

## NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 6 – 21<sup>st</sup> OCTOBER 2012

We have reached Nehemiah Chapter 6 in our series and as an introduction I want to begin in the New Testament. When Paul was writing to the Church in Thessalonica he knew how much they were under pressure and struggling so he said he would send Timothy to encourage and help them – why?

Let me quote from the letter:

“You are not to be unsettled by these trials – you know quite well that you were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know”  
(1 Thessalonians 3 verse 3)

Did you hear what Paul said: “You are destined for trials”.

This is a consistent theme in the New Testament and certainly the early Christians did not need convincing about that statement. The first book after the gospels – the book of Acts – focuses on how the church was born and its initial growth. Simply put it is a book about two movements – the movement of the Holy Spirit in establishing the Church – and alongside that the movement of the power of darkness opposing this work. We can expect the same today.

Anyone involved in the building of God’s kingdom and the honouring and glorifying of God’s name here on earth will – at points - find themselves under pressure to give up. It is important to be honest about this.

For if we taught and believed that the Christian life should be one triumph followed by an even greater one – that the normal Christian experience is constantly feeling high on a success orientated spirituality – it would not be long before our faith hits a crisis.

When the inevitable trials and testing comes, you will either become disillusioned believing God has let you down – or you will become despairing feeling that you are a failure.

Neither is true.

Difficulties, setbacks, trials and temptations are not a punishment or a sign that God has abandoned you. They actually may well be an affirmation that you are engaging in what God wants you to do.

If we are living by God’s commands and values – if we are committed to His will and putting His will and glory above our own – we will inevitably be in conflict with a world which is hostile to God.

Now – what a depressing way to start a talk you may well be thinking!

But it is not of course the whole picture. Before going to the Cross Jesus declared to his disciples “In this world you will have trouble”.

That is the reality – there is no avoiding this truth.

But what did he say then?

“But take heart - for I have overcome the world”

“Take heart” – for He assures us that in our struggle we will know God’s presence and protection – and remember, ultimately, we are on the winning side.

This brings us to the book of Nehemiah.

This is our 6<sup>th</sup> talk in this series – so a quick summary.

Nehemiah was called by God for a specific task – to leave Persia and travel to Jerusalem in order to oversee the rebuilding of the walls of the city.

He motivated the people to start building – but as soon as they began to build – the opposition commenced. Their enemies made it their goal to stop Jerusalem from becoming a fortified city once more.

Initially the opposition came from outside – in the form of ridicule and scoffing. When this failed to have the desired effect, there followed physical threats of violence. This failed to stop the work - but there then followed the more potentially damaging opposition from within in the form of financial exploitation of the poor in the community. We looked at how that was dealt with last week in Chapter 5. Through Nehemiah’s leadership - and example - the problem was dealt with and the building continued.

By the time you get to the beginning of Chapter 6 the wall was all but completed – only the doors in the gates needed to be put in place. You might think that the opposition would realise it had lost the day and go away.

But that was far from the case.

Which underlines that opposition to God's work is not only inevitable – it is sustained. The enemies were active when the wall began – were active when the wall was half completed and were active even now as it was nearing completion.

The opposition was sustained and it was also varied in its nature – and now in chapter 6 it takes on a more subtle turn.

It was focused solely upon Nehemiah himself.

The main tactic was to intimidate him and generate fear – because fear will always undermine faith and inwardly paralyze the person – or group of people – from moving forward.

Who said this?

“Mental confusion – contradiction of feeling – indecisiveness – panic – these are our weapons”

It was Adolf Hitler – who used fear against his enemies very effectively to carry out his evil purposes.

Something of that is going on against Nehemiah – and thus the whole project of rebuilding the wall - in this chapter.

There are three different attacks on Nehemiah – the first being chapter 6 verses 1 -4.

(READ IT)

This is a strange attack because it comes in a courteous - even honeyed - invitation from Sanballat and Gesham to Nehemiah to go and have a consultation with them on neutral ground. The plain of Ono is half way between Jerusalem and Samaria – about a day's journey. The invitation seemed to be about working out a way of living in harmony and peace together – it must have sounded attractive after all the trouble they had given Nehemiah and the Jews.

