

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2022**  
**Nehemiah 1:1-11**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Sermon keypoints:

- God disciplines His people to mature us
- God is ready to restore us
- Repentance precedes restoration

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Holy Spirit, we pray that You would come among us and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and lead us as a body of people into fuller and truer life.

Come dear Holy Spirit, with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

I was getting to share at the Deacon's Court on Tuesday evening that a good proportion of my working week just now is given over to the future of the church, in particular, to something called Mission Planning and you're going to probably hear more of that in the months to come because, as a denomination, we are undertaking a work of mission planning across the whole of the nation. Every presbytery is to come up with a plan of how the church would be shaped in the months and years to come. It will affect every congregation and every Kirk Session, and our presbytery has already been engaged upon this matter more recently, although the work has been going on for some time before as well, and we're having to do this and we're having to shape a plan because we need to face up to some facts that there is anticipated a 40% reduction of ministers and so we need to shape ourselves around that reality, and the reality that we have too many buildings. And so, we need to cut close to one-third of buildings across our nation and that's just an average, so some places it will be more than that. In light of the theme around Nehemiah of rebuilding we might say that mission planning is addressing some of our structural issues, to help hopefully restore the church so that we might be more focused on mission rather than buildings and maintenance. But yet, within the resources available to us however, if we think that simply restructuring ourselves will lead to a better future then we're deluding ourselves, because there needs to be a deeper, more personal work of God in our hearts, in our lives, if the church is to have a better future. And that goes contrary to our natural tendencies as people. We would much rather have a quick fix and we'd much rather have an external fix that was quickly done and didn't require that deeper work of the heart. But, as we've been singing and thinking about today, our God is the Good Shepherd and so, thankfully, He doesn't work as we would like Him to work. He knows our truest and deepest needs. And so our passage in Nehemiah today begins very personally with deep issues of the heart before anything else is addressed and so, yes, there might be some more challenging words today and there's part of me that hesitates to do that because I feel like that is often how I'm seen or portrayed as 'here's another challenge, time to switch off the button and tune Scott out' but I encourage you, please, to open yourself to what God might say this morning because He does desire to bring us into fuller and truer life both individually and corporately.

We read earlier the writing of Nehemiah 'While I was in the citadel of Souza, Han and I one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile and also about Jerusalem.'

Nehemiah is an exile. Still, he is part of the Jewish people still in Babylon. He hasn't been able to return as yet and we read earlier as well in verse 8 that part of the reason that they are scattered among the nations was because of unfaithfulness. They're not in exile for any other reason and so, we have to admit and become aware of that. The Lord disciplines His people when they are disobedient and that was part of the Old Testament covenant that there was both blessing and curse. And so, when they obeyed, there was God's favor and provision, and when they dissipate God would discipline. And so, we find them now in exile and often I think our view of any talk about discipline is shaped by misconceptions. We think of discipline as simply being hauled before the head teacher, and I can remember that experience myself from younger days, or we might think of it as appearing before a judge and we get really nervous about such an idea. But the scriptures don't speak of God's discipline in those terms. God's discipline is as a father to a son, as a loving parent doing something out of no other motive than love itself, to refine, to mature, to change the heart. So, let us bear that in mind as we delve in here.

I suspect when Nehemiah is asking for this report I wonder if he's hoping, anticipating for good news. To hear that the restoration that God began under the previous two leaders has maybe led to the people and that the city being rebuilt, that it's on track, maybe it's even near completion. I wonder if he's hoping for that kind of news. But then, in verse 3 we read that the people are in great trouble and disgrace and the gates of Jerusalem are still torn down and burned. He realizes that there's still more restoration to come and that speaks to him of God's ongoing discipline. There has been, in His mercy and grace, phases of restoration but there's still more to go. We might need to delve into some of that maybe next week as well, that the people have, for one reason or another, put off the work and so there's still an ongoing discipline, there's still that discipline of the heart and of His people.

