



HG244: Nehemiah - Be Determined
Fulfilling Their Promises

Nehemiah 13:1-31

Home Group Study Notes

24 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 book do you plan to read on your vacation or staycation over the summer?



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 ...



HG244: Nehemiah - Be Determined *Fulfilling Their Promises*

Nehemiah 13:1-31

Home Group Sermon

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Introduction.

We're made it - the final instalment of this informative, encouraging, challenging, even exciting, study into the book of Nehemiah. I don't think I've quite enjoyed preaching as much as I have on this series - and I know many of you have appreciated it too.

Nehemiah had been governor for about twelve years when he thought it was time to report back to King Artaxerxes. There's no doubt Nehemiah thought things would be fine in his absence – he thought the spiritual life of the people was in good condition, but *When the cat's away, the mice will play*. And so true it is. General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, once said to a group of new officers: *I want you young men always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed*. Nehemiah discovered on his return that the fires of devotion and commitment had gone out in Jerusalem and that the people were not fulfilling their promises to God.

We don't know how long Nehemiah was away, but it was long enough for a dramatic deterioration in the spirituality of the Israelites. Long enough for the men to have married foreign wives, for children to be born and speak another language, vs23-24. Long enough for a vibrant community of worship, service, generosity and obedience (12:27-47) to become a backslidden people riddled with compromise.

Sadly, *good beginnings are no guarantee of happy endings*. Was Nehemiah to blame or the people themselves? Ch13 is a warning against carelessness in our spiritual lives and a reminder how easily we can let things slip if we take our eyes off the Lord. The contrast between ch10 and Ch13 is that the people failed to keep several of the promises they made to the Lord:

1. Fulfilling their Promise of Separation vs 1-9 & 23-29.

In 10:28-29 the people willingly separated themselves from the Gentile people and made a covenant agreement with God, according to the Law of Moses, not to intermarry. In 13:1 they were reminded: *No Ammonite or Moabite should be admitted into the assembly of God ...* Yet here, just a few years later, that covenant has been broken. Israelite men had married the daughters of Ammonite and Moabite families - foreigners had infiltrated the congregation of Israel.

If we trace the Ammonites and the Moabites back to their beginnings, we discover they are actual relatives of Israel. Ammon and Moab were the sons of Lot - the nephew of Abraham. You may remember when the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were being destroyed by fire and brimstone, angels led Lot and his family up into the mountains to safety. Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt, but Lot and his two daughters hid in a cave and survived. It's a rather distasteful, incestuous tale of how these girls, believing they were the last two women left on earth, tricked their father into sleeping with them. They both conceived and bore sons, one named Ammon and the other Moab.

We all have relatives we can't get along with, don't we? They can be troublesome, embarrassing, obnoxious even, and often difficult to live with, and yet there is nothing you can do about them because they are relatives. *Blood is thicker than water.* That's the way it was between Ammon, Moab and Israel. Even though Israel were constantly being harassed, undermined and corrupted by the Ammonites and Moabites, they were forbidden to destroy them because ... they were relatives.

God had commanded Israel to be a separated people in order to preserve the uniqueness of Jewish worship. Nehemiah knew if the nations spiritual standards continued to decline their unique spiritual influence would be diminished and he was determined to do something about it.

Not only had the Israelite men intermarried, there was even an Ammonite living in the temple - talk about adding insult to injury! In vs4-9 we can see the finer points of how this came about. Eliashib the high priest had allowed his grandson to marry the daughter of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, who was an ally of Tobiah the Ammonite - both of whom were bitter enemies and consistently opposed the rebuilding of the walls.

Eliashib was in charge of the temple storerooms and through his cosy alliance with Tobiah provided him with a room formerly used to store the offerings/tithes of the people. The grain, oil and incense the Levites depended on had been thrown out - and none was being given - which meant they had no supplies to work with and, since they couldn't be adequately supported, they went to work in the fields to earn a living for themselves. Because of this, were unable to carry out their ministry.