But Nehemiah's head was not turned – for he believed there was another motive and reason behind the request:

“But they were scheming to harm me” he records for us.

We are not told how he knew that – except that after all the opposition they had constantly put up since he arrived in Jerusalem he had every reason to mistrust their motives.

The plain of Ono was hostile territory for a vulnerable Jew – it would have been easy to have got a band of mercenaries to take Nehemiah out - and cover it all up.

Four times Nehemiah refused this invitation – and this particular plot came to nothing.

How did he explain his refusal to talk with them?

He did not publically accuse them of planning to harm him – instead he simply declared:

“I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down – why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you”

What a firm and wise answer - and one for us to take to heart and reflect on.

Nehemiah was saying:

“I know my place and priorities at this time – I am not going to get distracted”.

He knew from the start that God – through the Persian King Artaxerxes – had sent him to Jerusalem for one purpose – that was to rebuild the walls.

That was his priority and preoccupation – his central focus – right from the outset and now as the task neared its completion he shows a determined refusal to be distracted and diverted from this task.

Can that be an example and challenge to us now?

We have to apply this - for we are not rebuilding a wall together – we are not Old Testament Christians concerned about the welfare of Jerusalem.

So - what as New Testament believers, as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, should be our particular focus that shapes our priorities in terms of time and effort?

Briefly let's go back to a previous talk where we looked at Chapter 3 and how everyone was organised to rebuild the walls.

In fact I am going to do something I can't recall I have ever done in a talk before – and that is to quote myself!

Hopefully it not a sign of becoming deluded – but it is to remind us what I understand as the New Testament equivalent to the rebuilding of the walls in Nehemiah’s time – for this shapes how we interpret what we are looking at now.

Here is the quote – and if you were here and clearly remember this then I am very encouraged – and also say it is not bad to be reminded:

(start of quote)

“When Jesus taught His disciples to pray - how did that prayer begin?

“Our Father in heaven – may your name be honoured – may your kingdom come – may your will be done – here on earth – including right where we are – as it is in heaven”

We shouldn’t ask God to join and bless our particular cause – rather we are to join with His cause.

It is not – “The primary outcome of my relationship with God is that He blesses me and life will get better” – but it should be:

“The primary outcome of this relationship is that I am dedicated to the cause of God’s kingdom here on earth and the glorifying of Jesus Christ”.

This then should determine the nature of our vision and work – and this is what as believers and followers of Christ should be our main focus and passion that determines the priorities in our individual lives and in our working together”  
(end of quote)

Last week Simon talked about how Nehemiah revered God and that meant “honouring God’s name, obeying God’s word and loving God’s people.”

Isn’t that a simple but very effective way to evaluate our priorities in working together?

If we believe this then we must guard against becoming distracted and diverted from this focus. We need to recognise that it is easy for our priority calling somehow to become lost and neglected. We need to remember that – like Nehemiah declared to Sanballet and Gesham – that we are “carrying out a great project” which we do not want to depart from.

Next attack on Nehemiah after this first one failed to take him away:

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 6 verses 6 – 9.

The attack comes in the form of an open letter – let me paraphrase:

“ Rumour has it that you are actually planning an armed revolt against the Persian king and would like the throne for yourself – it won’t be long before the King hears about this – now would you like to talk”

Basically, it was a slanderous accusation – and note it was an unsealed letter which is open for all to read. The modern equivalent – it is out there on facebook or twitter which reaches people one millisecond after it is posted. This was a calculated smear campaign – in political jargon it is “opposition research” – find, or manufacture, something that will smear someone’s character and bring it out in the open in order to bring them down.

What was Sanballet – with his cohorts – using now –aside from lies - to stop the work and particularly Nehemiah? It was fear was it not – fear of what the King of Persia would do if this rumour did reach him – as was clearly threatened – and he did believe that Nehemiah was leading a revolt against him. Nehemiah would have known that Persian kings tolerated no resistance from their subjects – any perceived rebellion would be ruthlessly put down. How easy it would have been for Nehemiah to be gripped by fear and panic – to leave the wall and spend his time and energy in countering these malicious and totally false claims.

