

Sermon Script: Nehemiah 6-7, 'Success'

I've been thinking about disaster and celebration lately...

... and how sometimes there can be a fine line between the two

- I guess that's obvious isn't it?
 - Just ask any supporters of the Blues! Or the Black Caps!

But here inside this house...

... if we think about the disaster side of things

... something kind of annoying that they'll just need to have, are smoke detectors

- Mostly they sit there on the wall doing nothing or beeping because they ran out of battery
 - But just occasionally they might save you from disaster
 - ◆ So I wonder if they have smoke detectors inside?
- What do you think?
 - Personally I hate smoke detectors, for the hassle they are to install and maintain
 - But then I think about my family if there was fire in the middle of the night

And on the celebration side of things...

... I wonder if these folk know how to celebrate success together?

- Do they make a fuss of each other when someone achieves something,
... or just carry on as if nothing happened?
- And you, in your house
... would you say you're good at celebrating together when someone achieves something?

Today in the story of Nehemiah...

... there is also a fine line between disaster and celebration

... but the sermon title at least, says 'Success'

- Let's take a look

Nehemiah 6-7 New Living Translation (NLT)

6 Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies found out that I had finished rebuilding the wall and that no gaps remained—though we had not yet set up the doors in the gates. 2 So Sanballat and Geshem sent a message asking me to meet them at one of the villages in the plain of Ono.

But I realized they were plotting to harm me, 3 so I replied by sending this message to them: "I am engaged in a great work, so I can't come. Why should I stop working to come and meet with you?"

4 Four times they sent the same message, and each time I gave the same reply. 5 The fifth time, Sanballat's servant came with an open letter in his hand, 6 and this is what it said:

"There is a rumor among the surrounding nations, and Geshem tells me it is true, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel and that is why you are building the wall. According to his reports, you plan to be their king. 7 He also reports that you have appointed prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim about you, 'Look! There is a king in Judah!'

“You can be very sure that this report will get back to the king, so I suggest that you come and talk it over with me.”

8 I replied, “There is no truth in any part of your story. You are making up the whole thing.”

9 They were just trying to intimidate us, imagining that they could discourage us and stop the work. So I continued the work with even greater determination.

10 Later I went to visit Shemaiah son of Delaiah and grandson of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home. He said, “Let us meet together inside the Temple of God and bolt the doors shut. Your enemies are coming to kill you tonight.”

11 But I replied, “Should someone in my position run from danger? Should someone in my position enter the Temple to save his life? No, I won’t do it!” 12 I realized that God had not spoken to him, but that he had uttered this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 They were hoping to intimidate me and make me sin. Then they would be able to accuse and discredit me.

14 Remember, O my God, all the evil things that Tobiah and Sanballat have done. And remember Noadiah the prophet and all the prophets like her who have tried to intimidate me.

The Builders Complete the Wall

15 So on October 2 the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. 16 When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God.

17 During those fifty-two days, many letters went back and forth between Tobiah and the nobles of Judah. 18 For many in Judah had sworn allegiance to him because his father-in-law was Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan was married to the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. 19 They kept telling me about Tobiah’s good deeds, and then they told him everything I said. And Tobiah kept sending threatening letters to intimidate me.

7 After the wall was finished and I had set up the doors in the gates, the gatekeepers, singers, and Levites were appointed. 2 I gave the responsibility of governing Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah, the commander of the fortress, for he was a faithful man who feared God more than most. 3 I said to them, “Do not leave the gates open during the hottest part of the day. And even while the gatekeepers are on duty, have them shut and bar the doors. Appoint the residents of Jerusalem to act as guards, everyone on a regular watch. Some will serve at sentry posts and some in front of their own homes.”

