

STUDY OF NEHEMIAH



CHARIS
MINISTRIES AFRICA

Background

The Jews had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon after they were defeated by King Nebuchadnezzar after his armies marched on Jerusalem. This was God's judgement on His people for their disobedience.

There were 3 deportations:

- 606BC The Royal courts left for BABYLON.
- 597BC The craftsmen and women.
- 586BC The rest of the Jewish people.

After 70 years in exile the Jews returned.

There were 3 returns:

- 537BC The royals - Zerubbabel returned to build the temple.
- 458BC Ezra and the priests returned to revive the religious life of the city.
- 445BC Nehemiah returned to rebuild the wall and re-establish security.¹

The temple was completed in 515 BC, but the walls remained in ruins. To the Jewish people the walls represented power, protection, security and peace.

Themes in the book of Nehemiah²

- Vision – see the need.
- Prayer – seek the Lord and stand in the gap.
- Leadership – do what it takes/share the vision/stay the course.
- Problems/Opposition – stand firm.
- Repentance/Revival – bow the knee.

Who was Nehemiah?

Nehemiah was a Jewish exile who served as cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes in Susa. A highly respected position his job was to protect the king from poisoning by drinking from the king's cup first. The king trusted him implicitly.

Chapter 1 The problem – broken walls

After learning from his fellow Jews, the state of the walls in Jerusalem Nehemiah was deeply moved:

Read (*Nehemiah 1:1-3*)

Nehemiah's reaction to what he hears gives testimony to his allegiance and heart for God and His chosen people.

⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:4)

¹ Rogers C. *Restore Renew Rebuild* (London SPCK 2022) p. 3

² Green D. *Serve The Core Mission of the Body of Christ* (London SPCK 2022) Contents page

Despite being in a well - respected job in the royal court of Persia Nehemiah's reaction shows his heart was still in his homeland and with his people. He was deeply saddened, and his response was to fast and pray to his God.

Nehemiah's prayer

Read *Nehemiah 1:5-11*

Nehemiah's heartfelt prayer includes confession and intercession for the sins of the Jewish people. He acknowledges the deserved judgement of being sent into exile because of his people's sin (*Lev 26:33-45*) and disobedience and includes himself in the prayer of repentance. He does not say 'they' but 'we'. He cries out for mercy and forgiveness and restoration and recalls Solomon's prophetic prayer (*2 Chronicles 6:36-39*).

Application

- 'Broken walls' can be a metaphor for things in our world that are broken – relationships, conflict, cruelty and injustice, sin and disobedience, poverty, greed... Where do we see 'broken walls' – in our families, communities, nations and world? What is our heart response?
- Is there something that so disturbs you that it makes you weep and cry out to God for His help? Or something in the past that you have experienced? Are you willing to stand in the gap?

Chapter 2 The solution - God makes a way

Nehemiah's brave act

4 Months later after praying and waiting on God the King noticed Nehemiah's sad appearance and asked him about it. This was a terrifying moment because to displease the King was dangerous and could have resulted in execution. But Nehemiah had been in prayer and was waiting for the right moment to seek help from the King. He threw up a quick prayer and shared what he had heard about the walls of Jerusalem and asked if he could go to rebuild them. God had heard Nehemiah's cries and the King granted his request to leave.

Read *2 Chronicles 7:13-14*.

Nehemiah would be away from his post for 12 years! Nehemiah further asked for letters from the King for his journey to ensure safe passage and one to get timber for the beams. Nehemiah was bold in his requests and wise in his preparation.

God promises to be with us when we step out for him. *Romans 8:33 Joshua 1:8*

This brings to mind 2 other brave servants of God called to intercede on behalf of God's people and purposes: Esther and Moses, both of whom risked their lives to do so.

Read *Esther 7:3³ and Exodus 5:1*

Nehemiah shares his vision

'Where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18)

Nehemiah makes the 4-month journey to Jerusalem. A long and arduous journey which would have meant travelling 9-10 miles per day in the hot sun through inhospitable territory and camping at night and so it is no wonder he rested for 3 days.³

Nehemiah does not immediately announce his plans but wisely and patiently spends time surveying the walls by moonlight after which he confidently presents his plan. He thus avoided unhealthy gossip and the enemies being alerted to his plans. It was clearly a challenging and demanding enterprise that required careful and thoughtful planning.

(Proverbs 27:12 / Luke 14:28-30)

Nehemiah shares his vision and recruits colleagues— this comes after months of prayer, preparation and careful planning and God's clear confirmation.

Nehemiah understood that this was a mammoth task that needed many to work together to see its realisation and so he gathered together a large group of prospective partners and workers who would accept responsibility for different sections of the wall. Although he was a newcomer, he clearly had authority, charisma and excellent persuasive and administrative skills and importantly identified personally with the problem:

You see what trouble we are in (2:17)

His heartfelt passion to see the walls rebuilt made him an authentic and trusted leader. This was no half-hearted gesture but a deeply committed man of God who cared about God's chosen inheritance. He had a clear purpose and then a detailed and practical strategy of how to see it established. He inspired confidence by sharing his testimony about the *'gracious hand of my God on me.'*⁴

Opposition begins.

Nehemiah clearly anticipated opposition to the rebuilding hence why he secretly surveyed the broken walls when he arrived. So when the troublesome trio, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, voiced their opposition against Nehemiah and his associates and ridiculed the venture questioning their motives, accusing them of rebelling against the king, Nehemiah was not put off.

Paul in the NT encountered constant opposition to his mission:

'Through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine yet regarded as imposters.' 2 Corinthians 6:8.

Nehemiah answered his critics by exalting God and clearly identifying the work as God's and themselves as God's servants. He did not answer their lies but confidently proclaimed God as Lord of the mission.

This reminds us of another servant – David who answered the taunts of Goliath who mocked him: *'you come against me with sword and javelin but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel who you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands.'* (1 Samuel 17:45-46).