Nehemiah saw Eliashib's act for what it was vs7, *an evil thing.* An offence against a holy God, a public denial of the priority of spiritual things and a blatant act of disobedience to his calling and to the teachings of the Law. vs8-9, Nehemiah was: ... *greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room and gave orders to purify the rooms and then he put back those things which had been removed.*

Nehemiah responds, as he did in ch5, with righteous anger and restores the temple to its proper use. How similar this is to John's Gospel 2:12-17, when Jesus' anger at spiritual degeneration led him to cleanse the moneychangers out of the temple. Nehemiah's comparable anger led him not only to cleanse the temple, but the whole city as this chapter shows us. In vs25 we see something of the extremity of Nehemiah's anger when dealing with those who'd intermarried: *I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair (ouch) and made them take an oath ...*

The Church today has, I believe, lost its ability to express outrage and public indignation over things that are, quite obviously, wrong. Oswald Chambers wrote: *Today the world has taken so many things out of the church, and the church has taken so many things out of the world, that it is difficult to know where you are.*

2. Fulfilling their Promise of Support vs10-14

As a result of all this, the services of the temple were being neglected and the spiritual life of the nation was not being maintained. And so, we have two wrongs involved here: an Ammonite was living in the temple and the Levites were being defrauded of their rights of storage and the ministry of the temple had come to a standstill. Eliashib had cultivated the wrong kind of relationships, which, ultimately, was to be his downfall. He had seriously misused his authority and was guilty of frustrating the work that God wanted to do. The sad thing in all of this, is that Eliashib wasn't aware of the seriousness of what he'd done. However, if Eliashib had a closer relationship with the Lord, this would never have happened. How easily compromise creeps in - the moment we take our eyes off the Lord is the moment things start to go wrong.

Interestingly, Eliashib, in 3:1, was the first person to be named in the list of workers rebuilding the walls, yet here he is a traitor. A reminder that we can't live in yesterday's anointing, yesterday's blessing or yesterday's relationship with the Lord.

In vs13, we read that Nehemiah put some new men in place in order to restore his vision. He chooses men who represented various aspects of the life of Israel, vs13: ... *Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, Pedaiah the Levite and Hanan who was a Layman* ... they all share one great quality, they: *were considered trustworthy*. And so, Nehemiah restored the temple and its affairs to where they should be and these four men ... *were made responsible* ... for ensuring it was done in the right way.

In a characteristic prayer, vs14, Nehemiah adds: *Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services* - a prayer that's echoed in vs23;29&31. Nehemiah's priority is that God would remember him for his faithful service. His conscience was clear because he knew he'd acted for the good of the people and for the glory of God. He knew there would be little appreciation for what he'd achieved - in spite of his proven record - but he knew God would reward him accordingly and that is the most important reward of all.

3. Fulfilling their Promise of Sabbath vs15 -22

Ch13 reveals to us the way evil works. It invades us quietly and subtly and, before we are aware of what's happened, we've compromised ourselves and conformed to the ungodly standards of the world around us. But it also shows to us, I think, that, there is a time for drastic action. Having cleansed the temple, Nehemiah will enforce the Sabbath promise. Vs15: *At that time, I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath. They were also bringing in stores of grain and loading them on donkeys, along with wine, grapes, and figs. All kinds of goods were being brought to Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.* We might be inclined to think that Nehemiah was moving in a legalistic direction, that he might have been more concerned with the law than necessary. But if we understand the way the Sabbath was intended to function, we wouldn't say that.

The Sabbath was intended to be a protected space in which Israel could meditate on God's Word and reflect on His mercies. The Sabbath was for worship. It was to be hallowed, so that people could enjoy their God. This concern for the Sabbath, therefore, is not legalistic but for the good of the people. The concern for the Sabbath is for the people to know God.

Does this mean we are duty bound to obey the Sabbath? I don't think so – though the Lord's Day Observance Society may agree to differ. Many key workers work on Sundays – does this mean they are disobeying God? I worked two Sundays a month when I was in the Prison Service, but I was selected for ordination. Nowadays I work nearly every Sunday – though some would say it's the only day of the week I work!

I don't think we are bound to obey the Sabbath, but I do think there is a valuable principle here for us: the principle of having boundaries on our time so that we can sit and read the Bible and meditate. We live in a world full of electronic gadgets and there is always something new coming across our social media outlets. There are so many distractions that eat away at our time, and suddenly the window we had to read the Bible has closed.

I'm not prescribing a law, but I would invite you to seek to apply a Sabbath-kind of boundary in your life. Maybe that means that when you plan to read the Bible, say to yourself, "I'm not going to read the Bible anywhere near the computer." Or "I'm not going to read the Bible with my phone at hand, because I don't want to be answering the pings from the Emmanuel WhatsApp group!" What we need to do is sit still and concentrate on the Bible. We have to be vigorous, or this culture is going to take away all the moments we have to read the Scriptures and pray and meditate. Nehemiah upheld the Sabbath, and he enforced it in 13:15-22. At the end of verse 22 he prayed again: *"Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love."*

4. Summary and Prayer vs 30-31

In the final two verses, Nehemiah summarized his work, and what is interesting here is what he didn't mention. We remember Nehemiah for rebuilding the walls, but that's not what he mentioned here at the end of his book. When he summarized his work, he said, *"So I purified them from everything foreign."*

Now the walls are certainly part of this as they enable the people to have a safe place in which to pursue purity, but what Nehemiah seems to be focused on here relates to the worship of God. He continues that he *“assigned specific duties to each of the priests and Levites. I also arranged for the donation of wood at the appointed times and for the first fruits.”* Nehemiah seems to view the reestablishment of the worship of God in Jerusalem as his major accomplishment not rebuilding the walls in 52 days.

