

STUDIES IN

NEHEMIAH

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Introduction

In term 2 we worked through the book of Joshua. Joshua revealed God's faithfulness in bringing his people into the land he promised their forefather Abraham way back in Genesis 12:1-7. Joshua used terms like 'rest' and 'fulfilled' to describe this epic moment in salvation history. God had brought his people across the Jordan to live in his place under his rule. It seemed like a great time of fulfillment.

Just before the book of Joshua, Moses sat God's people on the banks of the Jordan river and told them how their life with God would work when they entered the land—in particular he gave them this very clear warning:

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess." (**Deuteronomy 30:15-18**)

Joshua was the story of God's faithfulness in bringing Israel in to the land... but what do you think happened next? What did God's people choose? Life and prosperity or death and destruction? Did they end up in or out?

Quite tragically, they got taken into exile. After years—after generations—of sin and idolatry we're told in 2 Kings that the last remaining tribe of Israel, Judah, was taken into exile. Listen to how the narrator described it:

"It was because of the Lord's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence." (**2 Kings 24:20**)

The joy of Joshua turned to tragedy when the people were taken into captivity by the Babylonians in 586 BC. God's people were no longer in the land. After years of God's gracious patience, their sin led them into exile.

But... moving forward to 539 BC, Cyrus king of Persia conquered the Babylonians. And we're told in the book of Ezra chapter 1 that the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia. He moved it so much, that Cyrus decreed the Israelites should move back to Jerusalem and rebuild—starting with the temple! So Ezra headed back with a group of his people to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem.

Nehemiah is a continuation of Ezra. It partially overlaps. Nehemiah came to help rebuild the city and, in particular, the walls. There's a real sense that after the catastrophe of the exile, God's people will be living in God's place under God's rule again! It's like Joshua 2.0! Joshua the sequel: "Rescue and rebuild".

The most exciting thing is, this return to the land seems to be a sure sign of **God's faithfulness to his promise** way back in Deuteronomy 30 **to rescue and rebuild his people**. Listen to what it says:

"When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from the nations where he scattered you." (**Deuteronomy 30:1-3**)

This is it right??? Back in the land, obedient, restored! Surely this is the story of the faithful God finally rescuing and rebuilding his people! We'll have to read to see. This may end up being just a step in an even greater rebuilding plan. But whether it's the final stage, or just another step, Nehemiah is going to remind us of God's faithfulness to his promise to rescue and rebuild his people.

1 God is faithful

Nehemiah 1-2

Getting started

Can you think of a time something bad happened and your immediate response was to pray?

Explore

Read Nehemiah 1:1-4

1. Where is Nehemiah and why? The intro to these studies can help with your answer.

2. Why is Nehemiah so distressed? How does he respond in his distress?

Read Nehemiah 1:5-11

3. How does Nehemiah describe God as he praises him in the opening of his prayer?

4. After the opening of his prayer, what does Nehemiah acknowledge/confess?

5. In verse 8 Nehemiah quotes the Deuteronomy 30:1-3 passage we looked at the introduction. What aspect of God's character is he appealing to/trusting in?

6. How do you address God when you pray? What, if anything, does Nehemiah encourage us to consider as we address God in our prayers?

7. In his distress Nehemiah makes his appeal to God based on God's faithfulness to his promise to rescue and rebuild his people. What things has God promised us in his word that we could appeal to in our distress (see Romans 1:16 and 8:18 and 28, Philippians 1:6 and 4:6-7, John 11:25-26 and 14:1-6 as examples)?

8. Consider something that is distressing you at the moment. Have a go at writing out your own prayer, addressing God, confessing and appealing to him based on his promises.

Read Nehemiah 2:1-10

9. What does Nehemiah want from King Artaxerxes and how does he approach him?

10. How do we see God's faithfulness to his Deuteronomy 30:1-3 promise in this passage?

Read Nehemiah 2:11-20

11. How does Nehemiah explain his motivation (v 12), authority (v 18) and confidence (v 20) to rebuild the walls?

12. In the midst of distressing news, intimidating authorities, ruin and opposition, Nehemiah has one hope that seems to overcome them all. What is it that keeps Nehemiah going through all of this?

Read 1 John 1:8-2:2

13. In confessing his sins Nehemiah trusted in God's faithfulness to his word for restoration. Where do we see God's faithfulness to repentant sinners today?

14. There are lots of distressing things that will happen in our lives and across the world. What are some practical things we can do this week to get ourselves in the habit of appealing to our faithful God in prayer in the midst of distress?

- what can help us to pray daily?

- what can help us to be sporadically prayerful through our days?