Our help is in the name of the Lord the Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 124:8)

Nehemiah testifies to a God who hears, (4) guides (5) instructs, (12) and sustains (20) his people.

³ Brown R, *The Message of Nehemiah*, BST Commentaries (Leicester Inter-Varsity Press 1998) p. 53

⁴ Brown R, *The Message of Nehemiah* p. 56-7

Application

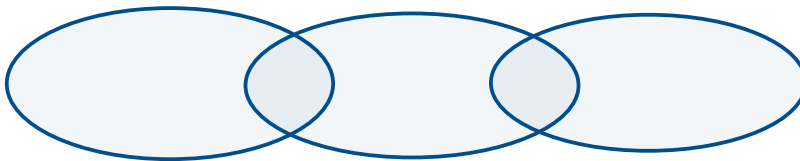
- Do you have a vision? What is it?
- Nehemiah's vision required him to be brave. He had to humble himself in front of the king and risk death. His journey to Jerusalem was 4 months long and dangerous.
³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it' Jesus (Matthew 10:38-39)

Jesus called his followers to follow him: *'who humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross therefore God exalted him to the highest place.'* (Philippians 2:7-9)

Cross carrying and following God's vision is a risky business. Do you have any experience of this? Have you responded to God's call and encountered problems, difficulties, and danger as a result?

- Nehemiah was wise and prudent in the preparation and planning stage of the venture. How can we apply this to our vision?
- Together is better. Nehemiah recruited others to join him. He had a clear focussed vision, which became *our* vision and together they acted upon it and came up with a joint strategy.

Vision/action/strategy ⁵



How can we share our vision and encourage others to join? What is our strategy for discipleship?

- When we encounter opposition (spiritual attack) to our calling, vision and walk of faith how should we respond? Do you have experience of this? (*Ephesians 6:10-18/2 Corinthians 10:4-5/1 Peter 5:8-9*)

Chapter 3 Building begins.

Nehemiah's strategy for building the wall shows thoughtful and clever planning.

He enlisted the high priest and his fellow priests to build the Sheep Gate. It was appropriate that the spiritual leaders should first set an example to the people. Starting with the Sheep Gate is markedly symbolic because it was the gate through which the sheep for sacrifice at the temple would be brought. In essence it is saying 'put God first'.⁶

'Seek first the kingdom of God' Matthew 6:33

⁵ Rogers C. *Restore Renew Rebuild* p. 57

⁶ Brown R, *The Message of Nehemiah* p. 64

Nehemiah encouraged the priests to repair the wall each in front of his own house. Repairing the section closest to their own houses encouraged motivation. It also meant they did not need to travel far and if attacked they would be defending their own homes.

The building of the wall included many gates because many roads converged on the city of Jerusalem. They were heavily guarded by soldiers, but the city gates were also hubs of activity – city council was held there, and traders sold their wares there. We see that each section is built by different groups and we see that wholehearted interdependent co-working (*next to them..next to him...next to them..3-31*) brings rapid success and growth of the wall. As always some refused to pull their weight and were too proud to roll up their sleeves like the nobles of Tekoa but they were in the minority.

The first part of the wall was built by sacrifice, joint commitment, and enthusiasm.

Application

- Discuss the importance of unity and interdependent service for the expansion of Gods kingdom.
1 Peter 2:4-5/9-10/John 17:20-23/1 Corinthians 3:5-14
- The nobles of Tekoa refused to work. Perhaps they thought that manual work was beneath them. Jesus gave his disciples an example to follow in his kingdom *John 13: 1-17* and that was to be servants and not masters. Read and discuss *Luke 22: 24-27*.

Chapter 4 Opposition – Expect it and be ready!

Inevitably, opposition to the rebuilding of the wall increased and intensified. It came from outside the ranks and the result was depression within. But Nehemiah's strength and compassion led the workers through to victory.

We see 4 basic principles which underpinned his leadership in this volatile context.⁷

- (i) Conflict is inevitable.

When the governor of Samaria Sanballat saw the progress the of the rebuilding, he '*ridiculed*' the Jews and mocked their capability to accomplish anything and turned up with his army to terrorize them. Soon his friend Tobiah joined him in the attacks and derided ability to build well- 'even a fox climbing on it would break their stones'. As a matter of fact, however history shows that the wall was actually 9 feet thick! The enemy's lies can sometimes undermine our confidence in our abilities and gifts but if we listen to the right voice, we know like Paul we can do all things through Him who strengthens us!' (*Philippians 4:13*).

Jesus told his disciples to expect trouble – *John 15:18-21/16:1-44,33/17:14-16*. Whenever we step out do something for God our arch enemy the devil will come at us in many ways. But we can take heart that Jesus has overcome and is with us.

- (ii) Prayer is crucial.

Nehemiah's response as leader is to pray. His prayer echoes David's prayers *in Psalm 44:13, 79:12 and 123:3-4*. Nehemiah knows where they can find help in their hour of need- *Psalm 121: 2 'It comes from the Lord the Maker of heaven and earth.'* His prayer is urgent and passionate appealing

⁷ Brown R. *The Message of Nehemiah* pp.72-77

to the faithfulness of God. He is honest and open and righteously angry at their enemies who are dishonouring God. *(2 Kings 19:14-19)*

The people continued to build, and the wall reached half its height because *the people worked with all their heart (6)*. In Colossians 3:23 Paul encourages his readers similarly: *And whatever you do in word or deed work at it with all your heart working for the Lord and not for men*. The workers accomplished something amazing because they worked wholeheartedly. They persevered despite the discouragement and opposition, and they saw the reward of their work. The people followed their leader's example and accompanied their work with corporate prayer to 'our God' (9).

(iii) Discouragement is natural.

