

**7 Lessons from Nehemiah
for Churches that want to grow.**
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“...for the people worked with all their heart.”

(Nehemiah 4:6)

Session 1 –
Identifying the need
(Nehemiah 1)

Session 2 –
Planning carefully
(Nehemiah 2)

Session 3 –
Dealing with opposition and frustrations
(Nehemiah 2, 4 and 6)

Session 4 –
Working as a team
(Nehemiah 3 and 11)

Session 5 –
Leading through service
(Nehemiah 5)

Session 6 –
Showing faith and commitment
(Nehemiah 8, 9 and 10)

Session 7 –
Persevering and maintaining focus
(Nehemiah 13)

Session 1

Identifying the need (Nehemiah 1)

View video clip Session 1:1

The Old Testament contains several different types of books – books of poetry such as the Psalms and the Song of Solomon and books of prophecy such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, but the Old Testament also contains history books, which tell of God's involvement with his people. The book of Nehemiah is a history book which tells of the efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the way God's people set about revitalizing their faith. Parts of the book of Nehemiah have been written in the first person and therefore read like a diary or a blog.

Over the next seven sessions, we will look at the following themes:

- i) Identifying the need (Nehemiah 1)
- ii) Planning carefully (Nehemiah 2)
- iii) Dealing with opposition and frustrations (Nehemiah 4 and 6)
- iv) Working as a team (Nehemiah 3 and 11)
- v) Leading through service (Nehemiah 5)
- vi) Showing faith and commitment (Nehemiah 8, 9 and 10)
- vii) Persevering and maintaining focus (Nehemiah 13)

We hope that looking at how Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem went about rebuilding the walls and rekindling their faith in God will help us do the same in our communities and chapels / churches throughout Wales.

Let us begin by going back to the year 445 BC, about 2,500 years ago and read Nehemiah, Chapter 1 together.

It was the month of Kislev, probably November or December in our calendar today. The story begins in the palace of King Artaxerxes in Susa, a city which would be in today's Iran. Nehemiah was far from home. His brother, Hanani, and some of his friends from Jerusalem came to Nehemiah in Susa. Naturally, Nehemiah asked: "How is everyone in Jerusalem?" We would all ask the same question if we hadn't seen our friends and family for some time. The answer was not good news. He heard that his family and friends in Jerusalem were "in great trouble" as the walls of Jerusalem had been broken down and the gates of the city burned with fire.

It's hard to imagine how Nehemiah would have felt when he heard the news. But let's try to put ourselves in his position.

View video clip Session 1:2

Imagine that you are miles away from your home and your church. Let's discuss how far from home you have been.

While you are away, you hear that there has been a fire at your home or your church / chapel and, as a result, your family and friends back home are in "great trouble" as the people of Jerusalem were in the book of Nehemiah.

What would be your first reaction?

Perhaps you would break out in a cold sweat. And then panic. Many of us would probably start crying. And that was exactly how Nehemiah reacted. He sat down and wept for his people, for his family, for his city and for his nation.

I wonder how many of us have wept over the state of our community or the spiritual state of Wales recently?

Some Christians weep over Wales often. I sometimes weep over her spiritual state and over the side-effects of the spiritual crisis in our communities: drugs, binge drinking, weak-willed politicians, materialism and so on. It is important to notice what Nehemiah did after weeping for his people. He fasted and prayed for days.

Do you fast or pray for your community or your church / chapel sometimes?

This is our first challenge from the life of Nehemiah. After identifying the need, he turns to the one who can change the situation – God. Let's look next at Nehemiah's prayer. Looking at his prayer, we learn a lot about prayer and what it means to trust God.

Nehemiah praises God for his greatness and his loyalty to his people. This was a bold statement on the part of Nehemiah because this was a period when it seemed to the Jews that God had abandoned them.

Do we, the people of Wales, sometimes feel that God has abandoned us?

Nehemiah confesses his sins and the sins of his fellow Jews before God. In his prayer, he implies that the Jews have not been faithful in their love for God and have not kept God's commandments. It is important for us to recognize too that Wales, on the whole, has strayed far from God.

It is important that we are honest with God in prayer. We must acknowledge our faults and our sins before God. If we want a relationship with God, we must begin our journey by acknowledging our sins. In a way, it's like going to the Doctor's. You have to begin by

acknowledging that there's something the matter – recognising the symptoms and then the Doctor will give the medication.