Or to just give up – for fear can crush our spirit and be so debilitating and disabling.

There was real pressure on Nehemiah at this point – and right at the end of the rebuilding comes probably the most severe trial and testing.

Now we know Nehemiah – like us all – did experience fear.

He actually tells us back in Chapter 2 when King Artaxerxes first start to question him and Nehemiah declares: “ I was very much afraid”

I reckon he said that phrase to himself all the way through the rebuilding of the wall right up to this point in chapter 6.

Nehemiah constantly showed courage – a quality that has been well defined as not as an absence of fear – but a resolute doing of what we know we should do - however afraid we may feel.

Nehemiah did two things we can reflect and learn from.  
First, he denied the rumour in very sharp matter of fact terms – verse 8.  
Secondly, he prayed – “Now strengthen my hands” – verse 9.

He showed great wisdom and faith – by leaving what he could not do in God’s hands and not running away from what he knew he had to do.

He prays for strength – for fear can be so exhausting.  
What else do we need to pray for in times of trial when we find ourselves under pressure and the future is uncertain and fear of that future is taking an increasingly strong grip in our hearts and minds?

Surely it is grace – great grace is needed.

The encouragement for us from Scripture – and from many other testimonies – is that when servants of God find themselves in the place of pressure where our own resources seem inadequate then great grace is regularly given.

We are to ask for grace in our confessed weakness – and the faith to commit our cause to God and to embrace the assurance that he will vindicate and honour those who do trust in Him.

Do what you can – and give to God what you can’t do or control.

Ask for grace - remembering that God has promised to give that grace when we ask humbly for it.

In fact, in the New Testament one of the most honest and enlightening passages is when the apostle Paul shared about - what for him - seemed an unbearable trial when he describes himself as feeling tormented but which in the end he declared that he learned - through that trial - that God’s grace is sufficient and that His power is made perfect in our weakness. This was something Nehemiah was also experiencing as the attacks upon him reached their climax.

There was a third and final attack – NEHEMIAH 6 verses 10 -14.

We are introduced to someone called Shemiah – who we discover had been hired by Sanballet and Tobiah as a false prophet in order to trap Nehemiah.

What was that trap?

Shemiah shut himself up in his house and gave the impression that, like Nehemiah, his life was in danger. When Nehemiah came to see him Shemiah suggested that they both take refuge in the temple because – in his words: “Some people are coming to kill you – by night they are coming to kill you”.

Not for the first time, the threat of attack was being used to lure Nehemiah away from the wall. But this was also a trap – and Nehemiah saw right through it - verse 13:

“He (Shemiah) had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, then they would give me a bad name to discredit me”

So, what was the sin?

Easy to miss this unless you really know Deuteronomy in the Old Testament!

Remember that Nehemiah was a layman – unlike his contemporary Ezra he was not a priest or prophet. Nehemiah though would have known the law of Moses and he would have known that it was forbidden for a layman to go beyond the altar of burnt offering in the temple as Shemiah was suggesting in order that he would be protected from those supposedly out to kill him. This is how Nehemiah knew Shemiah was a false prophet – because the message he delivered was contradictory to the word of God.

No true prophet will contradict the word of God.

“What does Scripture say” must be the test of any message claimed to be from God – including, of course, what you hear from the front here. Don’t take what I - or anyone else - say without first weighing it with Scripture.

Nehemiah saw through Shemiah’s deception and realised he was a hired prophet – a sham – whose intention was to lure Nehemiah away from what God had called him to - and actually lead him into sin.

In this third attack what could the application be for us now?

I want to suggest that it is to resist the temptation to compromise on what God has called us to be and what God has called us to do.

Compromise – do we not feel that pressure now as subtly as Nehemiah did then.

Ours is a different context and setting – but it is still real and varied.