Accomplishing any big task for God is tiring. The workers faced continual threat of terrorist attacks which eventually took their toll along with their tiredness and then the people from the surrounding villages voices discouraged them with negative voices: *'The strength of the labourers is giving out and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.'*

The people in Judah referred to the families of some of the workers, who had left them to work on the wall in the city. They were frightened and vulnerable and wanted their husbands/fathers to come home. We can imagine that being a powerful tug on the hearts of the men. Opposition can often come from within our families and a tug of war can develop between our family loyalties and our obedience to God.

The workers were tired. The enterprise was immense and, in their tiredness, it became even bigger in their imaginations. After working under pressure for several weeks their initial enthusiasm was beginning to wane especially in the light of new threats. The threat of enemy attack was imminent they were told: *Wherever you turn, they will attack us (12)* Carrying large amounts of rubble and debris outside of the city under threat of attack was strenuous and stressful work!

Sometimes, we can come to the end of our physical and mental resources. Remember Elijah, *(1 Kings 19:3-9)* who had defeated the enemy and gained a momentous victory for God over the gods of Baal, but when he heard the murderous threats of Jezebel he had had enough and was ready to give up. We have to remember we are human beings and not God nor robots. Our emotions and bodies become weary and that is when we need rest and restoration to be able to carry on.

(iv) A Fresh strategy

And so, Nehemiah devised a fresh strategy carefully and thoughtfully *(14)*. As before he was not hasty but spent time considering the best way forward.

- First, he concentrated on protecting the most vulnerable and lowest parts of the wall where a guard was placed.
- Then he encouraged the whole workforce to trust in the Lord: He compassionately urged them *not to be afraid..and to remember the Lord who is great and awesome.(14a)*. He encouraged them to first look to God. Like the writer to the *Hebrews in chapter 12:1-3* who encouraged his readers *to fix their eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of their faith and to run their race with perseverance*. He then rallied them to fight for their families and homes and to complete the task.
- Finally, he announced his plans that half the workforce would work with their swords at their sides, while the rest would guard equipped with weapons to fight. Behind each builder a soldier would stand guard and those who carried materials *did their work with one hand and a weapon in the other. (17) (Isaiah 62:6)* And a trumpeter stayed by Nehemiah's side so that the workers could be quickly gathered together in case of danger and urgent need. Nehemiah proclaimed the faith rallying cry: *Our God will fight for us!* like Moses before him,

who called on the Israelites to trust God despite the enemy racing towards them and as he raised his staff the Red Sea was parted. God delivered them in a most miraculous way! (*Exodus 14:14*). In the same way Nehemiah expected nothing less than full protection and deliverance.

And so the work continued with the workers alert, vigilant and fully equipped for battle. *They did not even take off their clothes (23)* shows how determined they were and so with perseverance and great courage and sacrifice they moved forward united and literally *watching each other's backs* to see the wall grow.

Application

- In what ways do we as Christians and missionaries experience opposition and conflict in our daily lives and in our ministries? (*James 4:7/Ephesians 4:27/1 Peter 5:8-11*)
- How can we persevere when trouble and discouragement come? Do you have experience of this? (*Psalm 42/Psalm 23*)
- Where does prayer fit in your personal and corporate life? (*Ephesians 6:18/Luke 18:1/Isaiah 62:6*)
- In our mission ventures how can we remain alert and vigilant to the threats and attacks of our enemy, recognise them and defeat his schemes? (*Revelation 12:10-11/Ephesians 6:10-18*)

Chapter 5 Socio-economic issues - God of the poor

The bible shows us that God has a special concern for the poor.

¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. (Deuteronomy 10:18)

³¹ Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Proverbs 14:31)

²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

The Problem

Nehemiah is now introduced as the appointed governor of Judah, previously undisclosed. It comes to his attention that for some time the exhausted workers had been labouring under severe economic difficulties and with increasing pressure from distressed homes they were at the end of their resources and *raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews (1)*.

There had been a great famine in the area, the workers had been away from their trades, farms etc for 8 weeks, greedy merchants had inflated the price of grain resulting in some people having to mortgage their fields and homes in order to raise funds to feed their families. And the Persian king's taxes on their fields and had increased to meet rising imperial immoral expenditure at the royal court. Some were in such dire straits that they were even forced to sell some family members into slavery.

Some moneylenders were making money by exploiting the situation and charging exorbitant interest rates.⁸

Nehemiah's solution

Nehemiah again reveals a high level of maturity and capability as leader and governor of the people. His response was emotional, sympathetic, thoughtful, and practical.

Nehemiah felt things deeply. He was not immune to the difficult situation of his fellow Israelites, because they were his brothers and he identified closely with them. When he became aware of the abuses, he was angry but wisely first pondered them in his mind. He felt the injustice of the situation and therefore called a meeting, where he confronted the nobles and leaders and where the aggrieved peoples could also voice their complaint.

Nehemiah appealed to the consciences of those whose selfish actions were leading their own people into poverty and slavery. He called on them to stop charging interest on loans which according to God's law was forbidden.

God clearly spelled out to the Israelites their responsibility to their poor brothers and sisters and their covenant obligation (*Exodus 22:22-27/Leviticus 25:35-37/Deuteronomy 14:28-29/17:7-11*). Community care and especially care of the weak and vulnerable was an important moral obligation as God's people. As God's people they were supposed to reflect His compassionate and merciful nature.

He directly calls them to give back the lands, vineyards, olive groves and houses and the interest they have charged them.

Nehemiah's appeal convicts the leaders, and they are moved to give back everything and promise to stop this injustice.

Nehemiah was keen to show he was practising what he preached and demonstrated his own sense of love for God and neighbour by forsaking his own right as governor to demand money from the people for rich foods. Nehemiah was not detached and aloof enjoying special advantages whilst the people laboured. He was a leader who rolled up his sleeves and joined the people in the task of building the wall and invited other to join him at his table.