By the end of the prayer, Nehemiah thanks God for providing a way of deliverance and begs God to hear his prayer. He asks God to use him as a servant to assist in the task of restoring Jerusalem and its people.

The two important lessons at the beginning of the book of Nehemiah are

i) that he identifies the need and

ii) that he seeks God in prayer as God is the only one who can change the situation.

Discuss what the need is in your community and in your chapel/church and then seek God in prayer as Nehemiah did. For the time being, try to avoid discussing possible solutions. The purpose of this first session is to identify the need.

View video clip Session 1:3

Session 2

Planning carefully

(Nehemiah 2)

View video clip Session 2:1

In the first Session we saw that God had given Nehemiah a burden of prayer for Jerusalem. He prayed for months and did identify the need. I hope that we have now identified the need in our community.

Having identified the need, Nehemiah proceeded to the planning stage. In this session, I hope that we, too, will see that planning the work and mission of our church is vitally important. Identifying the need, feeling a burden and pitching into work enthusiastically are all important – but so also are careful planning and organization.

In order to have time to go to Jerusalem, Nehemiah had to ask the King for time off work. The King did not share Nehemiah's God so it was really a miracle that the King allowed Nehemiah to follow the mission that the living God had put in his heart. As we consider the spiritual and material state of our communities, we are also aware that only a miracle can change them. It is therefore important to remember that the God we follow and worship can achieve the impossible!

To what extent does the task ahead of us seem impossible? What is the lesson to be learned from Nehemiah and Matthew 19:26 – "Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible'."?

Throughout Nehemiah 2 we see that the planning and preparation are proceeding well, but not without problems. Nehemiah faces some resistance and we will discuss how to deal with opposition and frustrations in the next session.

After a long journey that would have taken several months, Nehemiah has finally arrived in Jerusalem to start work. After months of prayer, months of travel and a great deal of preparation and expectation, one would expect Nehemiah to start work immediately.

But no. After arriving, he rests for three days before starting work (v. 2:11). Nehemiah's story shows us that rest and preparation are essential to the life and work of a Christian. This helps us to focus on our work and focus on our relationship with God.

In our busy world it is increasingly difficult to rest. It's important that we don't see our work with the church as one more responsibility – one more ball to keep juggling. It's important that we see our life in the church as something that enriches our lives and sustains us, not one more responsibility that tires us.

Do you see your life in the church as a responsibility or as a calling? Is there a difference? How do we ensure that we have the right attitude towards God's work in our community?

After taking time to rest, Nehemiah goes out to start exploring the city to see what lies ahead of them and how they should proceed. In other words, he intends to plan carefully (v. 2: 12-15). Interestingly he goes out at night and with only a few other people. That is, he doesn't go out during the day when everyone can see him, he doesn't make a big show of it – 'Look, here I am; Nehemiah has come to sort out you and your city!'. Not at all. The way he goes about it is very humble.

This is a big challenge for Christians because many people over the years have talked boldly about bringing the gospel to Wales, but for various reasons have failed. A naive optimism is dangerous. Quiet planning and preparation behind the scenes are important in order to have the greatest impact when you finally go public with your mission. If you go public without proper planning, the whole plan will fail.

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Do you have experience of holding a mission which was not properly planned? What lessons have you learned from that experience?

In chapter 2, Nehemiah explores the city on a fact-finding mission. He examines the wall, the gates and the buildings which are in need of repair. Nehemiah knows that the work needs to be based on facts and not on perceptions and misleading assumptions.

This is a lesson for us. How well do we really know our community? Where exactly are the families? Where are the Welsh speakers? Is our knowledge of our community based on facts or is our knowledge based on our assumptions and the small circle of people we know?

Why not study your community demographics? The statistics are available from your county council website or the Census website. How many children? Young people? Elderly? How many are employed? How many unemployed? What about local churches? Is there an area in the community with no church within reach? It is important for us to examine our communities as Nehemiah examined Jerusalem in order to get to know our community and prepare well for the work ahead.