Pray

2 God the builder

Nehemiah 3-4

Getting started

What's the hardest thing you've ever built?

Explore

In this section the people begin to rebuild. While it gets off to a good start, cracks soon appear and it becomes clear it's only through God that they'll see the rebuild through.

Read Nehemiah 3:1-32

1. There is a lot of detail in this passage! It is understandable if some of it washed over you. Try to give a short summary describing the group of people who rebuilt the wall.

2. Do you think this passage paints a positive picture or a negative picture of the people of Israel? Explain your answer.

3. The New Testament says God works through all his people to grow his kingdom (e.g. Ephesians 4:15-16). What part might God use you to play in building his church?

4. Verse 5 (and we'll see more so in chapter 5) shows a divide creeping in among the people of God. What role can you play in helping guard against any class divide in our church?

Read Nehemiah 4:1-9

5. Sanballat and Tobiah's opposition to the rebuild becomes full blown in this chapter. What are 3 specific ways their opposition is shown:

1. v2-3

2. v7

3. v8

7. What are the 3 specific ways the people of God respond to the opposition?

1. v4-5 and 9

2. v6

3. v9

8. Jesus' opponents mocked him (Mark 15:31), got angry at him (John 7:23) and plotted against him (Mark 3:6). How did Jesus respond to his opposition?

9. One of the incredible things about both Nehemiah and Jesus is that in the face of opposition, they weren't distracted, but got on with the job God was calling them to. When facing opposition how can we avoid getting distracted and get on with the job?

Read Nehemiah 4:10-21

10. What cracks are starting to appear in the commitment of the people?

11. What does Nehemiah remind the people of as they begin to waiver?

Earlier this term as we looked at 2 Peter 1:1-12 we were reminded that in Christ, God's given us everything we need to live for him.

12. How can you remember everything God's given us in Christ so that you press on with the work God's given you? Name some concrete ways you can do this through the week.

Pray

3 Worthless wall

Nehemiah 5-7

Getting Started

There's no clear evidence proving the death penalty is a deterrent to the volume or severity of crime. Why do you think people still commit crimes even though it could be so costly?

Explore

As the building project nears completion it starts to become apparent that more than a wall is required to rescue and rebuild the people of God.

Read Nehemiah 5:1-13

1. In this passage a problem is raised, the problem is confronted and then there is resolution. Use your own words to describe what happens in each part:

- the problem (v1-5)

- the confrontation (v6-11)

- the resolution (v12-13)

2. Why is the sin in this passage particularly bad for Israel (see Exodus 2:23-25, Exodus 22:25-27; Deuteronomy 23:19-20 and Ezra 9:7-9)?

Even though Israel were rescued from slavery by the Lord (twice!), they quickly forgot their dependence on his mercy and grace and showed none of it to the least among them.

3. How do we treat each other when we forget how generously gracious and merciful God has been to us?

Read Nehemiah 5:14-19

4. Describe Nehemiah's behaviour in this passage.

5. We see in verse 15 and 19 that Nehemiah is motivated to behave this way by his reverence (fear) of the Lord. Why does fearing the Lord equal showing compassion to the least among his people (see Leviticus 25:39-43)?

6. Describe your behaviour toward the needy. What motivates this behaviour?

Read Nehemiah 6:1-15

7. How does Nehemiah respond to the instances of opposition in this passage?

8. What can we learn from Nehemiah about responding to opposition?

Read Nehemiah 6:15-19

9. What is the good news this passage begins with?

10. Even though the surrounding nations outside the wall may to some extent be subdued by its completion, what do we learn here about the opposition to God's work (see also v 12-13, 14; the end of 7:7-10)?

11. Nehemiah has focused on rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. From what we've seen, how effective do you think it will be in setting God's people apart from the nations?

Read Ephesians 2:14-22

12. If not a wall, what makes people perfect citizens of God's kingdom today?

13. As God's people in the world today, we don't want to build a wall to separate us from the world around us (it clearly doesn't work anyway!). As sinners who are saved by grace being built into a building in which God lives by his Spirit, we are meant to be more of a bridge for the world to come to God than a wall keeping them out. We want all of our life to be for Jesus, and all people to be for Jesus. Write down 2 building blocks you can lay this week:

- to help your life to be all for Jesus

- to help all people live for Jesus

Pray

4 God speaks, we listen!

Nehemiah 8

Getting started

Can you remember an occasion when hearing the Bible read really moved you - either challenged you, encouraged you or made something “click?” When and why was that?

Explore

In this section of Nehemiah our attention now moves from the restoration of the Jerusalem wall to the restoration of Israel’s faith. Enter Ezra. Ezra was a compatriot of Nehemiah. He was a priest and scribe who led the second wave of Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem from Babylon. You can read more about him in the OT book of Ezra. It’s the book just before Nehemiah in the Bible.

