection that watched over them as the wall was being rebuilt.

They were thankful for the wisdom of God that allowed them to overcome their enemies, for the spirit of unity and co-operation that prevailed, for strength to labour, and for the supply of food and shelter. They were thankful for the will to work, which enabled the project to be carried through to completion. And so I could go on. But it raises the questions: How thankful are we for what God has done in our lives and our church? How thankful are we for the blessings we enjoy day to day?

The attitude and spirit of the world can so often be one of negativity that we can find ourselves replicating ungodly attitudes. We do don't we? One of the signs of a growing, maturing spirit in Christians is that they give thanks to God for what he has poured into their life; for the opportunities that are before them; and for the present blessings they enjoy - whatever the circumstances in which they find themselves.

This came home to me, vividly, when I first visited Uganda and more recently the Philippines, where people, praise the Lord with absolute sincerity, continually thanking Him for their salvation, even though they have nothing of material value to their name. I'm always humbled by that attitude.

Vs31b-39 describes how Nehemiah divided his choirs to march around the city. The leaders lead the way and the choirs went in opposite directions before joining together on the eastern side of the city before the Temple. This action of walking around an object or a piece of land, in the OT, is a way of claiming a certain ground for God. Abraham was told to walk around the land of promise and God would give it to him. Joshua walked the walls of Jericho and they fell down. Have you ever by faith walked around a situation and claimed it for God? Perhaps we should have a prayer walk around the parish boundary and claim the ground for the Lord - now there's a thought!

It must have been a wonderful sight: instruments playing, choirs singing, banners flying. So much so, vs43: *The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.* How many of us, at a football match/sports event, shout at the top of our voices for our team or favourite player? How many of us at a concert sing along very loudly to our favourite songs? Yet when we come to praise Almighty God - we are introverted, lose our exuberance, and seem to have nothing to sing and shout about?

5. There Was A Commitment To Generosity vs 44 – 47.

The people had covenanted to support the temple ministry, and they kept their promise of assuming responsibility for supporting the ministry of the temple, remember 10:39: *We will not neglect the House of our God.* As the massed choirs joined together and entered the temple for the great service of celebration and dedication, they affirmed their commitment to this promise by taking an offering – just like you do at a church service. Taking a retiring offering has a Biblical precedent! I'm sure if that celebration took place today they'd use cashless giving or a QR Code!

Conclusion

A church service is, I believe, an act of corporate celebration and testimony to God's saving grace. I believe that any person, young or old alike, who has little, or no, faith, should, when they attend one of our services (inc All Age and Messy Church) be left in no doubt that we worship a living God. Why? Because they will experience such vitality in our worship and such a sense of the presence of God's Holy Spirit that it draws them closer to a relationship with Jesus. That's my hearts desire for the church at large, and especially here at Emmanuel. I'm really praying that will be true for many people after the events at Sun Corner yesterday.

Nehemiah asked the people to: give themselves to God; to give their praise to God and to give their gifts to God. They rejoiced at what God had accomplished in their midst. Praising Him for what he had done in the past continued to do in their present and promised to do in the future. It was the beginning of a wonderful period in their history. But did it last? You'll have to wait for the thrilling climax of our series on 24 July to find out!

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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. Jeremiah 29:7: *Seek the peace and prosperity of the city ... Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.* How should these words from Jeremiah 29:7 affect our prayers and attitudes to our cities?

2. How would you describe your approach to worship? Do you worship God in your way or His way? What, would you suggest, is the most important aspect in our worship of God? What should be the outcome in the way it touches our lives?

3. Paul quoted a section from John Piper's book '*Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist.*' Discuss some of the issues raised by Piper's quote.

4. Does the word 'purity' give you cause for concern? If purity, as Paul suggests, involves confession and repentance, do we purify ourselves as regularly, and as appropriately, as we should?

5. The people in Jerusalem wanted to make known their thankfulness to God for his faithfulness to them, and blessings upon them - their celebration was an outward expression of this. Do we, as Christians, spend enough time thanking God? In what ways might we be able to address this issue more effectively within Emmanuel?

6. Can your approach to church meetings: Sunday worship; House Groups etc., affect the way in which God can touch your heart? If this is so, what steps can you take to ensure that you gain the most from meeting together with other Christians? Conversely, what might you need to avoid?



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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