Application

- Community care reflects true righteousness that's why in the OT law God made provision for the poor, the fatherless, the widow and the stranger (*Deuteronomy 10:18*) In God's kingdom there should be true justice for all and no exploitation of the weak.
What does the NT also have to say about this?
James 1:27/ 1 John 3:16-17/James 2:14-18/Matthew 25:30-41/2 Corinthians 9:6-9....
How should the church be putting this into practice?
- And personally, do we care about our brothers and sisters and neighbours who are suffering? *Philippians 2:3-4/Proverbs 21:13*
- Read and discuss the parable of *Matthew 18:21-35*

⁸ Brown R. *The Message of Nehemiah* pp. 87-88

Chapter 6 – 7:3 Stay vigilant – the last leg of the race is the toughest!

Read *Hebrews 12:1-3* about how we should stay focussed and single-minded in our mission and persevere through all difficulties.

Nehemiah and the whole community had tremendous success in rebuilding the wall but when it was almost complete, with just the gates missing, more opposition came. Sanballat and Tobiah were not happy, their efforts to stop the construction were failing. So they first tried to allure him away into enemy territory where they had a plan to kidnap him. But Nehemiah was discerning and recognised *'that they were scheming to harm me (2)*. We know he was a man of prayer and clearly sensitive to the Lord's promptings and warnings.

Then they tried a new approach, centring on Nehemiah's character. They attacked him personally with rumours:

Saying Nehemiah and the Israelites were plotting a revolt (*Nehemiah 6:6*).

Discrediting a leader's/person's character is a tactic of the enemy to create suspicion and confusion and to ruin the work.

But Nehemiah refuted their accusations and prayed to God: *Strengthen my hands (9)* recognising the scheme of the enemy to stop the completion of the work. He shows great determination and perseverance,

² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³ "Make level paths for your feet,"^[a] so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. (Hebrews 12:12-13)

Nehemiah stands firm in the face of the enemy (Ephesians 6:14-16) *¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place..*and ignores their lies and continues with the task God has given him.

The enemy then tries to deceive Nehemiah with a false prophecy from the prophet Shemaiah, using him, a deceitful messenger lured by money, who claimed to have a false report that his enemies were coming to kill him, trying to persuade him to flee to the temple. *(10)*. When a friend, and supposedly man of God, turns enemy, this is the most difficult to discern and also handle.

But Nehemiah once more sensitive to danger realised God had not sent him and that he had been sent by Sanballat and Tobiah to harm him.

Even Jesus has experience of this in his betrayal by Judas who was tempted by 30 pieces of silver to betray his Lord.

²⁰ My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant.²¹ His talk is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords. (Psalm 55:20-21)

The enemy often tries to make us afraid, lose heart and run away and give up. We need to have true discernment and tune in to God's voice (*2 Corinthians 11:13-15*). To run away to the temple would have been wrong according to God's OT law (*Numbers 18:22*).

The wall was completed in 52 days! As prophesied by Daniel (*Daniel 9:25*). Despite the size and apparent impossibility of the task the vision that came to Nehemiah in Persia after being moved to tears at the state of Jerusalem's walls was fully realised. Despite opposition from without, difficulties and problems within God made the impossible possible.

Nehemiah commanded the gatekeepers to stay vigilant and posted guards. When we have success in our mission or lives, we must stay alert to Satan's continuing threat. We can be especially vulnerable after a mountain top experience. Remember Elijah who defeated the prophets of Baal with an amazing miracle (*1 Kings 18:30-40*) but soon after ran for his life in fear when he heard that Jezebel wanted to kill him. In his tiredness and fear he forgot that God was with him and became discouraged and vulnerable to the enemy (*1 Kings 19:3-9*).

Application

- *Ephesians 6:10-18* is a key passage about spiritual warfare that clearly states that as God's people we are at war with the powers in the heavenly realms. Discuss the weapons of warfare and how we can apply these instructions practically in our daily lives and our mission.
- Read *John 10:1-5* and discuss how Nehemiah demonstrates the truth of Jesus' words. Discuss your own experience of discerning God's voice versus the stranger's/enemy's voice.
- *Revelation 12:7-12* - Satan is our arch enemy, he hates the people of God, those who follow Christ. He is described in this passage as the accuser of the brethren (*see Job 1:6-12/2:3-10*). When we are falsely accused, or lies come into our minds we need to stand firm and entrust ourselves to God.
Matthew 5:11-12/Luke 6/1 Peter 3:16/Psalm 41:5-9
Romans 8:35-39 – reminds us that our steadfast hope is in Christ who loves us.

Chapter 7 Repopulating the City

With the wall built it was now time for Nehemiah selected leaders to rule and protect Jerusalem. He chose men of integrity who had reverence for God.

He then set about repopulating the city, with a vision to see it a thriving and prosperous place again, bringing people from the rural areas to take up residence in the city.

Again Nehemiah is led by God '*So God put it in my heart to..*'(5) He assembles the nobles and officials and people to register them by families. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us wisdom. We see the importance of the family as a institution blessed by God.

Nehemiah makes a list of all the returning exiles describing their forms of service: Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants. God equips us for service and distributes gifts according to His purposes. Builders, labourers, soldiers, teachers, administrators, caterers etc are all essential for a society to flourish.⁹

Over 600 of those who returned '*could not show that their families were descended from Israel*' (61) as well as a number of priests without clearly defined ancestry and so were considered 'unclean' and therefore not fit to serve. (64). This was a reference to an issue which was and became crucially important in Judah; intermarrying and the emergence of pluralism in a nation surrounded by pagan neighbours with other religious allegiances. The aim was to maintain a 'pure' priesthood which would obey first and foremost their covenant obligation not to worship other gods. Ezra 13 years earlier committed himself to purifying their worship of the one true God and the continuing of

⁹ Brown R. *The Message of Nehemiah* p.123

the community of Israel's faith in Yahweh. It was a recurring problem in Israel's history which led in part to their exile to Babylon.¹⁰

Nehemiah records the generous giving of the heads of the families to the Lord's work. He himself set an example giving generously in money and kind. They showed in this their commitment to the task and how they put God first. They needed to build houses and establish farms and businesses, but they first gave to the Lord trusting He would honour their love, obedience, and trust in Him to meet all their needs.

