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Nehemiah

Study notes for group and personal reflection

Introduction "Remember"

In Chapter One, the scene is set as Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes the Persian king (1: 11) hears report of the state of the people of God and of Jerusalem from his place in the king's household. Nehemiah holds a position of influence, described by Evers as being "rather like a prime minister and master of ceremonies rolled into one" pp 99-100.

We are reminded that God has placed Nehemiah in this place and has given him the skills and authority for God's purposes. When we apply these principles to our own lives, we are able to recognise that the years that we have spent on career, bringing up family or being involved in an interest group will not be wasted in the service of God's Kingdom. God uses the abilities and skills we develop for the good of his people and for the glory of his name.

In this case, as we look at Chapter 1, we see how external influence needs to be brought to lift up the defeated people of God in Jerusalem and to have hope for the 'broken and burned' city itself.

Nehemiah intercedes with God for the city of Jerusalem and the people of God. He mourns, fasts and confesses. He remembers and declares the Covenant promise of God made at Sinai: verse 6.

He sets out to restore the honour of God's holy Name and requests favour with his Pagan king that he may be permitted to go home to the Jerusalem he has not yet seen. (Chapter 2)

Session One A Plan to Build

As you Gather 5 Minutes

What is the most ambitious construction scheme you have undertaken? (Lego, home, work, brio etc.)

What were the joys and the challenges?

Pray & Worship 10 Minutes

Sing a hymn or listen to a song about the plans and purposes of God.

Pray for:

- 1. God to show you something new about his Word**
- 2. God to teach your group something about trusting him**
- 3. God to increase your understanding of his character**
- 4. Your church to grow in faith and love for God**
- 5. Someone you know to find Jesus**
- 6. Your confidence to grow as you share your faith and your story of God's faithfulness**

Nehemiah 2 CEV

During the month of Nisan in the twentieth year that Artaxerxes was king, I served him his wine, as I had done before. But this was the first time I had ever looked depressed. 2 So the king said, "Why do you look so sad? You're not sick. Something must be bothering you." Even though I was frightened, 3 I answered, "Your Majesty, I hope you live forever! I feel sad because the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and its gates have been burned down." 4 The king asked, "What do you want me to do?" I prayed to the God who rules from heaven. 5 Then I told the king, "Sir, if it's all right with you, please send me back to Judah, so that I can rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried." 6 The queen was sitting beside the king when he asked me, "How long will it take, and when will you be back?" The king agreed to let me go, and I told him when I would return. 7 Then I asked, "Your Majesty, would you be willing to give me letters to the governors of the provinces west of the Euphrates River, so that I can travel safely to Judah? 8 I will need timber to rebuild the gates of the fortress near the temple and more timber to construct the city wall and to build a place for me to live. And so, I would appreciate a letter to Asaph, who is in charge of the royal forest." God was good to me, and the king did everything I asked. 9 The king sent some army officers and cavalry troops along with me, and as I traveled through the Western Provinces, I gave the letters to the governors. 10 But when Sanballat from Horon and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about what had happened, they became very angry, because they didn't want anyone to help the people of Israel.

Nehemiah is in a place of privilege and position in worldly terms. He is known by the King and the King recognises his worth and his regular disposition.

Talk about the opportunities you have in serving God in the routine of your life.

Talk about the things that made Nehemiah valuable to the King and to God.

It is 4 months between Nehemiah mourning over his city and the encounter with the king. This time of waiting was important because when the opportunity to act came, it would be of God's making rather than Nehemiah's choosing.

Jonathan Lamb comments;

... for anyone with an activist mentality, these four months of determining what might be God's will, and of assessing when to act, could have been a form of torture. But this is often the pathway God calls us to walk. Too often we imagine that prayer will provide us with a quick-fix solution... The process of prayer is one whereby we begin to think God's thoughts after him, to desire the things he desires, to love the things he loves...The waiting time is often when God can make us what he wants us to be. Pp22-23.

Talk about the waiting time when you think you are ready, but nothing seems to be happening. How do you pray through these times?

Talk together about the Lamb passage above.

What strategies might you use to ensure that the things that he says are happening through prayer are actually happening in your life?

How might your group help you?

4 The king asked, "What do you want me to do?" I prayed to the God who rules from heaven.

Verse 4 is a famous 'arrow prayer' which is one that is part of the larger life of prayer that Nehemiah inhabits. It is his, "Okay God, I'm here and this your seem like an opening, be present in my actions and I will be present to obey your prompting."

Have you experienced any moments like this? Share your stories. Ask each other questions about them and how they happened...

Sometimes we call these *kairos*. The 'right or opportune moments' when something significant can happen in our life of faith.

