



Time to Reflect

- Why do we look back to the past and seek out what was familiar? Are there any other approaches to counteract feelings of uncertainty?
- What has impacted you the most about the faithfulness of Nehemiah?

Last week we reflected on the repopulation of Jerusalem after the rebuilding process had been complete. We were reminded of the importance of being faithful to God and being willing to follow His call. This week we will consider the rural community of the Israelites. Some of the villages were a considerable distance from Jerusalem, yet they were still under the authority of Nehemiah and the king of Persia. The people who lived there demonstrated a deep level of local loyalty.

“Nehemiah doesn’t neglect those who live outside the city, although he doesn’t list them by name...Instead he lists the different regions with each of their villages (v25-36). They’ve taken possession of the whole of Judah – all the land that was once ruled over by the kings of Judah, from Beersheba in the south to the valley of Hinnom in the north (v30). At last, the people are where they should be.”

(Eric Mason, *Nehemiah For You*, p145.)

Specifics

- Last week our attention was drawn to the repopulation of Jerusalem. A series of names were recorded and specific groups were mentioned.
- In contrast, this week’s passage does not offer the same level of detail. At surface level it simply tells us that there were Israelites who lived in rural areas.
- It is worth noting that, having returned from exile in Babylon, many of the Israelites wanted to return to their native towns and villages. Some of these settlements are mentioned in (v25-36).
- We can understand and appreciate their desire to return to familiar places. This is a return to the known and the comfortable. After a period of disorientation and relocation this was the embracing of what was familiar.
- We all know what this is like. There are times when we are unsettled and unsure. When we feel like this we are often drawn to safe ground, a return to what is known.
- There are obvious positives in such a move. Yet this journey begins with us looking backwards and assessing what we perceive to be the good old days in our happy place.
- Nicky Gumbel offers a challenging insight. He observes, **“If the grass looks greener on the other side, it is probably AstroTurf.¹”** This reminds us that nostalgia is fine so long as we don’t lose our perspective and realism.
- The desire of many of the Israelites to return to known pastures caused problems for Nehemiah. For example, last week we reflected on how he found it difficult to get people to repopulate Jerusalem.

¹ Quote can be found in the *Bible In One Year*, Day 76.

- There were challenges within Jerusalem that discouraged people from moving into the city and last week we looked specifically at the issue of housing (Nehemiah 7:4).
- It is, however, important to recognise the loyalty that the people had to the places that were familiar to them.
- Warren Wiersbe reflects, **“This loyalty to their native cities was what helped make it difficult for Nehemiah to get people to reside in Jerusalem. While it is good to cultivate local loyalties, we must remember that there are larger obligations that must also be considered. The work of the Lord is bigger than any one person’s ministry or the ministry of any one assembly.”²**
- This challenges us to seek to see the bigger picture of what God is doing and then strive to align ourselves to His will. As we endeavour to do this, it is necessary for us to spend time with God in prayer and Bible study.
- What is God saying to us? Where is He leading us and what is His will? Are we aligned with God’s plans? These are massive questions, personally and as churches, and we need to regularly reflect on them.
- Nehemiah sought to remain faithful to God’s will. In the good times and in the challenging moments, Nehemiah followed God wholeheartedly. This required him to be determined, resolute, focused, assured and confident.
- As God’s people we are challenged to follow the example of Nehemiah and serve God with wholehearted faithfulness.
- Many of the villages that were named by Nehemiah in this week’s passage were some distance from Jerusalem. For example, Kiriath Arba (v25) was located twenty miles south of the city and Beersheba (v27) was even further away.
- The villages mentioned in (v34-35), including Ono (where Nehemiah had previously been invited to meet Sanballat, see Nehemiah 6:1-2), were about thirty miles north-west of Jerusalem.
- Our passage reveals that the Israelites lived in a variety of locations. Stan Evers reflects, **“As citizens of Persia the people were allowed to set up home wherever they wanted, which meant that the Jews could move to the towns or cities where their families formerly lived.”³**
- Evers also focuses on (v30) and the phrase **“So they were living...”** He contends that this may suggest that the Israelites were tolerated rather than welcomed by the neighbouring peoples. If this were the case, then it reveals more about the complexities that existed within the region at the time.
- We have encountered these difficulties before in the book of Nehemiah, particularly in relation to the rebuilding of the walls.
- (v36) is also interesting in that it tells us that some of the divisions of the Levites settled in Benjamin. This was important as it ensured that God’s Word would be taught in all the Jewish territories and not just in Jerusalem.
- As we reflect on this, we are reminded that **“The Word of God, then as now, is needed in the urban cities as well as in the rural towns and villages.”⁴**
- We need to be intentional about communicating the Christian faith in the places where we have been called and placed by God. He invites us to partner with Him in Kingdom work and we all have a part to play.
- Like Nehemiah, we are challenged to be determined and wholehearted as we serve God.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined: Nehemiah* (David. C. Cook, 1992), p147.

³ Stan Evers, *Doing A Great Work: Ezra And Nehemiah Simply Explained* (EP Books, 2015), p211.

⁴ Ibid, p212.