All this talk of discipline might make you wonder 'Well, does God still discipline today? Do we live under a system of blessing and curse as Christians?' Well, as we were thinking about last weekend, we have our hope and trust in Jesus and because of His perfect life, because of His death on the cross, which was sinless and perfect, undeserved, then we live under a different means of relationship with God. We have a different covenant called the New Covenant and so, because of that the righteousness, the right relationship that Jesus had with Father God, we are brought into that. We share in that and so we don't relate to God as Christians based on how good or bad we are, it's not how good or bad that ends your status with God, it's Jesus and His righteousness. As we sung about in our first two hymns, as the choir reminded us in Blessed Assurance, that is our assurance of who we are in Jesus. So, we don't live under that old system of blessing and curse. That is done away with. Nevertheless, the New Testament still speaks about discipline and so in Hebrews chapter 12 we read that 'God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.' No

discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful later on, however it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

God still disciplines for our good. We're told that we might grow in the likeness of Jesus, that we might grow in holiness, that we might share in His righteousness, as right living before God and with one another, and then walk in peace, walk in greater wholeness, has shalom.

Now, our next question might then be – Well, how does God discipline if he does discipline us? The passage tells us how does He discipline and the scriptures speak of a number of ways. But I want to draw on one for this morning because I'm particularly concerned and mindful of how God would discipline a group of people, a denomination even, and so I've been reflecting on Romans chapter one which I'm not going to detail but, in Romans chapter one, God speaks of disciplining the nations and in that discipline He basically just leaves the nations to their own devices, He allows their choices to lead to consequences and so, when a body of people potentially need brought in line with His ways and with His commands, I do wonder if He adopts a similar approach to discipline. He allows our choices to lead to consequences. He keeps speaking to us through His word, through faithful preaching but, if we will not listen, then maybe the Lord leaves us to our own devices. And so, as we think about our denomination, so, we think about the church in our day, could it be that our lack of impact, our lack of fruitfulness, and it's lovely that as a church we are a bit fuller than the average church, where I am interim moderator there's 20 to 25 people most Sundays. I'm part of the Mission Planning Team and there's churches that have 10 or less gathering week by week and most have no children, not just one or two, no children among them, could it be that our decline, could it be that the lack of people called into ministry, could it be that the closing of buildings, is because we've not listened, that we are experiencing a measure of discipline, allowing our choices to lead to consequences? Choices like having wrong priorities or focusing on the building spending, so much on it, rather than on mission. Wrong priorities, like be more seeking our comfort above being uncomfortable enough for mission, such that we share our faith or we sacrifice time for mission. Could it be the dilution of the gospel or God's word? Could it be a lukewarm passion for mission and discipleship? We make choices every day, as David was reminding us in our prayer, every day and do our choices align with God's priorities?

And so, where does that then lead us, when we don't? And does He allow that to ripple down and lead to consequences? Because, maybe that's the only way to get our attention as a body of people locally and nationally. But let's remember, He does it for our good. He does. It's interesting, I have yet to find a scripture I think that says that God says 'I'm disappointed with you.' I don't think He ever uses that language. He might say 'You've gone wayward.' He might say 'You've sinned.' I've sinned but He never says 'I'm disappointed.' He never ridicules. He never tears us down. He does discipline for good, to mature. And any talk about discipline is always hard, it's probably hard to hear it, believe me it's hard to share it.

I was not looking forward to this at nine o'clock. I'd come back in from doing some early preparation I said to Gill 'I'm really nervous for this morning'. But discipline is not the whole story, because Nehemiah goes on he says 'Then I said, Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses saying but if you return to me and obey my commands then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my name.'

God does discipline but He yearns, He longs, He promises to restore us and we have hope in that again, as was echoed in many places already in our service, God stands ready, waiting to restore us and just in case you think this is an Old Testament idea and oh, we should just ignore it, it's also echoed in the New Testament. In the book of Revelation where Jesus sends seven letters to seven New Testament churches, in particular to the church of Laodicea, Jesus says this 'Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline, so be earnest and repent. Here I am, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, says the lord, and opens the door. I will come in and eat with that person and they with me.' Jesus is ready to restore us, He's ready to come in and have fellowship with us and change things around. The language here is an echo of Psalm 23 which we just sung about in 'The King of love my Shepherd is' that banquet feast before us. He's ready to bring us in, to bring new life, to restore, to bring us into bounty and a harvest, and just a great feast, as that's on the other side of discipline. And so, we should not fear discipline, we should not turn away from it or shy away, we should not just put on the blinkers and let it go in one ear and out the other, because God's discipline is not about, listen to me please, God's discipline is not about inducing guilt. I know that's hard to get your head around because that's often how we feel but God's discipline is not about inducing guilt. There may be conviction but it's so that it leads to life.