After assessing the situation, getting to know the city and seeing what was in front of him, he begins to draw more people in (v. 17-18). Note the inclusive words used – he includes everyone. 'Let us rebuild/Let us start rebuilding', not 'I shall rebuild' or 'You must rebuild'. After sharing his story so far and sharing the vision God has given him, Nehemiah goes on to inspire everyone to take ownership of the work. 'Let us begin to rebuild' and they all get stuck in.

Everyone was now aware of God's will for them. Are we all aware of God's will for us. Are we prepared to do the careful planning?

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Session 3

Dealing with opposition and frustrations (Nehemiah 2, 4 and 6)

View video clip Session 3:1

When we are involved in God's work, we sometimes come face to face with opposition and frustrations. Throughout the Bible we see God's people dealing with opposition and Nehemiah is no different.

Nehemiah faces opposition from three particular characters – Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. Throughout the book of Nehemiah, these characters return again and again to try to oppose Nehemiah, undermine his work and break the spirit of all who work with him.

As we look at the way Nehemiah deals with opposition and frustrations here, we can learn how to deal with situations when things become difficult for us too.

What situations have arisen recently where you have experienced opposition and frustrations?

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem appear first in chapter 2, verse 19:

"But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. 'What is this you are doing?' they asked. 'Are you rebelling against the king?'"

This is how negative people work, in gangs. People who conspire and undermine often try to gather supporters before going on to carry out their misdemeanours. It is clear that Sanballat and Tobiah have been spreading their poison and gossip and have attracted Geshem to join them. Gossip has destroyed the fellowship of many churches and has undermined many missionary enterprises.

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Do we need to be careful that we don't make the same mistake as Geshem and fall under the influence of negative people who gossip?

If we encounter people like Sanballat and Tobiah outside or inside the church, we should run a mile rather than coming under their influence.

Nehemiah's opponents' tactic is to falsely accuse him of various offences in an attempt to undermine the work. They had seen and heard that Nehemiah had arrived in Jerusalem with the cavalry and had jumped to the conclusion that Nehemiah had arrived to rebel

against the King. It is important for us to remember that not everything we hear is true and that it's easy to jump to the wrong conclusions about people. Jumping to the wrong conclusions about people and situations can raise tensions and frustrations within the church.

Nehemiah challenges his opponents and answers them in verse 20:

"I answered them by saying, 'The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.'"

It's important to note that we ourselves are not the answer. We must depend on God to answer our opponents. If we try to depend on our ability or our clever words, we may well make a fool of ourselves because we are sinners like everyone else. We must always depend on God and turn to him when we are faced with opposition. Nehemiah responds humbly: he doesn't say that he is right. But he does say that he is obedient to God's will.

How should we make a stand but yet respond to opposition in a humble way?

It is important to note that Nehemiah is honest, even with his opponents. We must be open about our faith, our motives and our purpose. If we are not open about our motives, then we deceive people and in the long term this will not be a healthy form of Christian witness. For example, if your church organizes a BBQ where someone will give a talk about Jesus, it's important for the people who attend to be aware of that from the outset. People appreciate openness; and honesty about our motives in the church's outreach activities, can help to minimize potential opposition.

Nehemiah is very open about his motives. He serves God and follows his guidance. How should we strike the balance between being open about our missionary motives and not scaring people away?

In chapter 4, Sanballat and Tobiah return. They have heard that Nehemiah and the others are busy rebuilding the walls and they don't like this. This reminds us of one important lesson – the more active God's people are, the more opposition we face.

In chapter 4, Sanballat and Tobiah aren't happy to see Nehemiah succeed. There is still a tendency for people not to like seeing others succeed. Is it because of jealousy?

If someone does something well, such as singing, sports or writing, people will respond: "He's getting too big for his boots!" It's important that we avoid this negativity in the work of the Church. It's important for us to foster a culture of celebrating with those who succeed and to avoid jealousy.

Sanballat and Tobiah had a different agenda to that of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was keen to rebuild Jerusalem, to provide a safe place for people to worship God and experience a revival among God's people. Sanballat and Tobiah had a completely different agenda. They didn't want to see the walls rebuilt, they didn't want God's people to have a safe place to worship and they didn't want a revival.

What is our agenda? Do we have the correct priorities in our agenda?

People tend to take against active and conscientious people, especially if they themselves are lazy. Unfortunately, in the work of the church, much of the opposition comes from people who do nothing themselves!