Nehemiah shows in this chapter that he cared not only about physical security, social welfare and economic stability of the city but also the spiritual condition of the people. He encouraged the worship of God and adherence to the truth of God's law, integrity and reverence, service and use of the multiplicity of gifts, the pursuit of holiness and the grace of generosity.

Application

- Nehemiah organises the people on the basis of family groups using the historical genealogical records from 538BC when Zerubbabel returned.

The institution of **the family** comes from God's heart and is important to the Christian faith. How does 'the family' express God's heart for His creation? God is described as a Father and Jesus His Son (*John 3:16*), how does this influence our understanding of the gospel?

In *Hosea 11* God speaks of his intense love for his stubborn 'son' Israel. Read the chapter and reflect on God's heart for his people.

Think about the father heart of God using the parable of the Prodigal Son (*Luke 15:11-32*). Have you known this kind of forgiveness?

We are adopted as children of God (*1 John 3:1-3*) and our relationships with one another are familial – we are brothers and sisters (*1 John 5:1—2/3:16-18*). How should we treat one another?

In the world the family and familial relationships are being attacked by the enemy-what consequences do we see?

- God endows His people with **gifts** to glorify His name, enrich others and develop the life of a interdependent community. (*Romans 12:4-8/1 Corinthians 12:4-11/1 Peter 4:10-11*). We are to encourage each other in our giftings, and a good leader identifies potential and gifts, offers opportunities to use them and develop them for the benefit of all. What are your gifts? Can you identify each other's?
- God is a **generous** God – Read *Psalms 104* describes the abundance God has provided in his creation and *Philippians 4:19* how he will meet all our needs. (*James 1:17*)

Money can be a force for good but also evil. Greed is often cited as a sin in the bible –Read *Proverbs 28:25/Ecclesiastes 5:10/Hebrews 13:5/James 4:3/Luke 12:15*

¹⁰ Brown R. *The Message of Nehemiah* p124

As God's children we are called to invest our money in His kingdom first and trust Him with our needs. Often however we do it the other way and God gets our leftovers:

Read and discuss the story of Cain and Abel (*Genesis 4*) and Ananias and Sapphira (*Acts 5:1-11*). They serve as a warning to us as God's people today – Read: *1 Timothy 6:7-10/Matthew 6:24*

We are simply stewards of God's possessions - *Genesis 1:28/2:15/ 1 Peter 4:10/Luke 16:11/1 Corinthians 4:2/Luke 12:42-46/Luke 6:38*. How should this affect how we spend personal money and corporate ministry monies?

God loves generosity and wants us to reflect his nature and be generous to the poor and weak– (*Proverbs 11:25/ Proverbs 11:24/2 Corinthians 9:6-11*).

Chapter 8 Reforming the Community

After Nehemiah completes the rebuilding programme as political leader Ezra the priest and scribe now makes an appearance to lead the spiritual revival of the nation.

Ezra begins by reading the Law from day until night and the Levites instruct the people as to its meaning. The people weep with shame lamenting how far they have moved away from God's covenantal law:

⁹'Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.'

Ezra and Nehemiah encouraged the people to stop weeping because the day was holy, and it was a celebration that should fill them with joy. *Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength (10)*. In their wisdom Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to move the people on from shame to confession to transformation and so encouraged the people to eat nice foods and drink sweet drinks and give gifts to those in need. God's aim in convicting us of our sins is not condemnation, but reconciliation and change and a renewed close wholehearted spiritual relationship and walk with him.

The Festival of Tabernacles is reinstated (*Leviticus 23:43*), which was established by God to remind the Israelites of their time in the wilderness when God took care of them, protected them, guided them and provided for all their needs. Ezra commands the people to find branches and build temporary shelters and live in them for a week. *Remembering* is a useful spiritual discipline and allows God to remind us of His faithfulness in the past and the importance of obedience to God. It was also a visual witness to visitors and people of other religions and gave opportunity to proclaim the word of God and spread it (15).

In *1 Samuel 7:7-12* God leads the Israelites to victory against their enemies, the Philistines, and so Samuel erects a large stone in remembrance called Ebenezer 'stone of help'. It is good practice to have visual reminders of how God has helped us in the past to encourage us to keep trusting and obeying God.

Application

- In *Joshua 1:7-9* the Lord commanded Joshua to read and meditate on God's law, day and night and to be courageous in his obedience. He said his success would be directly linked to his obedience-the practical application of God's word. Lip service would not work. *James 1: 22-25* says the same thing – if we profess to be the people of God/Christians then we must do what God's word says. Then we will be blessed in what we do.

Reflect on *1 Corinthians 13: 1-13* especially *4-7*. Are we truly loving our brothers and sisters, our family, our neighbour or are we falling short?

Reflect on *Isaiah 58:1-12* – we see a contrast here between empty religion and true, active faith.

- God's word is like a mirror to our souls. It reflects a true vision of ourselves. The Israelites mourned when they heard the Scripture because it highlighted and condemned their sinful lifestyles. The bright light of God's holiness revealed the darkness of their sinful lives, their greed, lack of compassion and selfishness.¹¹ And hearing the consequences and judgement of a sinful life brought fear to their hearts.

Matthew 5:4 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.'

James 4:7-10 - shows us what a true response to sin in our lives as Christians should be. We should not abuse God's grace. *Hebrews 10:26-31* is a sobering passage that shows us that God will not allow us to keep on sinning deliberately. We should take sin very seriously and keep short accounts with God. We cannot simply keep saying: 'Oh, its okay God will forgive me.'

Think about your own spiritual life – does the presence of sin in your life make you weep/mourn? Are you growing in holiness?

Chapter 9 Intercessory prayer

After the Festival of Tabernacles had finished, the day came for repentant, confessional prayer. The people approached God in a posture of humility – fasting, in sackcloth and with ashes on their heads.

