

## Magnificent Ruins Confronting ourselves!

Nehemiah 5

Ian has entitled this talk confronting ourselves!

Chris, a couple of weeks ago, touched on the need for self-examination as he shared about his visit to the dentist and how the dentist probed and took his time to make sure all was OK.

In Chapter 5, Nehemiah moves on from the wall to addressing community issues of poverty, slavery and injustice, whilst uniting a community previously divided - not bad for a day's work.

As we look to the future, what community do we want to build both here and across our nation?

In confronting ourselves we can often personalize the gospel message; God often challenges us to examine our own hearts, motives and actions. Nehemiah had to take personal risks, in asking the king for help, asking the people to follow him, and facing opposition from those around covered in chapter 4.

To the point they spent half the time building, and half the time armed ready for a fight. Are we ready to fight for justice and our society through action and prayer?

The rebuilding project held individual challenges, but rebuilding the walls was a community effort, it took collective teamwork, it took them all to play their part. As COVID-19 has taken hold of our nation and some of us look to a second birthday in lockdown, we have come together to help one another and perhaps we should give ourselves a clap, in all the challenges we have faced, or should I say, give God a round of applause?

It is great to hear testimonies of how God has worked in our lives in quite different circumstance, and the simple message that came through them all was, God loves us and meets us where we are.

God met the people in Nehemiah's day where they were, using what they had to rebuild and even using a perfume maker as a builder!

God calls us to do what we can, with what God has blessed us with and not to feel guilty about what we can't do.

The rebuilding of the wall was a witness to the nations, Nehemiah took his place by taking responsibility for the actions of his nation. I wonder how our nation is perceived in the eyes of the world?

Chapter 5 takes a break from focusing on the wall and focuses on the community living with those walls. When we built this church, we wanted to not build a church building but a community, God graciously provided the funds not only for this building project but for building projects in many other places and the resources to build a community that is bursting with life!

Nehemiah – Helps the poor v 1- 6.

1. Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. 2 Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.”

3 Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”

4 Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. 5 Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

6 When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. 7 I pondered them in my mind...

I wonder when you were last full of righteous anger, or as in Nehemiah case very angry, spitting feathers?

Was it because you were wronged, felt slighted, or was it over an injustice, exploitation, global warming or knife crime?

We are living in difficult financial times, but the government is going to reduce our nations overseas aid contribution, from 0.7% of our GDP to 0.5%. a reduction of £2.9 billion.

Some within our congregation such as Graham Piper and Alan Michell have received funding from our government to support the poor communities in Uganda and Rwanda so they can have a better life. At this time should we neglect the poorest of this world’s population who are also facing the brunt of Global warming?

To put it into perspective, we spend more in the UK looking after our cats and dogs, than what we give away to help the poorest nations of the world. Our pets are vital to our well-being, but so is the help we could offer the poor of the world.

As Christians should we be very angry at this change and challenge the government?

Why was Nehemiah very angry?

Even in this second-choice world, living in the destroyed city of Jerusalem, there were the haves and the have nots, some nobles were still doing well, even in those difficult times, and the people cry to Nehemiah for help.

In verse 7 it says Nehemiah pondered these things: Nehemiah, first ponders things in his mind, he does not rush in in his anger but ponders his actions and weighs out all the evidence.

Perhaps Nehemiah had just read or hidden these words in his heart.

Job 29 v 12 – 17

12 because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist them. 13 The one who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing. 14 I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. 15 I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. 16 I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. 17 I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth.

Nehemiah acts.. V7 – 8 ...I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!"

So, I called together a large meeting to deal with them 8 and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!"

The nobles kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

I wonder how often we cry out for help or even ask for help? We live in a society where we find it hard to accept help, we would rather struggle on than accept help.

I wonder how many people miss out on God love and Gods free gift of grace, because we don't want to admit we need a friend and some help?

People that we know did not have a sofa for Christmas owing to delivery problems, we offered them some of ours. But they said no we would rather sit on the floor.

I wonder how often we stay silent and sit on the floor when we really need help?

If we are to be God's community and witness to this town, we need to both ask for help and freely give it.

I guess in our life group meetings we ask; Does anyone have a prayer requests and there can be a deathly hush... perhaps we don't feel it's the right place to share or we don't want to burden people with our woes.

But the people in this passage are real and cried out for help.