Nehemiah Registers the People

4 At that time the city was large and spacious, but the population was small, and none of the houses had been rebuilt. 5 So my God gave me the idea to call together all the nobles and leaders of the city, along with the ordinary citizens, for registration. I had found the genealogical record of those who had first returned to Judah. This is what was written there:

6 Here is the list of the Jewish exiles of the provinces who returned from their captivity. King

Nebuchadnezzar had deported them to Babylon, but now they returned to Jerusalem and the other towns in Judah where they originally lived. 7 Their leaders were Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah,[f] Reelaiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

This is the number of the men of Israel who returned from exile:

- 8 The family of Parosh 2,172
- 9 The family of Shephatiah 372
- 10 The family of Arah 652
- 11 The family of Pahath-moab (descendants of Jeshua and Joab) 2,818
- 12 The family of Elam 1,254
- 13 The family of Zattu 845
- 14 The family of Zaccai 760
- 15 The family of Bani[j] 648
- 16 The family of Bebai 628
- 17 The family of Azgad 2,322
- 18 The family of Adonikam 667
- 19 The family of Bigvai 2,067
- 20 The family of Adin 655
- 21 The family of Ater (descendants of Hezekiah) 98
- 22 The family of Hashum 328
- 23 The family of Bezai 324
- 24 The family of Jorah[k] 112
- 25 The family of Gibbar[l] 95
- 26 The people of Bethlehem and Netophah 188
- 27 The people of Anathoth 128
- 28 The people of Beth-azmaveth 42
- 29 The people of Kiriath-jearim, Kephirah, and Beeroth 743
- 30 The people of Ramah and Geba 621
- 31 The people of Micmash 122
- 32 The people of Bethel and Ai 123
- 33 The people of West Nebo[m] 52
- 34 The citizens of West Elam[n] 1,254
- 35 The citizens of Harim 320
- 36 The citizens of Jericho 345
- 37 The citizens of Lod, Hadid, and Ono 721
- 38 The citizens of Senaah 3,930
- 39 These are the priests who returned from exile:

- The family of Jedaiah (through the line of Jeshua) 973
- 40 The family of Immer 1,052
- 41 The family of Pashhur 1,247
- 42 The family of Harim 1,017
- 43 These are the Levites who returned from exile:

The families of Jeshua and Kadmiel (descendants of Hodaviah) 74

44 The singers of the family of Asaph 148
45 The gatekeepers of the families of Shallum, Ater, Talmon, Akkub, Hatita, and Shobai 138
46 The descendants of the following Temple servants returned from exile:

Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth,
47 Keros, Siaha, Padon,
48 Lebanah, Hagabah, Shalmal,
49 Hanan, Giddel, Gahar,
50 Reaiah, Rezin, Nekoda,
51 Gazzam, Uzza, Paseah,
52 Besai, Meunim, Nephusim,
53 Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur,
54 Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha,
55 Barkos, Sisera, Temah,
56 Nezia, and Hatipha.
57 The descendants of these servants of King Solomon returned from exile:

Sotai, Hassophereth, Peruda,
58 Jaalah, Darkon, Giddel,
59 Shephatiah, Hattil, Pokereth-hazzebaim, and Ami.
60 In all, the Temple servants and the descendants of Solomon's servants numbered 392.

61 Another group returned at this time from the towns of Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Kerub, Addan,[v] and Immer. However, they could not prove that they or their families were descendants of Israel. 62 This group included the families of Delaiah, Tobiah, and Nekoda—a total of 642 people.

63 Three families of priests—Hobaiah, Hakkoz, and Barzillai—also returned. (This Barzillai had married a woman who was a descendant of Barzillai of Gilead, and he had taken her family name.) 64 They searched for their names in the genealogical records, but they were not found, so they were disqualified from serving as priests. 65 The governor told them not to eat the priests' share of food from the sacrifices until a priest could consult the Lord about the matter by using the Urim and Thummim—the sacred lots.

66 So a total of 42,360 people returned to Judah, 67 in addition to 7,337 servants and 245 singers, both men and women. 68 They took with them 736 horses, 245 mules,[w] 69 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys.

70 Some of the family leaders gave gifts for the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 gold coins, 50 gold basins, and 530 robes for the priests. 71 The other leaders gave to the treasury a total of 20,000 gold coin and some 2,750 pounds of silver for the work. 72 The rest of the people gave 20,000 gold coins, about 2,500 pounds of silver, and 67 robes for the priests.

73 So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Temple servants, and some of the common people settled near Jerusalem. The rest of the people returned to their own towns throughout Israel.

PRAYER

Three questions jumped out at me from this passage:

1. Where's the celebration? Why is the success so underplayed?
2. What's the point of the 'registration' in ch 7?
3. How are these attacks different to the ones in the preceding chapters?