When we feel guilt, that's the enemy speaking, because the enemy wants you to feel guilty so that you turn from God, so that you feel gloomy, so that there's self-pity. The Lord brings conviction to bring you to life and there's many examples we could turn to both inside the Bible and outside the Bible, but I'm going to stick with an inside the Bible example.

And so, we have the apostle Paul and he's used of God to challenge the churches left right and center when they stray and particularly the church in Corinth, who just seem to get it wrong in so many different ways. And so, he writes multiple letters to them and his first letter is really hard-hitting and he addresses a number of issues but he follows it up, he hasn't managed to visit them, but he follows them up because he hears how they've responded to that first letter and so he says this, but he's been exercising God's discipline, and he says this 'I know I distressed you greatly with my letter although I felt awful at the time I don't feel at all bad now that I see how it turned out. The letter upset you but only for a while, now I'm glad not that you were upset but that you were jarred into turning things around. You let the distress bring you to God, not drive you from him. The result was all gain, no loss. The stress that drives us to God does that, it turns us

around, it gets us back in the way of salvation. We never regret that kind of pain but those who let the stress drive them away from God are full of regrets, they end up on a deathbed of regrets and now isn't it wonderful all the ways in which this distress has goaded you closer to God. You're more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible. Looked at from any angle, you've come out of this with purity of heart and that is what I was hoping for in the first place when I wrote the letter.' I wonder, can we try and see discipline, God's challenge in that way? To welcome it, to engage with it? That on the other side of it is His life? Because He stands ready to restore us. He stands ready if we will but respond to Him.

And so, we can change our structure as much as we want, we could even plant churches, but, if the heart is not there, if the priorities are not right, it doesn't make a jot of difference, we need to be changed from the inside out, we need to be purified and matured and, if we will but, heed the Lord as he says here, He's ready to restore us, to come in, as He said in Revelation and bring that life, to bring that life. So, if we're ready to respond, how do we respond? what does that response look like?

Well, Nehemiah's passage teaches us that there's probably multiple stages of responding but it begins this way. 'Then I said, Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself, have committed against you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.' As Nehemiah realizes that God's discipline continues, he responds in prayer. As Corinthians said, he's driven closer to God, he's driven into that place with God, to seek the Lord. But how does he begin his prayer? He begins with confession, with turning up to God and in that place of humility, recognizing that he is but a man, a human being. He comes before this incredible God, He begins with confession because repentance precedes restoration and repentance is not just about saying 'Sorry'. True repentance is when our hearts are so deeply changed and we are grieved by the waywardness, that we change our lives, that we're ready to change our lives however that might need to be done. And, although Nehemiah doesn't pray specifics here, as we'll see next week, this prayer is really a summary prayer of prayers he prays over a great vast number of days. So, it's unlikely he's going to include specifics here but I think he would get specific in his prayers and so I want to get specific with us this morning.

If our future is to be different, if we are to see the gaps around us filled, for to see that balcony as full as the downstairs, how might our future be restored? What might we need to repent of? What might we need to admit up to God and ask for His help on? And again, as I say, I want to get personal. I don't want to just talk about the wider denomination. Let's talk about us here.

And so, very briefly I want to touch on our purpose and two of our four values because our purpose says 'We seek to invite, encourage and enable people of all ages to follow Jesus Christ.' To do that requires all of us to be involved within the church and within the community because, inherent in this is that, everybody's got a part to play, everybody's got a part to play. Are you playing your part within here? There's too many

people who are carrying too much of the load. How could you play your part? Now there can be times of life, whatever age range, you're at younger or older and in the middle, there can be times of life when things are particularly busy or particularly limited but, even in that, there is still space to pray. Are you praying? So, are you playing your part within the church and outside? How can we possibly invite others to follow Jesus if we're not some way building bridges in the community and maybe sharing our faith gently? I'm not saying you have to stand on a soapbox and preach to people but do you ever invite someone to something at church, ever? We had a quiz last night, that's an easy building, bridge building thing with someone in the community – 'Oh, we're doing this fundraising quiz, do you want to come along?' Did you take that opportunity?

So, is there something there we need to change in us and repent of? Maybe it's fear that holds us back. Maybe we need to repent of our fear. That we have a greater fear of our neighbors than we have of a holy fear of God.