The book of Nehemiah begins and ends with prayer. Back in Nehemiah 1, when he got the report about the state of Jerusalem: broken down walls, fire-scorched gates, he responded in prayer. Now his last words in the book are, *“Remember me with favour, O my God.”* Nehemiah began by calling on the Lord to do what He had promised to do for Jerusalem. He ended by calling on the Lord to remember him with favour. That was his final concern.

Conclusion

It's been wonderful to see how God used this remarkable man to rebuild and reform Jerusalem and restore it to its rightful place as the Holy City of God. Of all the people who knew about its broken walls and burned gates, it took a man in the far-off kingdom of Persia, who was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, to heed the call and do something about it. Nehemiah had a Godly vision ... *a deep satisfaction with what is and a clear grasp of what could be ...* (John Stott). And so, he undertook the project and carried it through to its completion and he did so at great personal cost. He never gave up, even amongst great opposition, and was always able to uphold godly principles in his planning, strategies and decision-making. He was able to encourage others and pressed on until the job was finished.

Nehemiah proved himself, time and time again, to be a successful leader. As I said back in January, he wasn't a prophet - but he spoke and acted in a manner reminiscent of the best of them. He didn't belong to the priesthood - yet he supported the priests with enthusiasm and showed priestly characteristics in his everyday life. He encouraged others to serve the Lord and he encourages us to keep going when the going gets tough and, most importantly, he shows us how prayer should be a vital part of our daily lives.

However, the overriding characteristic of Nehemiah, for me, was his zeal for God. I remember one of my churchwardens when I was a curate calling me zealous during the time of vacancy. He meant it as an insult, but I took it as a compliment! Being zealous is not being out of control or irresponsible enthusiasm, it's rather, a humble, reverent, single-minded commitment to the worship of God's name and the doing of his will. J.I. Packer: *Zealous folk are sensitive to situations in which God's truth and honour are in one way or another being jeopardised and, rather than let the matter go by default they will force the issue on people's attention in order to compel, if possible, a change of heart about it - even at personal risk.*

How God is looking for people in today's world who will follow Nehemiah's example. For men and women who: Know they've been called by God; Have a deep personal faith; Are committed to prayer; Have a vision for God's work; Recognise their accountability to God's Word; Are spiritually minded; Are full of passion; Are able to discern the tactics of the enemy; Are hard workers and who enable others to share in that work; Can recognise the gifts of others; Have integrity and honesty; Live holy lives; Have a godly love for the task God is calling them to; Seek to glorify God in all they do; Have the courage to be salt and light and who are prepared to stand up and change the world in which they live. Men and women who are determined to accomplish the will of God, come what may.

And my prayer is that we may know something of Nehemiah's attributes in us so that God may be glorified in our lives and His Church built up through our dedication. May we be men and women who stand by the promises we have made.



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: The Ammonites and Moabites were enemies of Israel, however, because they were relatives, the Israelites were forbidden from causing them any harm. Can you relate to the tensions facing Nehemiah here? Is blood really thicker than water? Who means the most to you: friends or family?

2: Nehemiah expressed his disappointment at the people's lack of commitment to their covenant agreement (9:38ff) by reacting in some quite 'aggressive' ways! Is it right to respond to ungodly behaviour in this way? Why, why not?

3: What would be the best distinguishing marks of a Christian in today's world? What might they be in your particular circumstances? How can you do this without appearing to be arrogant or aloof?

4: Paul spoke about how we are God's people for today's world and that we can never live in yesterday's blessing and yesterday's anointing. What difficult choices might you need to take as an individual, and we as a church, if we want to be an effective Christian presence in today's world?

5: Nehemiah, just like the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, kept his eyes on his future reward (Hebrews 11:26). He also sought to run his particular race in such a way as to win a prize (1 Corinthians 9:24). What does this mean to you? What have you done that you hope God will remember you for doing?

6: The book of Nehemiah has been an informative, challenging and encouraging book in many different ways. What, out of all that we have studied, really sticks in your mind? What has strengthened your faith the most? What has challenged your faith the most? What has inspired you the most? What might you want to guard against in the future?



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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