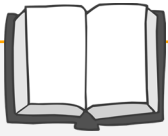


4. Ezra and Nehemiah - a new normal? **SECONDARY**



Bible Passage

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah. To remind yourself of what happens in these books watch this video: bibleproject.com/explore/ezra-nehemiah

Whilst this is an overview of the two books, the focus is on Nehemiah 13:6-14.

INTRODUCTION (1 minutes)

Introduce the session by covering the following points. We want to get back to normal or to the “new normal”, whatever that is! But what can we expect? Whatever it looks like, it will not meet all our needs as it will not be perfect. Just as before we long for things to be perfect – and for heaven. Our call for now is to know God and glorify him.

ACTIVITY (6 minutes)

Do an activity called ‘What is the point?’

Have several different items to show – it could be the actual item or a picture of it. The group must tell you in the most descriptive way possible what the point of the item is. You can use normal or unusual items and let the descriptions get a bit silly and fun. As an optional extra you could score volunteers on how descriptive they have managed to be.

e.g. a watch – the point is to show the exact time so that you can be on time, know how long things have gone on for

e.g. a toaster – the point is to heat the element to warm the bread and caramelise the sugars to turn the bread into toast that you can enjoy

End the activity by showing a picture of a person, or point at yourself and ask the group to tell you what the point of a person is. What are we made to do? What is our purpose? This could be answered individually or in small groups. Note the answers but do not comment on them for now. These will be returned to later in the session.



Aim

To see that the point of life – to know God and show others how amazing he is – remains the same, even if things are different.



You will need

- ◆ Bible
- ◆ Various household items
- ◆ Picture of a person
- ◆ Paper and pen for you to note answers
- ◆ Props to help tell the story, or a way to show on screen pictures

BIBLE (12 minutes)

The part of the Bible being looked at covers a period of decades. Therefore, you will need to describe what happens in your own words, rather than reading out two books of the Bible. To aid the telling of the story you might show pictures of the temple, the Book of the Law and the city walls. Search for Ezra and Nehemiah at freebibleimages.org

If you have an older group you might show the video listed earlier as preparation for team members: bibleproject.com/explore/ezra-nehemiah

Here are some points as a guide:

- ◆ In the part of the Bible being explored in this session God's people, the Israelites, are experiencing the end of a "lock-out" rather than the lockdown we have had
- ◆ The Israelites were attacked about 50 years previously and many of them had been taken as captives to a foreign country called Babylon
- ◆ The "lock-out" is now coming to an end because the Israelites are being allowed to go back to their country
- ◆ Gradually they start going back. It is a bit like restrictions in Scotland being eased but this happened over a period of many years
- ◆ One of the first people to go back is a man called Zerubbabel and he organises the rebuilding of the temple
- ◆ Ezra leads the next group and he sorts out the rules and laws and rebuilding the community
- ◆ Finally, Nehemiah returns and his job is rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, especially its broken walls
- ◆ Each of them seems to start well, but then some people go against them and try to disrupt the work so although some good things happen in the end it is a bit of a let down
- ◆ The temple isn't as good as the old one, some people are kept out of the community and God's laws are broken
- ◆ The brilliant new normal they are hoping

for doesn't happen and the things God has promised years before, like a Saviour King, God's presence with them and God's kingdom ruling the other nations doesn't seem to be working out

- ◆ At the end of all this although they have a rebuilt temple, city and walls, the people are doing what they like and have forgotten God

Read Nehemiah 13:6-14

These verses show Nehemiah discovering all the wrong things that the people are doing and in v.14 he prays to God saying he has done the best he can and asks God to remember him.

For the Israelites the "new normal" isn't really working out any better than it has been before. They are looking for their purpose in rules, buildings and places and rather than a "new normal" what they really need is a new heart. They have missed the point. In life our point, our purpose, is not simply about having a nice life and being kind to others. What is our point, our purpose?

CHAT (7 minutes)

Look together at the suggestions that were noted earlier in the session. What has been suggested as the point of people? Discuss why these suggestions were made.

In the Bible God says that people are made in His image (Genesis 1:26) and live out our praise of him by the things we do for him (1 Corinthians 10:31). That is the point of life, to know God and show others how amazing he is. Ask the group how much they understand this and how much they agree or disagree with it.

The people in Nehemiah's time do not do that. They are too busy trying to work out how to make life the best for themselves, by themselves.

Lead a conversation with the group to help them discover what they would say the point of their life is. Some questions to ask that will

help each person do this are:

- ◆ Apart from the things you need to do like eating, sleeping and being at school, what do you spend a lot of time doing?
- ◆ Who is most important to you?
- ◆ Who or what helps you decide what choices you make?

Draw a conclusion that in many ways it does not really matter if we live in the “old normal” or the “new normal”, in both there will be good things and hard things. The true point of life remains the same but are we doing that?

PRAY (4 minutes)

Take a moment to allow the group to think and pray about what is most important in their lives. Lead in prayer, asking God to help us see the point of life and to live with that in mind, whatever “normal” looks like.