We also have a value that says 'We aspire to be a family of all sorts of people journeying in community' and Jesus says that the outside world will know that we are His disciples by the love we have for one another. Is that supernatural kind of love seen among us?

For example, do we always think the best of one another or do we assume that we know the motivations behind someone's actions? Do we ever and always give the benefit of the doubt to one another? And, you know, if you put together the New Testament teaching about how Christians should behave both individually and corporately, you could summarize it as 'we should be unoffendable'. We should be unoffendable. Do you ever get offended by something in church, by someone's actions, by me?

You should be unoffendable, if you're putting into practice New Testament teaching. Is that seen?

Or, what is the wider community hearing?' Oh, they're having another argument about x, y or z or someone was moaning about a, b or c again.' Is there something that we need to repent of there?

And then our meet value 'Meeting with God in a personal and life-changing way.' It's not about meeting together, that's our family value, it's not about having meetings for the church. Not really sure where that value fits in. So, maybe it needs fewer meeting. But this is meeting with God because, let's be honest folks, the community out there doesn't give a jot about church, doesn't need more community, it's got its networks, it's got its friendships, it's got stuff to do, it doesn't need more community, and it's busy enough with work, with the cost-of-living crisis, with Netflix, with gems, with sports clubs, with clubs that kids are in. It doesn't need more stuff to do and fill its week. So, why would they ever come in?

There might be multiple reasons that we could give them and answers to that question but one answer could be, if you can see what God is doing in your life, if you can say what God is speaking to you about, how he's refining you, how he's given you hope, what your faith means to you, how following Him is an adventure, and this is what it's done in your life, then, then, maybe, you might help someone see that, actually, there is a God, there's too much coincidence around these stories that individuals can share and, maybe, there's something to pursue there, and, okay, I might not go to church but I'll maybe go to this group or that thing first. But maybe they will come to church. Can you, have you limited your expectations of God, have you put God in a box, have you put up boundaries to keep God at a distance, have you maybe just become a bit lackadaisical in your relationship with God? 'Oh, I can't be bothered reading the Bible. I can't be bothered praying.'

Whatever it might be, what is it that's holding you back from meeting with God in a personal and life-changing way, such that you have testimony to share with people out there?

I can't answer it for you but I can ask the challenging questions.

And all this, if you want another Bible story to hang all this on, think about the prodigal father. I know we are probably quite familiar with that story. The younger son he says 'Father I wish you were dead to me because I want the inheritance that I'm due, now. I just, I want to be cut off from you and I just want to go my own way.' Sounds a bit like our denomination at times, sounds a bit like how we can be in our own lives. And, you know, the father allows him to go. It's a form of discipline because his choices lead to consequences and he gets himself into poverty. At the end of the story the son does return and as he expressed the horizon the father runs to him and he envelops him and he wraps his arms around him. And doesn't that show us that God is ready to restore His people? He's ready. His waiting is long but the bit in the middle of the story is just as important in fact, the restoration might not necessarily come without the middle where the son realizes it's time to change and he doesn't just say sorry, he comes back, he turns around, he lives differently. He gets to say sorry but he doesn't get on to say the other things that are maybe more rooted in self-pity or a false humility, because the father loves him and restores him and brings him into new life. We often use that parable just to talk about coming to faith but maybe there's a deeper meaning there also for us all, faith that the Father stands ready to restore if we were to but repent. So, let us take a moment to pray before we close our service. Let us pray:

So in the stillness,

where do you feel a measure of conviction, a measure of calling, a measure of fresh realization about Father God?

And, in the stillness, why don't you speak to God about that and admit that to Him?



Our God and Heavenly Father, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with us, with me. Let your ear be attentive to our prayer this morning, to the confession we bring, that there are things that need to change in our individual lives and in us corporately.

We recognize, that just by admitting it, it doesn't change instantly, that there's a journey here, a process that we need to begin upon, but it begins with repentance, Father, begins with admitting the truth and asking for Your help.

Whatever it might be that you've put your finger upon this morning, don't let us be overcome with guilt. That's not of You. But let the conviction go deep that might change our hearts, that we might realize You do only out of love and to lead us into life and maturity, that we might further Your purposes and be Your people upon the earth and from us Your light might go forth into our wider community.

Hear our prayer for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.