Nehemiah is granted great favour by the Pagan King, Artaxerxes. He is granted safe passage through to Jerusalem and given the resources to rebuild the city of his ancestors. Nehemiah has the wisdom to talk about his own needs in terms of what is important to the King. In this case it is 'the ancestors'.

Why is it necessary to meet earthly authorities with an interest that they can relate to?

8b God was good to me, and the king did everything I asked.

The glory and credit goes to the Lord almighty for all Artaxerxes gives Nehemiah. The foreign policy regarding the rebuilding of Judah is overturned and Nehemiah becomes its governor. The Lord can completely change the heart and minds of those in authority for his own good purpose.

When have you prayed for a situation and been surprised by the unexpected generosity or change of heart of the governing authority?

Give thanks to God!

Reflection & Refreshment 20 minutes

Over your refreshments, look up the times of opposition in Chapter 2.

They first surface in verse 10 when the people surrounding Judah get wind of the help and potential restoration of Jerusalem. Again, after Nehemiah has assessed the damage in verses 11-18, the voices of opposition surface in verse 19.

There are two key themes to this part of the chapter. The first is the desire to trust in God for all that he can accomplish. It is not Nehemiah's work, but it is God's. He will see it done and it will give God glory. Nehemiah has stepped out faithfully from his place of safety and exile in Artaxerxes' palace to govern and rebuild a city in ruins. He is careful to share the vision for restoration as being God's vision and God's desire. He is careful to count the cost before acting.

Lamb writes about this; [Nehemiah] creates what we might call 'godly expectation'; the God-given ability to see what could be, rather than just what is. This is basic to our work for God. George Carey calls lack of vision 'an ecclesiastical terminal illness'. The dispirited people in Jerusalem needed more than the power of positive thinking. Their hearts and minds needed to be lifted to see what God could do. And we are the same. We need to be dissatisfied with where we are and develop a lively expectation of what, by God's grace, could be in our lives, our churches, in our cause or mission. P26

Discuss these thoughts with reference to your own church and community. 6

Chapter 4 "Opposition to God's Plan"

Chapter 3 details the repairs to the walls, the people involved and those who are not keen on doing the work...

Chapter 4 shows how easy it is to fall to discouragement and give up under the obvious and strong threat of an enemy. In this case, there were potential and powerful enemies around the walls, each with a desire to keep Jerusalem in ruins. Nehemiah's faith and leadership must be strong and confident to keep the builders faithful and working for God's purpose. As Evers writes: "The way we deal with frustrations in Christian work and in our personal lives shows what kind of people we are." p 124

It doesn't help Nehemiah or the resolve of the Jews that they are taunted by very real comments, probably the doubts that they held, being pointed out loudly and showing the ridiculous nature of the task they were undertaking. Verses 1 - 3 are jibes. Snidey, nasty jibes designed to demoralise the workers.

We learn about Nehemiah's prayer-life as a person of faith and action. Verses 4 - 5 are the words of his prayer. His response to the attack is to turn to God. In v9, he documents prayer as part of their strategy and again in vv14 - 15, we see Nehemiah using the familiar covenant-call to Remember. This is God's plan and under God's favour ... carry on.

There is a plan formed for working under the threat of attack. V 20 "our God will fight for us" is their strength and their motivation and, Nehemiah, as practical as he is holy, keeps them armed and ready for action day and night. They live in a state of constant readiness to defend and protect God's mission. V 23 "Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water."

Session Two Restoration of the City

As you Gather 5-10 minutes

Have a mini-party with some hats and party poppers, fizzy drink and party ring biscuits.

Play a game of musical statues or pass the parcel.

Celebrate together because God is Good.

Pray & Worship 10 Minutes

Sing a hymn or a song which speaks of your delight in God's promises.

Pray for:

- 1. A greater love for God's mission.**
- 2. A greater desire to be with God's people in worship, prayer and teaching.**
- 3. A greater trust in God's purposes for this church and community.**
- 4. A greater witness to the saving love of God through Jesus, especially in your own life and faith.**
- 5. A greater delight in serving God.**
- 6. A greater purpose in living faithfully, even when opposition is strong.**

Read the Word 50 minutes

Nehemiah 7 CEV

7 After the wall had been rebuilt and the gates hung, then the temple guards, the singers, and the other Levites were assigned their work. **2** I put my brother Hanani in charge of Jerusalem, along with Hananiah, the commander of the fortress, because Hananiah could be trusted, and he respected God more than most people did. **3** I said to them, "Don't let the gates to the city be opened until the sun has been up for a while. And make sure that they are closed and barred before the guards go off duty at sunset. Choose people from Jerusalem to stand guard at different places around the wall and others to stand guard near their own houses."