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem when the city had been in a deplorable condition for over a century. That was the norm, people had become used to the situation. So Nehemiah experienced opposition from people who didn't want to see change even if it was change for the better.

Do you have experience of dealing with people in the church who oppose change at all costs? How should we deal with such opposition?

In chapter 6, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem return again to try to undermine Nehemiah and the work. The tactic this time is to try to distract Nehemiah from the work to which God has called him. And I'm sure that this is one of the frustrations we also have to deal with.

In our churches, it's easy to be distracted from what really matters. It's easy to spend our church's scarce financial resources on repairing the organ or the roof when it is needed to develop missionary work and so on.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem send a message to Nehemiah in chapter 6, v. 1 + 2:

"When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it – though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates – Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: 'Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono'."

At first glance they appear to be more friendly than usual. They mention that they want to meet in a neutral place for a chat with Nehemiah – maybe because they want to clear the air and seek reconciliation? Nehemiah saw through their intentions, they were trying to take his mind off God's call.

"...I sent messengers to them with this reply: '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?'"

He had to focus on finishing work on the wall because it was God's call to him. God has a

will and a calling for all of us. But we live in the world and things and people call us, trying to tempt us and prevent us from listening to the word of God and following his voice.

Sanballat, Geshem and Tobiah tried to persuade and tempt Nehemiah to take his eyes away from God's will. What or who tries to draw our attention away from God?

Perhaps a friend or relative who doesn't share your faith creates a barrier? Maybe it's something small – something you like to do: support a football team or follow a TV programme – something that is acceptable in its place, but maybe it sometimes steals your attention from Jesus.

When obstacles arise and things try to distract us, we must respond as Nehemiah did, by saying: "No, I adhere to the vision God has given me." Despite all attempts to undermine his work, despite the temptation to stoop to the level of his opponents and throw dirt, Nehemiah does what we should all do, he adheres to truth and leans on God. The truth is the strongest weapon we have.

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Session 4

Working as a team

(Nehemiah 3 & 11)

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At first glance, chapter 3 of the Book of Nehemiah reads like the Jerusalem telephone directory. 38 names, divided into 42 teams, working on 7 different sections of the city. Many people would decide to skip this section, thinking that such chapters contain nothing of value. But this long list of names teaches us an important lesson – God’s work is team-work and everyone has a role in the team.

Firstly, let us look at the work at the Dung Gate – in chapter 3, verses 13-14

13 The Valley Gate was repaired by Hanun and the residents of Zanoah. They rebuilt it and put its doors with their bolts and bars in place. They also repaired a thousand cubits of the wall as far as the Dung Gate.

14 The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of Rekab, ruler of the district of Beth Hakkerem. He rebuilt it and put its doors with their bolts and bars in place.

Hanun and his friends – conveniently enough – decide they have done enough work before reaching the Dung Gate. Apparently, all the city’s waste passed through this area. But someone had to work there and Malkijah the son of Rekab, ruler of the district of Beth-hakkerem, volunteered.

Malkijah was an important man, in a responsible position as ruler of the district. But he saw that there was work to be done and, although it was unpleasant work, he set about doing it.

Malkijah’s willingness to serve shows how important it is for us to work humbly and not to think that we are too good for certain tasks. Are some tasks easier than others? How do we adopt the correct attitude towards tasks in the church which are less attractive, but still necessary?

The list of names in chapter 3 reminds us that God knows us all by name. We are all important to God. Lists such as this appear several times in the Bible – it doesn’t only name “famous” people but also hundreds of ordinary people like us. Why? Because, before God, we are all equal and God wants a relationship with each one of us.

Because it was such a mammoth task, Nehemiah divided his people into teams to work on different parts of the project. Each team carried out different tasks but, yet, they were all united in their purpose. They were united in the task of serving God and working towards the goal of seeing God honoured in Jerusalem once again.

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How can we divide our people into teams in order to focus on various aspects of church work, at the same time maintaining unity and keeping everyone's eye on the goal?

One of the main problems faced by churches in Wales over the last century, and even today, is the cult of the preacher. Of course, preaching and teaching the Bible are important but there is more than that to being a church. There is more to being a church than ensuring that there is someone standing before the congregation and preaching every Sunday. A real church is a body of people united in Jesus Christ, where everyone rolls up their sleeves to do various things, thereby winning their community to Christ.