As we think through our next vision, maybe there is a challenge to be real with one another, to build a community that will show Gods love and acceptance to a hurting community. As we come out of lock down should we revisit our values as a gospel community?

**Grace:** We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do

**One Another:** We will be real as we care for one another and work together

**Servant Hearts:** We will serve those in the local community and beyond with integrity and love

**People:** We will share the Good News of Jesus with anyone who does not know him

**Equipped:** We will identify, develop and use our God given gifts

**Lifestyle:** We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions

The poor and enslaved people cry out and Nehemiah acts.

As a church we support Christians Against Poverty (CAP) helping those in financial difficulty, those needing life skills training, I have worked for charities that have had the privilege of helping people in need. Evidence shows that you only need one event to tip someone into poverty, events such as being sick for a couple of months, losing a job or a divorce. People, generally with limited resources, are very good at managing money and work extremely hard, but it only takes a small event to tip the scales. At this challenging time many more people will need our help emotionally and the support of the Easter Team in providing food for those most in need.

Here we read it's because of the famine, that they are suffering, and have sold family members into slavery. In God's original plan all his people would have had enough, but there is exploitation going on.

The rich would have welcomed Nehemiah's return to build up the protection around the wealth they had accumulated. But Nehemiah says it should not be at the exploitation of your fellow brothers and sisters through slavery and usury.

Usury and Slavery are both thriving across the world today - should this be the case?

Zacchaeus the Tax collector, in meeting Jesus, had a change of heart, gave half his possessions to the poor and said; 'If I have cheated anybody I will pay them back 4 times what I have taken.'

The Nobles fall silent....

So, I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? 10 I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! 11 Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil."

12 "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. 13 I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

14 Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. 15 But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels[a] of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. 16 Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we[b] did not acquire any land.

17 Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. 18 Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

19 Remember me with favour, my God, for all I have done for these people.

The people also have a change of heart, return the land stop the usury.

Nehemiah makes them take an oath to do what they had promised.

Globally nations have signed up to the Millennium Goals, Climate change agreements and many more agreements. But I wonder do they do it in the fear of God? Or because it looks good and meets their countries long-term economic benefit?

They could have built the walls well and looked good to those on the outside but on the inside, if their hearts weren't right as a nation and as a community, would they really bring honour God?

We are adept at looking good on the outside pretending all is fine, but we need God's Holy Spirit to help us each and every day, to become more like Jesus, to have servant hearts, to love and forgive, to have a soft heart.

It must have been hard for the nobles to let go. If God had not moved in their hearts to let go of all they had built up and to trust in Nehemiah's leadership, would they have done so? Nehemiah did ruffle a few feathers in bringing about justice, as Jesus did. Jesus did not hold back in calling the Jewish officials at the time - a brood of vipers and a whitewashed wall - you honour me on the out-side but in your heart and on the inside, well that's a different matter...

However, both Nehemiah and Jesus came as peace makers and were willing to serve the people. Nehemiah worked as hard on the wall as anyone, he did not just want to bring peace by building a wall to keep them safe – no, he was a peacemaker who wanted to heal the rift between the poor and disadvantaged of the day and to build one community, following Gods ways, to reconcile past, ongoing hurt, injustice and tension within the community.

As leader he did not demand his 40 shekels of silver, the finest food or lord his authority over the people – no, he came to be one of them, lived and work with them.

Nehemiah still had everything he needed, the people out of gratitude still gave freely to provide for his needs. Nehemiah's heart was to bring unity, justice and peace for Gods people, so that God would be honoured and glorified.

As we share around the communion table later, we will reflect on all that Jesus did in bringing us into a place of freedom. Chris has made parallels between Nehemiah and Jesus over the last few weeks.

Jesus came to set captives free; to bind up the broken heart; he came to bring peace; and draw us back to his father; and to bring glory to God.

Jesus went a step further than Nehemiah, he died on the cross so that we might have eternal freedom from poverty, slavery and injustice, to have a life to the full.

Nehemiah was God's person for that day, Jesus came in his day, but who is God's person for today? We have heard a glimpse of them over the last few weeks through testimonies..

Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

As we rebuild from the ruins of COVID-19 into a new community, I pray that the Holy Spirit would release his gifts within us, to be a gospel people and bring good news to a hurting world.

Amen

Preached and Live Streamed from Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2021, by Ian Larkham.