The spent the first few hours listening to the Word of God, then the next few hours repenting of their sins openly and then in worship. When we have unconfessed sin in our hearts it's impossible to truly worship. But as we unburden ourselves of our shame and sins, we experience the freedom that forgiveness brings, and we are set free to worship God and experience His healing restoring presence. (*John 8:32*).

Nehemiah's prayer in 9:5-38 is a wide-sweeping historical record of God's relationship with His people Israel spanning from Genesis to the prophets, including God's call of Abram, his raising up of Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery, the exodus and desert wanderings, finishing with the kings, priests and prophets. Like in Psalm 78 and 106 it records how the people rebelled against God and were not faithful despite seeing miracles like the parting of the Red Sea and miraculous provision of manna and water in the desert. It records how God in his mercy repeatedly forgave their sin and restored them but how quickly they forgot and again sinned against Him.

¹¹ Brown R. *The Message of Nehemiah* p. 133

The prayer highlights God's character '*forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love*' (17,19,), his compassion when he saw them suffering even due to their rebellion, (27) his faithfulness and mercy when they ignored his warnings by His Spirit and disobeyed his laws. God who keeps His covenant love despite the faithlessness of his people.

The prayer contrasts the faithful enduring love, faithfulness, and goodness of God with the fickle, weak, faithlessness of His people. And we are often no different.

God's holiness highlights our impurity. His generosity highlights our greed and selfishness. His faithfulness highlights our disloyalty. His covenantal love highlights our self-centeredness. God keeps his promises whilst we so quickly forget our promises to God. (*Psalm 106:13-14*).

The prayer clearly identifies their sins and acknowledges the commands they broke. They identified themselves with their ancestors and their sins. They offered corporate confession including themselves because they realised there was no place for self-righteousness. They too were guilty of sinning against God. They recognised the justice of God's judgement upon them and appealed to His mercy.

Application

- The prayer reminds me of Stephen's sermon in *Acts 7:1-53* when he summarized the history of Israel and their rejection of God's ways over the centuries. He shows from OT history how Israel had constantly rejected God's message and his prophets and now even his Messiah.

Why do you think this pattern of disobedience and rebellion happened? Look at the Church today, do we see a similar pattern or now that we are born again of His Spirit are we better?

- To confess our sins and repent (change direction) should be a daily discipline so that nothing interferes with our prayers and relationship with God. If we leave sin unchecked in our lives the bible is clear-God will not listen to us when we pray and will judge us.

Read *1 John 1:8-2:2/1 Peter 3:7/10-12/Isaiah 1:12-15/Galatians 6:7-8/ Matthew 5:27-30*).

James 5:16-18 The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

- God sometimes calls us to offer corporate confession/repentance. When our particular church fellowship has problems or when our community or nation is suffering in some way-conflict, war, famine, devastation (*2 Chronicles 7:13-14*.)

Chapter 9:38-10:39 A Renewed Promise

Covenants are important in biblical history. A covenant is where 2 people/entities enter into an agreement and commit to it. God made covenants with Abraham and Noah and later through Moses and the 10 Commandments. God as we have seen was always faithful, but Israel was not.

Nehemiah and 57 other leaders signed the public agreement making it personal to them and on behalf of the rest of the people. The agreement was assent to specific actions designed to restore their relationship to God and their identity as God's holy people.

It stated 5 promises:¹²

1. They promised not to intermarry with the peoples around them. Israel's problems were historically bound up with intermarrying with their neighbours who worshipped other gods

¹² Brown R *The Message of Nehemiah* pp.176-192

and often led to syncretism and the inclusion of idolatrous practices including sexual immorality (*Exodus 20:3*). Solomon is a key example of someone who intermarried and had many foreign wives which eventually led to the division of the kingdom into Israel and Judah (*1 Kings 11:1-13*). Baal worship in the northern kingdom of Israel through Ahab's marriage to Jezebel led to disastrous moral and spiritual consequences. (*16:29-33*). The prohibition not to intermarry was to preserve the purity of their faith and holiness. They had been commissioned to be a light to the nations – to mirror God's likeness to the surrounding nations: (*Exodus 19:6*) *'you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* *I will also make you a light for the Gentiles. That my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'* (*Isaiah 49:6*)

2. They promised to keep the Sabbath day holy and not to trade on the sabbath (*Exodus 20:8-11*). In this they were committing to put God first and not money. Rest was important to God (*Genesis 2:2*) even He rested from his work in creation.
3. They promised to keep the Sabbath year rule and leave the land fallow every 7th year and cancel all debts. In this they were declaring God's ownership of the land and their roles as stewards. Allowing the land to rest was wisdom allowing the land to be replenished and restored. Also, during this year, the modest natural harvest was to be left for the poor among them. (*Exodus 23:10-11*).
4. God cared passionately for the weak and vulnerable, the widow, the foreigner and provided for them, as he did for those who through circumstances found themselves with crippling debts. He commanded all debts to be cancelled allowing these unfortunate ones to start afresh. (*Deuteronomy 15:1-15*).
5. They promised to support God's work and service at the temple by pledging to give. All, whether rich or poor or in-between, promised to give proportionately and sacrificially to the work of the Lord. The emphasis is on bringing the 'firstfruits' the first portion of their crops, fruit trees, ground meal, new wine, olive oil as well as their offering their firstborn to the Lord. (*Exodus 13:1-2*). In all this they were reiterating the truth that they were simply stewards of everything they had been given by God as well as acknowledging their responsibility to maintain the work and service of the Lord's temple-all its religious activities, which cared for the spiritual condition of the people as well as providing for the continuing worship of their God.

In all these promises the Israelite believers were confessing God's sovereign control over every aspect of their lives: their home life, work life, social life and spiritual life.