Time and time again, chapter 3 mentions that they re-use old stones to build the new wall. There are two lessons for us here. Firstly, many churches in Wales are full of elderly people, if not full of stones! We shouldn't think of this as a problem – we should look at it as an opportunity because Nehemiah set about rebuilding Jerusalem with the old stones.

Perhaps some of the older members of the church feel that they are passed their *use by date* and are of no use to the church's mission. The story of Nehemiah shows that God can use old stones to do something new and, indeed, wishes to do so.

The older members of your team have life experiences that the younger members do not have. The older members have raised children and seen them growing up. The older members have dealt with illness and have been through the difficult experience of losing friends and family. In a healthy church, the old stones have an essential role.

What is the average age of your church members? Do you feel this is a strain or do you see the potential as Nehemiah did?

Later on, in chapter 11, Nehemiah gives various people different responsibilities and sends various families to live and work in different areas in and around Jerusalem.

Throughout the book of Nehemiah, it is obvious that Nehemiah wasn't a 'one-man-band'. He was assisted by a team who was committed to serving God together. As we reach out to our communities, it's important to remember that Nehemiah and God's people throughout the ages have seen the importance of teamwork – everyone has different talents and responsibilities but works with unity of purpose.

View video clip Session 4:3

Session 5

Leadership - leading through service (Nehemiah 5)

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Although teamwork is essential in the church, the Bible makes it obvious time and again that God calls some people to be leaders. The book of Nehemiah shows how important teamwork is but someone is needed to co-ordinate and lead the team – and that person was Nehemiah. His life and leadership show us that Christian leadership is different from the world's approach to leadership. Christian leadership is based on Christ's leadership – *Jesus Christ came to serve and not to be served*. This is the key to understanding how to lead in church work. Let us look at chapter 5 of the book of Nehemiah and compare Nehemiah's godly worship to that of other contemporary leaders.

In chapter 5, Nehemiah is faced with a difficult situation. One faction of people is oppressing another faction and those who have been wronged bring their grievance to Nehemiah. The first thing to note is that Nehemiah is prepared to listen to his people – something all good and godly leaders should do.

What is your experience in church or at your workplace? Do you have experience of working with leaders who are prepared to listen to other people's problems or ideas? Why is this an important feature in a leader?

After listening to the people, Nehemiah becomes very angry (v. 6-8). He doesn't necessarily lose his temper but, as a leader, he shows empathy with his people's situation. This is another important feature that the leaders of the church of Jesus Christ should show. In the same way, as Jesus came to the world as a man in order to identify with us, Christian leaders should make every effort to understand and identify with the situation and perspective of all members of the church family.

The problem in Jerusalem in the period of Nehemiah was that the nobles and officials were being unreasonable in charging the ordinary people high interest. As a result, Nehemiah rebukes them sternly. Christian leaders should take every opportunity to raise their voice against injustice and speak for those without a voice.

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Are there situations in our communities where church leaders should take the side of the disadvantaged and condemn leaders who are indifferent to the condition of ordinary people?

The second half of the chapter (v. 14-19) goes on to contrast Nehemiah's leadership with

that of the governors who preceded him. It was obvious that the previous ruler had taken advantage of his situation as leader and had lived a comfortable life – a life of luxury – at the expense of the ordinary people. On the other hand, Nehemiah did not eat the 'food allotted to the governor' (v. 14) as he saw that life was hard for the ordinary people and he wanted to identify with them.

Thinking of the MPs' expenses scandal a few years ago, are there lessons our church and society can learn from Nehemiah's life?

The key to understanding Nehemiah's humble and godly leadership is, in his own words, his 'reverence for God' (Verse 15). If we feel that God is calling us to be leaders in his church, we must remember that we become leaders, not to hold influence over others, but to serve others. Jesus came to the world to reign by firstly becoming a servant for all of us.

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Session 6

Faith and commitment

(Nehemiah 8, 9 and 10)

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By chapter 8, the wall of Jerusalem has been rebuilt by Nehemiah and his team. Everything seems fine – so feet up, telly on? Not at all. At the beginning of this series of studies on the book of Nehemiah we saw that Jerusalem needed two types of recovery. Firstly, restoring and rebuilding the wall literally and secondly, a spiritual recovery.

