

NEHEMIAH'S PLAN AND GOD'S PROVISION

Sermon: Northern Community 30th April 2017

Right through the Bible, there is story after story of people – people like us, even though they lived in a very different culture and period of time. Every individual story features something about how the person related to God. Every story becomes part of God's story. You have your own unique story – and it is part of the bigger story of God. Last week, we were reminded to hold fast to the stories that remind us of who we are. How do we get to know someone? By hearing stories they tell about their life.

Personal story

Another remarkable aspect of stories, is how God's story speaks into our lives. Isn't it amazing that a story that happened thousands of years ago, recorded in the Bible, can speak into our own experience right here, right now?

Personal story shared based on a passage of Scripture from Isaiah 43: 19

'For I am about to do something new.
See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?
I will make a pathway through the wilderness.
I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.'

And the opening verses of Isaiah 43:

'Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.
I have called you by name; you are mine.
² When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.
When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown.
When you walk through the fire of oppression,
you will not be burned up;
the flames will not consume you.
³ For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.' (Isaiah 43: 1-3)

I thought I would share that as a way of illustrating how our stories form part of God's bigger story – and how God's story speaks into our lives time after time. In the same way, Nehemiah's story is part of God's bigger story about his people. Today we focus on the story recorded in Chapter 2, where we hear about Nehemiah's plan and God's provision for that plan.

What was Nehemiah's plan?

He was a cupbearer to the king and queen – one of the highest positions in the Persian court. It was his job to serve wine to the king, which he had to taste first to make sure that it was not poisoned by an enemy. He was trusted.

4 months earlier, he had received a report from his brother about the deplorable state of Jerusalem. The wall of the city was broken down, and the gates destroyed by fire. The people were in distress, trying to start life again after returning from exile. Walls around ancient cities were extremely important – they provided protection against invaders.

During that 4 months, Nehemiah fasted and prayed, and felt the burden of his people, which led to his decision to ask the king for permission to visit Jerusalem to rebuild the city. His request was granted. Letters of introduction to governors of the province which Nehemiah would travel through on his way to Jerusalem were given to him, to ensure safe passage through the area. He also had permission to use timber from the king's forest in Lebanon for construction work in Jerusalem.

Once he was in Jerusalem, under cover of night, Nehemiah secretly set out with a few servants to inspect the battered walls of Jerusalem in order to formulate his plans for reconstruction. When Nehemiah gave his assessment of the city's condition to the Jewish leaders and officials, he told them of his plans to rebuild the wall. He rallied the people to the challenge and they agreed. 'Yes, let's rebuild the wall.' The work began.

Nehemiah and his work crew were harassed by three enemies: Sanballat a Samaritan, Tobiah an Ammonite official, and Geshem from Arabia. They were angry that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. There was a political reason behind this anger. They saw Nehemiah as a rival because of his influence. They accused Nehemiah of leading a rebellion. They are the details of the story.

What are Nehemiah's characteristics that can inspire us, and that are necessary for a thriving church and neighbourhood?

We know that Jerusalem was not thriving. It was in ruins. People were disheartened. They had lost hope. Not only was a rebuilding of the physical wall needed – the people themselves needed a rebuilding of hope and renewal. We will see that the rebuilding of the spirit of the people happened through being engaged in a project together, under Nehemiah's leadership.

1. Nehemiah was a person of prayer

v4 - When the king asked Nehemiah how he could help, Nehemiah prayed, and had the courage to ask the king to send him to Jerusalem. Four months had elapsed since Nehemiah received the original report about the state of Jerusalem and his approach to the king. He waited – and prayed for the right time. In the four months between *chapter 1* and *chapter 2*, what had started as a deep concern in the heart of Nehemiah, had worked its way into his mind as a plan, and was about to spring forth into action. Four months of prayer and fasting, and then a sentence prayer as the king questioned him. "Lord help me!" is often all that needs to be said. You will find examples of sentence prayers in *The Circle* that you can use this week.

'The heart and soul of the Christian life is learning to hear God's voice and then developing the courage to do what He asks us to do.' (Bill Hybels)

2. He planned strategically

v7 – He anticipated he would need protection on his trip back to Jerusalem, so he asked for letters from the king to show the governors of the province which he would pass through.
V8 – He knew the resources he would need – and arranged for permission to get wood for the rebuilding.

V12 – He waited for the right timing to reveal his plans – ‘I had not told anyone about the plans’. V16 – ‘The city officials did not know what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders.’

V12 – Nehemiah knew where his plans originated - ‘the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem.’ It was God’s plan – but God needed a person to strategise, to gather resources, and to implement it.

3. He knew his purpose

v17 – After his survey of the situation, he revealed his plans to the city officials and the Jewish leaders, outlining the reality of the condition of the city. No exaggeration. He states what the reality is.

4. He had a vision and passion

v17 – ‘Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!’ There are no flowery words, but a strong call to gather together and achieve something great.

5. He was courageous

He asked the king for requests, and then later confronted his opponents: v20 – ‘You have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem.’

6. He identified with his people

v17 - When it came time for Nehemiah to reveal his plan, he said, ‘You know very well what trouble WE are in. Let US rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace.’ V20 – ‘The God of heaven will help US succeed. WE, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall.’ He identified himself with his people in their problems and he was with them, assuring them they would do the work together.

7. He trusted God’s provision

Twice, he said that ‘**the gracious hand of God was on me.**’ (vv8, 18) When faced with opposition, Nehemiah said, ‘The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall.’ His focus was on the task, trusting what God would do, but he knew what he and his people had to do.

What is our response as we do our part in rebuilding a thriving church and neighbourhood?

Nehemiah’s characteristics are applicable to a church - but also to careers and work places, and to projects that you might engage in as a family, or personal goals that you might have. The Holy Spirit will apply God’s word corporately and personally. We need to hear with our heart and mind, and apply it.

Nehemiah shows the biblical balance of action and reflection - waiting on God in prayer, but also thinking and planning about what he would do when God opened the door.

Strategic planning

Having a purpose
Being energised by vision and passion
Having courage
Identifying with others and valuing team work
Trusting that God will provide what is needed in spiritual and material resources.

As our church prepares to welcome a new ministry team leader, all of these characteristics are needed. The Leadership Group and the selection panel– recognised in the new leader, some or all of these qualities. We can trust that ‘the gracious hand of God’ is upon him and his wife – and on us.

Through all of Northern’s history – and the history of the four churches that formed Northern Community - ‘the gracious hand of God’ has been upon the church. Even in difficult times, God doesn’t lift his hand. He is there to redeem situations, to bring good out of everything that happens, even if it seems bad at the time. One of the main aspects of Northern’s life is community: “Vibrant and living churches look after the interests of others. They are concerned for their communities. They open the door for others.” (Thom S. Rainer)

To finish on a personal note, recognise how ‘the gracious hand of God’ is on your life – not in a heavy-handed way, but guiding, reassuring, encouraging. And there are those times, the challenging times that we all face, when the hands of God are the everlasting arms that are underneath us, sustaining and supporting.

The sermon finished with prayer, asking people to imagine God placing his hand on their head as a sign of affirmation, encouragement and blessing.