1. Where's the celebration? Why is the success so underplayed?

- After the whole ordeal of this story
 - From his broken hearted prayer in chapter one
 - To the King miraculously allowing him to return and rebuild Jerusalem
 - To the getting all Israel on board
 - To the comprehensive interfering and opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah
 - To the exhausted workers who continue building with a load in one hand and a sword in the other
 - To the fight against materialism last week
- You finally get to chapter 6 and it casually, in one verse, blink and you miss it, says,
 - 'When I'd finished building the wall this other stuff happened!

They finished building the Wall!

- Where's the celebration?
 - They've done it!
 - The impossible - tried before and failed; this time done!
 - Miraculous, when you're under the rule of another country!
- It's not like Jewish people don't know how to party, they do!
- But there is no celebration here

Why?

- And it doesn't seem fair
- With all the community invested in this big vision of Nehemiah's
 - They deserve a party
 - To stand with your mates and a drink in your hand
 - *And to look at the Walls now at full height, right around Jerusalem, and say: 'We did that'*

When I planned this series I actually thought ...

... today's would be a message about the importance of celebrating together what you've done well

- Until I read it a little more closely

Instead of a party they have a registration in chapter 7

- Woohoo!
- Talk about killing the moment!

2. What is the point of that registration?

- That's easier to answer
 - Jerusalem was a place of desolation
 - Hardly anyone lived there - not a place to bring up your family
 - Now it had a restored Temple and Walls around it

- Who should live there?
 - *What assortment of people did he need there to make it into a thriving city again?*
 - *Who will need to come in from the country towns and live here, and how will they feel about that?*

And who were the awesome families that came back with
Zerrubabbel...

... 80 years ago with their faith in God that a day like today would come?

- I love the way he values their history here
 - A great lesson for all of us who are leaders in any context
 - ◆ Finding out the history will bring you much closer to the people
- This registration is to find out who all these people are, what they've sacrificed and what roles they can play

The third question I asked was:

3. How are these attacks different to the ones in the preceding chapters?

- One obvious reason they're not celebrating is because attacks are still going on
- You might've thought you'd seen the full repertoire already from Sanballat and Tobiah
- But it seems not

What's different though ...

... is that now the attacks are made personal

'If you can't bring down the Wall, bring down the Leader

- As part of that - don't *allow* him to celebrate his success
 - Make him look like a slave driver, who works everyone super hard, and never lets them relax and enjoy

And so the closer look at today's passage...

... suggest what it's really about, is vulnerability

Nehemiah was potentially vulnerable in three ways

- As I go through them, think about your own areas of vulnerability

The first one is:

1. Isolation (v2-4)

- 'Come meet us at this village in the area of Ono', says Sanballat in verse 2
 - *That's half way to Samaria!*
 - *It would take him a whole day to get there,*
 - *a day for discussions*
 - *and another whole day to get back*
 - ◆ *Almost half a week!*
- It also bordered on hostile territory
- You can imagine the enemy thinking: 'Let's get him alone, away from his community and supports'

If the Enemy can isolate you

- ... when you're overseeing something
- ... get you away from your community and supports
- ... there's a great chance of breaking you

Has that happened to you lately?

- Felt isolated?
 - Away from your community and supports?

How does Nehemiah respond to that ploy of isolation?

- With confidence!
 - ... in that wonderful line, 'I'm engaged in a great work'
- He didn't lack for self esteem!
 - And why not be confident, when you know what you're doing is important?
- And if God's called you to something, we shouldn't pretend it's not important

And Nehemiah's keeps his focus...

... avoiding distraction, when he says, 'So I can't come'

2. The second threat to Nehemiah was rumour (v5-8)

- 'People are saying that you Jews are going to rebel and you - Nehemiah - are going to make yourself King. The King's not going to like that!'
 - By the way, did you see it in the news this morning that Donald Trump has invaded Mexico?
 - ◆ Incredible right?
 - And Jacinda Ardern has turned down MP of Mt Albert for personal reasons
 - ◆ Who saw that coming?
 - And you know the work they've been doing over at Rocket Park?
 - They're going to put in an international Space Station
 - ... right over the road in Rocket Park!
 - ◆ Can you imagine what that's going to do for local business?