Application

- **Modern day covenants** still take place. The *Lausanne Covenant* is an example of corporate commitment to evangelism and social action on the part of evangelical believers all over the world.¹³ A covenant like this encourages us as Christ's global body to come together to make noble plans and carry out noble deeds (*Isaiah 32:8*) for God's glory. (<https://lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant>) We can also make personal commitments to God – for example – we might promise to read/study God's word every day for 2x30 minutes alongside prayer and worship to strengthen our relationship to Jesus. Have you ever made a covenant either corporate or personal? Would you like to make one?

¹³ Brown R. *The Message of Nehemiah* p. 170

- In the same way that the people promised to follow a **plan of giving** we too need to give intentionally and regularly. This shows our commitment first to God (Matthew 6:33) Read *Malachi 3:6-12* – this shows a clear link between our giving and our right relationship with God (*2 Corinthians 9:9*). The people were disobeying God who instituted the giving of tithes (*Leviticus 27:30-34*) to provide for the priests/Levites and their responsibilities to care for the temple, the service of worship and the spiritual instruction of the people. As a result of people not giving the Levites had to get jobs and so neglected their work at the temple. In the NT *1 Timothy 5:17-18* says that a pastor should be supported so that he/she can carry out his/her duties.
- **Sabbath rest** – God created night and day and in that provided rest and sleep for his created ones. He also showed the importance of a rhythm of work and rest when he also rested from his work of creation on the 7th day. The 4th commandment stated clearly that everyone including animals should have a day of rest. A day for the renewal of strength and a focus on the worship of God. (*Isaiah 41:28-31*). In the NT the Sabbath had become however a rod for the people’s backs in the religious teacher’s legalistic interpretation of the rule. When Jesus healed the crippled woman (*Luke 13:14*) they tried to entrap him saying he disobeyed God’s law, but Jesus rebuked them and showed them that doing good is always appropriate whatever day. They were missing the point. *The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8)*. God had created the Sabbath for rest, renewal, true worship and doing good.
Do you have a balanced work/rest life? Do you have boundaries? How do you rest/wind down and relax? Do you carve out times to be with Jesus?
- **Holistic faith** – the covenant that Ezra, Nehemiah and the people signed covered every area of their lives demonstrating that God should be Lord of every area of our lives not just the spiritual/religious part. True faith affects our minds, bodies, souls and spirits and a real living faith in Jesus therefore brings holistic transformation. The Holy Spirit changes the way we think, feel, speak, our attitudes, and actions.
Can you see God’s transforming power in every area of your life? (*2 Corinthians 3:18/Romans 8:29/12:2*).
God’s aim is that we are transformed into the image of Jesus - that we look like, sound like, act like, speak like Jesus.
Good question to ask in various situations we find ourselves: *What would Jesus do?* That is why it is important to read the gospels and know the bible.

Chapter 11 Sacrificial commitment

Nehemiah asked one tenth of the people from the outlying areas to move inside the walls of the city because large areas of the city were vacant, obviously this was a big ask, a few wanted to move who were commended for their willing service (2) but most did not, so they cast lots.

The reason why most did not want to move was because there was a stigma attached to Jerusalem residents who were often excluded from trading because of their religious beliefs, and of course they would need to rebuild their homes and re-establish businesses and living in the holy city - Jerusalem required stricter obedience to God’s word because of greater social pressure and proximity to the temple.¹⁴ As those who work ‘full-time’ in ministry this can apply to us too. There is

¹⁴ Brown R. *The Message of Nehemiah* p.197

greater responsibility attached to our lives because we are more visible and to represent God is a high calling!

For Jerusalem to become a thriving economic, social, and spiritual hub it needed the people to come together in unity and partnership. Selfless actions were necessary for the common good. The walls had been built but without people Jerusalem would remain an empty shell. The developing community needed committed people to come and live out their lives together holistically.

Application

- When might we as followers of Jesus be called upon to lay down our lives, to act sacrificially for the sake of God's kingdom? *Luke 9:23-25/ Matthew 28:18-20.*
- Unity of heart and purpose spurred on the people in Nehemiah. Likewise, *Philippians 2:1-4* encourages us to act together as a united Christian faith community – *Acts 4:32-37* is an example of when God's people come together in unity with one purpose to glorify God He can do powerful things among us!

Chapter 12 The Final Act of Worship

In celebration of completion of the task, rededication of the people and praise to God the musicians and choirs now come together in a final act of worship, thanksgiving and praise to God who has made it all possible. The dedication of the city was filled with joy, praise and singing. Nehemiah's vision was to see a revival of Israel's former glory recalling David's great days as King when Israel was a God-fearing nation.

It was a Celebration first and foremost of how God had enabled, empowered, and equipped them all to do the impossible in the face of great difficulties and opposition. There was a sense of delight and jubilancy.

There was heartfelt thanksgiving for God's mercy, grace and generosity as well as for each other, with whom they had shared the burden of the work and selflessly served alongside so that the wall could be rebuilt, and the city repopulated.

The variety of worshippers was wide-ranging including a plethora of musical instruments, singers and choirs and they were all brought together in a unifying opportunity to give glory to God.

The hearts of the people needed to be pure so that their worship would be acceptable to God thus a service of purification was included. The purpose of this was to remind the people of the importance of a 'clean heart' when coming to worship God (*Psalms 24:3-4*).

The procession of choirs around the city walls was a public act of witness culminating in a service of thanksgiving in the temple. This was a public demonstration of celebration to God who had restored and revived them as the people of God and had established Jerusalem as the city of God once more. What a great opportunity to give testimony to the one true God!

Application

- God loves us to worship and praise him in song. In heaven this very moment thousands of heavenly beings, angels and redeemed are worshipping the Lamb and him who sits upon the throne (*Revelation 5:11-14*). In worship we draw close to God's heart. It is right and good to praise and give thanks to God (*Psalms 135:1-3/Philippians 4:41 Thessalonians 5:16*).

Praise fights off our enemies (*Psalm 8:2*). Satan flees at the name of Jesus and when we declare the truth and praises of God, we push back the powers of darkness. *2 Chronicles 21:21-22* shows that Jehoshaphat sent the singers and musicians to go ahead of the army on the frontline and as they began to sing and praise God, He defeated their enemies.