The communities in which we live and where we are trying to bring hope also need both types of recovery. It's important that we serve our communities and show Christ's love but, as in the story of Nehemiah, it's important that we shoulder our responsibility as a church to call people to see their spiritual need and to believe in Jesus Christ as their lord and saviour.

At the beginning of chapter 8, Ezra joins the story for the first time in the book of Nehemiah. Ezra was an important leader who came to Jerusalem 13 years before Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries and co-workers, but probably had a different mission. Nehemiah was the political leader – the governor. Ezra was the spiritual leader – he was the priest and scribe.

The Bible says that some are called to serve in practical ways in the church as Nehemiah was (eg arrange services, clubs, run the financial side of the church, etc ...) and some are called to serve in more spiritual ways as Ezra was (eg preparing bible studies, leading services, giving pastoral tips etc. ...).

What type of role is God's calling for you?

At the beginning of chapter 8, we see Ezra reading the Law of Moses to the people, i.e. the first five books of our Bible today: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri and Deuteronomium. One of the most striking things is that the people listened attentively!

Reading and understanding the Bible can be difficult but Bible study is an essential part of church life. There are many ways in which we, like God's people in the time of Nehemiah, can learn from the Bible. We can get together to study the Bible – on Sundays, in a Bible study meeting, at informal meetings at each other's houses or even in cafes. It's also important for us to encourage each other and others to study the Bible at home on our own or with family or friends. It has never been easier to study the Bible as many versions are available to read on the internet and on our mobile phones.

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What is your experience of studying the Bible? What about sharing good practice?

Perhaps some of you sometimes find it difficult to understand parts of the Bible. When we try to understand the Bible, it's sometimes tempting to give up and go to watch TV or check Facebook instead. But in verse 8, we see that God's people in the time of Nehemiah learned to persevere and help each other understand the Bible: 'They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.'

It's interesting that the people's first response as they heard the Scriptures and came before God was to mourn and weep. 'For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.' They wept because they perceived their need before God. They saw that they had strayed and had led arrogant and selfish lives without giving God the central place in their lives and hearts.

As we look at the Bible and learn about Jesus's perfect life, we see that we fall far short of the standard. We disappoint family and friends and disappoint God. In Nehemiah 9, we hear that the people of Jerusalem see that they are needy and repent. Repentance means seeing your need as a sinner and turning to Jesus Christ who offers grace and forgiveness.

The word 'sin' is becoming less and less a part of our everyday language. How do we convey the message today that we are all sinners who need forgiveness?

Although the people in the time of Nehemiah had strayed far, Ezra hastens to remind them that God loves them and that he can forgive all their sins. We should remember that this is still true today – this is the 'good news' that we, as a church, have to share with our communities.

It is important to acknowledge that we are all sinners who have fallen short of God's standard. But it is even more important to realize that God offers forgiveness as Jesus has dealt with all our faults on the cross.

Ezra then reminds the people that God loves them and that he has made a covenant with them, and the party begins. "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." v. 8:10)

As the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news, the church of Jesus Christ always has reason to celebrate. Unfortunately, people perceive churches in Wales today as being negative and criticizing everything. But the church should be known for constant celebration and rejoicing.

How can we convey a positive image of Christianity to people outside the church? Could we organize a party or celebration as Ezra did in order to share the good news with our communities? How would we go about this on a practical level?

After realizing that they are sinners, the people in Jerusalem repent and receive God's forgiveness. Then, in chapter 10, they want a new beginning. They set about preparing a covenant – some kind of statement promising to keep God's law. This is not a statement made only out of a sense of duty. They do not adopt a religion of rules. What we have here is people whose hearts have changed, people who have a new Spirit; in short, people who truly follow and worship God.

Does the reality of our freedom in the gospel excite us?

In the book of Acts, we hear of people who have accepted God into their lives and are so enthusiastic that others think they're drunk! Is there a fire burning inside us? This is a covenant that has been composed by people on fire. Throughout the centuries, since the days of Nehemiah, God's people have prepared statements such as this as a focus for their life and mission.

Perhaps it would be useful to draft a statement setting out your church's mission and objectives?

This can give a sharper focus to your work as a church as you try to reach out to your community.