There's nothing much new about alternative facts

- They've been happening since Nehemiah
 - Rumour and alternative facts are pretty similar
 - They're when you fabricate or exaggerate a story in order to undermine someone

Nehemiah responds immediately

... with truth telling

- "There is no truth in any part of your story. You are making up the whole thing."

While alternative facts can be funny

... there's nothing funny about their effects when targetted at you

- Gossip in a church is like fire in a house
- Deal with it as soon as you hear that smoke detector or someone's going to get badly hurt

When people have come to me saying:

- ... there's gossip going around, I do need to find out who exactly is saying what
- ... and talk to them directly
 - If I don't, people get hurt
 - And just like fire, the longer you leave it, the more people get hurt

And one of the frequent ones in a church...

- ... is when you're told, 'Everyone is saying...'
- To which, I have to say: How many people, and who exactly?
- So often I find it came down to one or two conversations
- Though if you leave it you can be sure it'll spread really fast

I wonder if you've been on the receiving end of hurtful gossip lately?

- Track it to its source; respond quickly and tell the truth

The third personal threat to Nehemiah was what often gets called

3. Spiritual Abuse (v10-14)

- You've heard about physical abuse, sexual abuse and verbal abuse
 - What is spiritual abuse?
 - This is an area that's really important but doesn't often appear in sermons
 - ◆ So take a minute if you like, and see if someone around you knows

DISCUSSION

- It's where someone uses your commitment to God to manipulate you into doing what they want
 - They will try to make you look sinful or lax you don't do what they want
 - It's all about fear

Suddenly a whole lot of 'prophets'...

- ... are telling Nehemiah what God wants him to do
 - The implication being: If you *really are* a man of God, you must do these things
 - But these so called prophets - Shemaiah and Noadiah - had been paid to say those things by Sanballat and Tobiah
- Nehemiah recognises this, so he responds with fearlessness and prayer

If you thought such things never happened today you'd be mistaken

- I tried to figure out the main categories, but there are so many examples, they just go on and on
- Here are the first examples I could think of:

Examples of spiritual abuse:

- Manipulation disguised as 'prophecy' or a 'word from God'
- A leader using the label 'uncommitted', to leverage a disproportionate amount of people's time or money
- Using shame or fear to keep someone from leaving a group or ministry
- Statements like:
 - *'If you don't do it this way, you're not a proper Christian'*
 - *'You're always questioning which shows you don't have enough faith'*

I was invited along with a number of other pastors...

... to a session run by the chaplain at Auckland University

... about christian cults that they don't know how to manage on campus

■ Apparently Victoria University is having the same problem

I wanted to know what the features of these cults were

- Two really struck me:
 - 'If you are a really committed Christian then attending our group several times a week would not be a problem'
 - 'Abraham had to lie when he and Sarah went to Egypt but it was for the greater good. Sometimes we have to lie for the greater good also.'

I've also encountered awful examples of spiritual manipulation

... when people have told me why they no longer come to church

- And a weekly prayer meeting that people used to have power over others
 - ◆ 'None of the staff attend the weekly prayer meeting'
- ... at a time staff were exhausted and our Senior Pastor had unexpectedly left

So coming back to Nehemiah

- Spiritual abuse creates a climate of fear
- Nehemiah refuses to be afraid: 'Should someone in my position run from danger?'
- He stands firm and once again, as always with Nehemiah, he prays
-

If you are in a situation of spiritual abuse...

... definitely get some help

- On some occasions people who cause spiritual abuse can be unaware that they are doing it

Some questions to conclude all this:

- How vulnerable are you to isolation, rumour or spiritual abuse?
 - Like Nehemiah, are you confident in how you tackle these?
 - ◆ And how have those three factors played out in the things you lead?
- And as a church and as leaders with in it, are we committed to standing together
 - ... against isolation,
 - ... against gossip
 - ... and against spiritual abuse?

The real reason there's no big celebration in this passage after they finally built the Wall

- It's because building the Wall wasn't actually the big deal (it was only symbolic of it)
- Building up the people of God, free of these three things is a thousand times more important

PRAYER

Communion:

By contrast to the manipulative...

... and abusive voices in this passage

- Jesus said, 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light'
- So we gather in communion around the table of the one who brings truth to light
- The one who frees us from the excesses that he never intended

As you prepare for communion today, be reminded of that easier yoke

- And allow God to show you what that easier way of living and being means for you