- What is true worship? It includes singing and praising God with our lips from our hearts, hearts that are clean and free but it is so much more.
Psalm 51:17 – ‘*My sacrifice O God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart Lord you will not despise.*’
Romans 12:1 says our ‘*true worship is to offer our bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God.*’
What do you think this means in practice? What does this say about what true worship is?

Chapter 13 Final Reforms

After 12 years in Jerusalem Nehemiah had to return to Babylon(433BC). When he returned, he unfortunately encountered problems. Tobiah, one of his main opponents in building the wall, had been given a room in the temple, which should have been used for storing the grain offerings, tithes of grain, new wine oil, temple articles etc which meant there was nowhere to store the grain etc for the Levites. After the previous high of Chapter 12 it is disappointing and somewhat deflating to hear of old habits and sins rearing their ugly heads.

Nehemiah had left for Babylon on a high having accomplished his mission. The wall was rebuilt, and the people had repented and recommitted themselves to wholeheartedly obey and serve God. There had been praising and singing and surely Nehemiah had basked in the joy of this victory when he returned to his role in Babylon.

One can imagine, therefore, his disillusionment to return to see his enemy Tobiah occupying a room in the sacred temple and not only that he then learns that the provision allocated for the Levites had been withheld forcing them to return to their fields and so neglect their temple duties and spiritual oversight of the people. He also found trading taking place on the Sabbath and some of the men of Judah had again defied God’s laws and married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, when intermarrying with foreign peoples had been expressly forbidden.

The high priest Eliashib had clearly cultivated wrong relationships allowing Tobiah to have space in the temple. He abused his authority (4) which had devastating results. Perhaps Tobiah was linked to him by marriage. Our lives can be ruined by wrong relationships, and we need to be alert. Clearly Eliashib was far from God even though he was God’s representative. Jesus found the priests and teachers of the Law so far from God and rebuked them sternly. (*Matthew 23*).

There is a stark realism here. There is no happy fairy-tale ending, but sin had yet again crept in to despoil and challenge the good that had been done.

Secularism, materialism, and sexual impurity had not been eradicated from the community by the reforms, the war was still waging.

Nehemiah was a brilliant leader, a man of integrity and courage of moral uprightness and wisdom, who loved God and His laws and was led by the Spirit in all he did. He exerted an exemplary influence on the everyday life of the people. Once he left, there was clearly a void of good leadership leaving the people again vulnerable to waywardness and sin.

Nehemiah had been away a few years. The drifting and decline in moral standards clearly did not happen overnight, but gradually. Sin usually creeps in through small disobediences and neglect.

The Levites were not being provided for and so the teaching of God's word and laws was neglected allowing the people to revert back to their old materialistic, immoral ways.

Three areas of the life of the community were affected: The temple (religious), the marketplace (commercial) and the home (domestic).¹⁵

Nehemiah set about again reforming all these areas:

He spoke sternly and acted boldly. He rid the rooms in the temple of all of Tobiah's goods and ordered the rooms to be cleansed and re-established as a store for the temple provisions. He ordered all the officials to restart the supervision of the giving of tithes for the support of the work of the temple and those serving in it. He ordered the gates to be shut the night before the Sabbath and not opened until it was over and so stopping all trading on the holy day. And those men who had intermarried with foreign women he sternly rebuked and disciplined them and ordered them not to give their daughters or sons in marriage to foreign peoples. He finally purified the Levites and drove away anyone who defiled the sacred office.

Application

- This chapter highlights the importance of good leadership and godly influence. Whilst Nehemiah was actively present despite difficulties and opposition much progress was made. He was a man of prayer and was led by the Spirit and had authority which brought reverence and respect. He had a clear purpose and acted upon it with courage and wisdom.

But when he left it seems there was no one of that calibre to replace him.

It is important as leaders to mentor others who will eventually take our place, those who have followed a godly influence and good spiritual practices including instruction in the Word of God, prayer and fasting, listening to the Holy Spirit, practical compassion and generosity, humility, and moral behaviour.

Like Elijah - God ordered Elijah the prophet to prepare Elisha to take over from him. (*1Kings 19:16,19-21/2 Kings 2:1-14*).

And Paul is another example of a good leader, in *1 Corinthians 11:1* he told the church to 'Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.' Of course, Jesus is our ultimate Example, and we are commanded to live the way he lived (1 John 2:6) but we need human mentors to walk alongside us and see us grow and develop, to pray for and guide us. Paul followed the way of Christ, and he instructed his followers to follow his example of how to live a righteous life in their particular context.

Paul mentored Timothy – *1 Timothy 4:11-16/6:11-16/ 2: Timothy 3:10-17* and urged him to follow his example and his teachings and then entrust them to others (*2 Timothy 2:2/Titus 2:6-8*).

Think about the joys and challenges of leadership. Make a list of Nehemiah's strengths. Do you see any weaknesses?

Do you have the gift of leadership? Who can you mentor?

- There is an important message for us in this chapter and that is the insidious nature of sin which is always 'crouching at the door' (*Genesis 4:7*) and that we have an enemy who is

¹⁵ Brown R. *The Message of Nehemiah* p. 225

always tempting us (*1 Peter 5:8-9/James 4:7/Ephesians 4:26-27*). We are called to be alert to his schemes and resist him and remember our own weaknesses. How can we keep our lives free from sin and not give in to temptation? How can we keep on God's path and not turn off?

Read and discuss *Revelation 2:4-5*

Now look again at the themes that were highlighted at the beginning of this study and reflect on each one. How can we, in our personal callings and corporate ministry and our particular context in 2023, apply what we have learned from the book of Nehemiah in each of these areas?

Themes

- Vision – see the need.
- Prayer – seek the Lord and stand in the gap.
- Leadership – do what it takes/share the vision/stay the course.
- Problems/Opposition – stand firm.
- Repentance/Revival – bow the knee.

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