View video clip Session 6:3

Session 7

Persevering and maintaining focus (Nehemiah 13)

View video clip Session 7:1

After leading the work of rebuilding the city, Ezra and Nehemiah lead the people back into a living relationship with God. In this final session, we turn to the last chapter in the Book of Nehemiah, chapter 13. The events in this chapter takes place some time, possibly several years, after the events in chapter 12. By now, Nehemiah has had to return to work in Susa where he was at the beginning of the story when he first heard about the situation in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah evidently felt called to return to Jerusalem to see how things were coming along. On reaching Jerusalem, he came face to face with a sad and unfortunate development.

You may remember Tobiah from Session 3. He was one of the people who opposed the work of Nehemiah because he did not follow God. Eliashib, one of the priests, was married to Tobiah's daughter and Tobiah used this as a way to get a room in the Temple where he could disrupt God's people and draw attention and resources from the main purpose of the Temple which was to worship the living God. Read verses 4 to 9.

Is there a risk that we could allow negative influences to slip into the life of our churches? How do we protect the church from being diverted from its primary purpose which is to worship Jesus and lead others to him?

As he walks around the Temple and the city, Nehemiah encounters several other things that have gone wrong. Earlier in the book, Nehemiah taught the people the importance of supporting and contributing to the work of the Temple in every way possible, including financially. Unfortunately, the people have become lazy and have forgotten about this responsibility (v. 10-11).

If we are serious about the life and mission of the church, it is important for us to give generously from our money and resources towards the work. How can we be faithful stewards of our wealth and contribute generously towards church life?

In verses 15 to 17, Nehemiah reports that people in Jerusalem have fallen back and started trading again on the Sabbath. This is a symptom of a deeper problem, namely that they consider money and work more important than God himself. Keeping the 'Welsh Sabbath' has become impossible as we live in a secular country. But it's important for Christians to be careful that we do not give everyday things the most important place in our life. Jesus alone should be in the middle.

How do we make sure that we don't allow our work or our interests (which are legitimate in their place) to replace Jesus as the most important thing in our lives?

In verses 23 to 27, Nehemiah sees that some of the Jews have married women from other countries and this is a matter of concern for him. It is extremely important that we understand the context of these verses. Nehemiah is not opposed to mixed marriages as people with racist tendencies were opposed to mixed marriages. In Nehemiah's time, the other nations followed other gods so Nehemiah's concern was that some of the Jews would turn their backs on the true God and choose to follow the other nations' gods under the influence of their husbands and wives who were of other nationalities.

The context is very different to our experience today. Perhaps the lesson here is to be careful by whom we are influenced.

Do we surround ourselves with people who help us to deepen our relationship with Jesus or do we spend time with people who distract us from Jesus?

In one sense, this great story from the Book of Nehemiah has a very sad ending. We have seen God leading Nehemiah and the people to rebuild their city. We have seen God restoring the people's spiritual life and the people responding with new worship. But at the end, we see that the people have gone back to their old ways, forgetting about the Lord's faithfulness.

The lesson at the end of this series of studies on the Book of Nehemiah is that we have a responsibility to adhere to the Lord and that which is good. The work of restoring the church of Jesus Christ in Wales will not be easy. But we have hope – because God accepts all who call on him and because the Holy Spirit is at work in the church.

1. **Prayer.** Nehemiah was a great believer in prayer. Prayer is an opportunity to set things before God and an opportunity to listen to God's will for us as individuals and as a church.
2. **The Bible.** Nehemiah insisted time after time that the people turn back to read God's law. We have the wealth of the Bible to guide us along the way.
3. **Church.** No one can be a Christian alone. The story of Nehemiah is not the story of one person or of separate individuals but the story of a community of people and of people in communion with God.

How can we use these three tools or resources to help us run the race without wavering as the people of Jerusalem unfortunately did at the end of the story?

The story of Nehemiah teaches us today several important lessons. Nehemiah had a definite purpose in life and he allowed God to lead him. Nehemiah did what was right before God. He feared God not men.

In conclusion, it is worth remembering that Nehemiah was not Superman. Although no major sins or transgressions are revealed, we have to remember that he was an ordinary person like you and me. He was an ordinary person, doing extraordinary things through the power of God.

I hope that God has spoken to us today and shown us his will just as he showed Nehemiah and his team his will 2,500 years ago. I hope that this story has inspired you to follow, worship and serve Jesus together in your own communities.

View video clip Session 7:3