Read Nehemiah 8:1-12

1. Describe in your own words what is happening in the scene outlined by these verses. If you’re feeling especially artistic you might even like to draw it.

2. What is significant about the date? (See Leviticus 23:23-24)

3. What things happened to ensure the Israelites *both* heard and understood God’s Word? What things can we be doing to ensure we *both* hear and understand it?

4. How do you tend to react to the Word of God? How does it compare to that of the Israelites in this passage?

5. What do you think the phrase means “...for the joy of the Lord is your strength”? (v10). To what extent is this true for you?
6. What parallels and differences are there between us reading the Bible at our church gatherings and Ezra reading the Book of the Law of God to Old Testament Israel?
7. Can you think of ways in which we can better foster a joy in hearing God’s Word?

Read Nehemiah 8:13-18

8. What date is it now? (cf verse 13). Why is this date significant? (See Leviticus 23:33-43)
9. Why do you think it’s so significant for the Israelites to remember their rescue from Egypt in such an overt way?
10. Do you think “festivals” of remembrance have a place for Christians today? Why or why not?
11. Can you think of any ways this chapter prepares us and excites us for the arrival of Jesus?

PRAY

5 From confession to conviction

Nehemiah 9-12

Getting started

When has a past mistake helped you make a better decision in the present?

Explore

Read Nehemiah 9:1-4

In the previous study we discovered how Israel were instructed to rejoice after hearing and understanding God's Word. Now is the time for a very different response.

1. What are the Israelites now instructed to do? In what ways is this appropriate?
2. Why do you think the Israelites "separated themselves from all foreigners" (v2)? This action could be seen as racist or culturally arrogant. Is it? What do you think is the reason behind it?
3. To what extent should confession of sin be part of the our lives?

Read Nehemiah 9:5-37

4. In this section, the story of Israel's history is retold. Are any of the events mentioned unfamiliar to you? Try and find their fuller description in the Old Testament and familiarise yourself with them.

5. It's quite amazing that the Old Testament actually tells an integrated, coherent story given that it's written over a period of approximately 1000 years and involves 30-40 different authors. In what way does this testify to it being the Word of God?

6. What do we discover about Israel from their history? In what ways do you see the same characteristics in your own life?

7. What do we discover about God from His dealings with Israel? In what ways has God treated you similarly?

Read Nehemiah 10:28-39

8. Israel's confession of sin moves them to a conviction to change their behaviour. List the specific areas of their lives they have been convicted to change.

9. This study has shown us that God never gives up on his people despite our repeated failing. How does knowing this help us avoid sin?

10. Are there areas of your life which God's word is convicting you to change? How might you do that? Try and be as specific and practical as you can.

11. In what ways does this section in Nehemiah help us appreciate Jesus all the more.

PRAY

6 Darkness before dawn

Nehemiah 13

GETTING STARTED

Recall a time when someone has broken their promise to you. How did it make you feel? How did you react to the person?

EXPLORE

So far the book of Nehemiah has had some wonderful high points. The completion and dedication of Jerusalem's wall despite intense opposition. The confession of sin and renewed conviction of Israel after hearing and understanding God's Word. It's been great!

All that's about to change.

Read Nehemiah 13:1-5

1. What is "that day" a reference to? (v1 cf Nehemiah 12:27). Remind yourself of what's been happening.

2. What do Israel do as a result of hearing "the Book of Moses" being read? Look back and remind yourself of who Tobiah is (Nehemiah 2:10)

3. Given what Israel had previously promised (Nehemiah 10:37:-39) why is this incident particularly troubling?

Read Nehemiah 13:6-31

4. Look back at your answer to Question 9 in the previous study and remind yourself of the list of specific promises that Israel made in their recommitment to God.

5. What does Nehemiah discover regarding these promises on his return?

Nehemiah 13:10-11

Nehemiah 13:15-16

Nehemiah 13:23-24

6. How does Nehemiah react to Israel's failing? How does this compare to how you might have reacted?

THE WRAP UP

7. What has been your overall impression of Nehemiah the man?

8. What has been your overall impression of Israel?

9. What has been your overall impression of God?

10. Now that we've read the whole book, what would you say is its overall lesson?

11. How has the book of Nehemiah helped you appreciate our need for Jesus?

12. Have there been any particular lessons from the book of Nehemiah that have especially resonated with you? Why?

13. Has the book inspired you to change anything in your life? What things? How are you intending to do it? Try and be as practical and specific as you can.

PRAY