It may be to compromise on the essential truth of the Christian faith – it may be to compromise in our lives morally – to compromise sexually, financially – or to misuse power or privilege we may have.

What is our protection – how do we avoid this type of compromise?

It must involve – like Nehemiah showed here – a desire to live by the truth – for our lives to be shaped by the word and not the world – and for us to admit our vulnerability in this area and ask for the grace of God and the Holy Spirit to empower us to be consistent and to live by what we confess.

Let us finish on an encouraging note by highlighting that despite the tremendous trials Nehemiah faced in this chapter his stand was vindicated and honoured by God. That is clear from verse 16:

“When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self confidence, because they realised that this work had been done with the help of our God”

One of the great all time sitcom classics is “Dads Army” – I am presuming you have at least heard of it. In case you don’t know it is a brilliant, affectionate take on the home guard – Britain’s amateur defence force during the Second World War. The great charters all had tag lines – Frasier – “We’re all doomed” – Mainwaring – “Stupid boy” – could go on - but the one that stood for me was Corporal Jones - which was?

“Don’t panic – don’t panic”.

Good tag line to end this talk – because it is the equivalent of the most repeated instruction in Scripture which is “Do not be afraid” or – “Fear not”.

When we do fear remember Nehemiah’s prayer in verse 9 – “Now strengthen my hands” – remember how it was answered – remember this is to be our hearts attitude in the face of spiritual opposition.

I see Nehemiah as part of that great crowd of witnesses from the past in Scripture- and beyond- who say to us that God’s purpose is not to bypass and remove difficulties in our lives, but to transform them – so we too can learn that, indeed, His grace is sufficient.

But we are to ultimately look beyond Nehemiah and focus on the greatest of God’s servants – the Lord Jesus Christ. We are instructed in the New Testament in the letter to the Hebrews to consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners – who then endured the cross, scorning it’s shame – and is now glorified at the right hand of God.

Nehemiah is a great encouragement to us – but Jesus is our ultimate example – and it is upon Him that we are to fix our eyes in order that we do not grow weary and lose heart in the race set before us.

When we do that, individually and corporately, the church will be built up and, most importantly, the God - by whose help all the work is done - will be glorified.

## QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS:

In Chapter 6 there are three specific attacks on Nehemiah that are all part of the opposition the rebuilding of the walls faced in Chapters 4 – 6.

### The first was in Nehemiah 6 verses 1 – 4.

The plan was to distract and divert Nehemiah away from his God given calling which was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

If our work now is “to build the kingdom here on earth”, how might we get diverted and distracted from this task?

Have you seen that happen to churches or Christian Organisations?

How do you think that might happen at The Good Shepherd Mission – and how can we guard against it?

### The second attack was in Nehemiah chapter 6 verses 6 – 9.

Here it is in the form of slander – and done to generate fear in the heart and mind of Nehemiah. Fear that the Persian king would believe the lie that Nehemiah is planning to lead a revolt against him.

Why is fear such a common – but effective – attack on any Christian believer?

What affect does it have?

“Do not fear” (or “Fear not”) is the most common instruction in the Scriptures.

Why do you think this is so?

How might fear be countered and faith built up in our lives?

Nehemiah prayed for strength (verse 9) in the face of this attack. What else should we be praying for?

Quote from the John White book on Nehemiah:

“Courage is not lack of fear but moving ahead in spite of the fear”

Would you agree with this definition?

Would anyone share a time when this was a reality for them?

### Third attack – Nehemiah 6 verses 10 – 14.

The attack here is very subtle – to lead Nehemiah into sin by tempting him to take refuge in the temple which he would have known was forbidden in the law of Moses (may need explaining for those not in the sermon)

Nehemiah was under great pressure to compromise his faith here – and given his life was threatened and a so called prophet was encouraging him it was easy to justify.

Are there areas in our lives where the pressure to compromise is strong?

(Would people share their own “pressure points”?)

In what situations may compromise be a good thing?

(I am thinking of “loving compromise” and when the compromise is in the context of having the same goals, values and purpose)

When in our Christian work and walk is compromise not a good thing but to be avoided?