4 Although Jerusalem covered a large area, not many people lived there, and no new houses had been built. **5-6** So God gave me the idea to bring together the people, their leaders, and officials and to check the family records of those who had returned from captivity in Babylonia, after having been taken there by King Nebuchadnezzar. About this same time, I found records of those who had been the first to return to Jerusalem from Babylon Province. By reading these records, I learned that they settled in their own hometowns, **7** and that they had come with Zerubbabel, Joshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, and Baanah.

Once God's *kairos* moment is here, there is no time to dither. Under Nehemiah's faithful and Godly leadership, the walls of Jerusalem are built in under two months. The city had been emptied of people and in order to restore its power and authority (and so give glory to God), it needed people to commit to stay and make their homes there. This is an act of faith and commitment.

Evers writes about this moment of decision;

The Jews who moved to Jerusalem were expected to subordinate their own interests to the will of God for the benefit of his people. Who would be willing to make this sacrifice and pull up their roots to resettle in the capital city? Christians too ought to be more solicitous about the progress of the church and the glory of God than about their own particular spheres of service. The ministry of individual believers and churches is of utmost importance to the Lord. Nevertheless our labours are only part of the overall global work of God which spans the centuries from the creation until its consummation at the second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. P150

We can talk in general terms about how the church we love has reached the state it is in (either good or not good). However, we are custodians of the worship, witness and service of this moment.

What does this mean for your church today?

Talk about the challenge that being at the forefront of a new mission initiative brings.

In twenty-first century UK society, we are largely a people who like deep roots and this sometimes plays out in an intransigence when change and development for kingdom purposes are at stake.

Discuss the points in your life where you have been challenged to move for the mission of God?

Nehemiah begins the rebuilding of community by appointing the right spiritual leadership before all else. In all his appointing, Nehemiah was careful to choose people, firstly for their quality of faith. In page 151, Evers asks his readers the question: ***Do the adoration and service of God take precedence in our lives?*** Re-read the section from Nehemiah 7 and talk about the implications and challenges that this question raise for each of you.

Nehemiah is aware that the best people to defend the walls that have been build and the mission and purpose of the city are those who are personally invested in its safety. Look at verse 3.

Nehemiah implements God's plan for the populating of Jerusalem. Look at verses 5 & 6. This reminds us that even in the most practical of administrative activities, Nehemiah was a man who listened for God's voice. He was a man of deep, reflective prayer.

Are you someone whom Nehemiah would have wanted to be living in the city? Why is it important that the city is well populated?

Reflection & Refreshment 20 minutes

Over your refreshments, read the section from Chapter 8 (CEV). Share the joy of pronouncing the names - my favourite unpronounceable is "Maaseiah" ... *Maa-see-iah?*

1-2 On the first day of the seventh month, the people came together in the open area in front of the Water Gate. Then they asked Ezra, who was a teacher of the Law of Moses, to read to them from this Law that the Lord had given his people. Ezra the priest came with the Law and stood before the crowd of men, women, and the children who were old enough to understand. 3 From early morning till noon, he read the Law of Moses to them, and they listened carefully. 4 Ezra stood on a high wooden platform that had been built for this occasion. Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah were standing to his right, while Pedaiah, Mishaël, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash Baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam were standing to his left. 5 Ezra was up on the high platform, where he could be seen by everyone, and when he opened the book, they all stood up. 6 Ezra praised the great Lord God, and the people shouted, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed with their faces to the ground and worshipped the Lord.

This is all about the prominence of the Word of God.

Look at the way that the desire for good, solid teaching comes from 'the people' in verse 1.

They bring Ezra out of retirement, because they know that he is trustworthy in sharing God's Word. People know that it is written down by Moses, but they also recognise its divine origins.

Talk about and pray through the underlined portions with reference to your own church situation and share any observations.

Conclusions ?

In this brief look at the ministry of Nehemiah, we find a godly and prayerful servant of God.

Nehemiah is willing to leave his place of comfort to do God's will.

In the Lord's service, there will be opposition from plausible sources.

Nehemiah prays for the right time to act and does so unwaveringly. He trusts God more than he fears people's threats.

Unity in worship and prayer is important.

A desire to receive and learn God's Word is necessary in establishing a Godly community.

All people should be exposed to God's Word and together, respond in worship. There is something important here regarding teaching children and young people to value the Word.

A Godly heart is important in every act of service for the Lord - be it practical, manual, clerical or priestly; God's servants should all honour him.

There will be kairos moments when God's favour is ripe for action: don't miss them !

There are many links to New Testament themes in Nehemiah.

Spend some time looking them up and listing them.

Use them in your prayers.

Love & Blessings,

Catherine x

Bibliography

Evers, Stan K. *Doing a great Work*. Evangelical Press. 1996.

Lamb, Jonathan. *Faith in the face of danger*. Authentic media. 2004.

Note from Author

Although only certain passages have been referenced it is strongly advised that you read the whole of the book of Nehemiah.