

# STUDIES IN NEHEMIAH

Prepared for Christ Church Derby, 2022-2023

Peter Leach

## Contents

Nehemiah 1 .....	3
Nehemiah 2 .....	6
Nehemiah 3 .....	10
Nehemiah 4 .....	14
Nehemiah 5 .....	18
Nehemiah 6:1 – 7:4 .....	22
Bonus Study: The Meaning of Walls .....	26
Nehemiah 8:1-12 .....	32
Nehemiah 8:13-18 .....	36
Nehemiah 9 .....	39
Nehemiah 10 .....	43
Nehemiah 11-12 .....	47
Nehemiah 13:4-31 .....	51
Appendix: The Ruins and the Rebuilder .....	54

**N.B.** Rather than being off-the-shelf studies, the pages that follow are intended as a guide for leaders in preparing their own questions. The format is the one that I would prefer if sitting down to prepare a study myself. It was a privilege and pleasure to prepare these guides for the saints at Christ Church Derby – and I enjoyed more than one evening in which the leader had made generous modifications to my suggested outline, to the great benefit of all present!

## Nehemiah 1

The prayer in Nehemiah 1 is the longest speech Nehemiah gives in the whole book. He is, on the whole, a man of action: short vigorous speeches and decisive interventions. But his first prayer gives us an insight into his heart.

There are two fruitful ways to read this prayer, and we will go for both in this study. The first way is to read it and see Nehemiah's prayer as a model for our prayer. The second way is to read it and see Nehemiah as a type (pattern) of Christ, revealing what Jesus is like to us. Rather than try and keep these two different ways of reading in our heads at the same time, we'll just go through the passage twice, treating it first as a model for us and secondly as a revelation of Christ.

### Walkthrough 1: Nehemiah as model for us

At the start of the book, Nehemiah is in Susa (one of the capital cities of the empire), v1; he gets a visit from his brother, v2. And immediately he shows his concern for God's people: "I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem." The news he hears is not good (v3): trouble and shame, and in particular the walls of Jerusalem are broken down. This sets the agenda for the whole book. Nehemiah 1-6 are about rebuilding the wall, and Nehemiah 7-13 about repairing the shame of the people.

Nehemiah's response is one of deep grief: mourning, weeping, fasting,<sup>1</sup> praying (v4). Before we get to what he actually prays, there is a lesson here for us. Nehemiah was comfortable, in the king's palace, an important man. He could easily ignore the fortunes of God's people. But instead he cares deeply for them, wants to hear about them, and grieves when they are in trouble. Is that our attitude? If not, the prayer that follows is a model we need!

Nehemiah's prayer has the following structure:

- A. Appeal to God to hear (v5-6a)
- B. Confession of sin (v6b-7)
- C. Argument (v8-10)
- D. Appeal to God to hear (v11)

The opening appeal is to God's character. Both the name ("LORD God of heaven") and the description ("the great and awesome God who keeps covenant...") highlight two things: God's incredible *power* ("God of heaven", "great and awesome God") and his covenant faithfulness ("LORD" is God's covenant name; "who keeps covenant..."). In other words, God is able to help and committed to help. Thus Nehemiah's prayer starts with praising God, in the middle of trouble, and basing his whole prayer on God's character. It is on this basis that he asks God to hear his prayer. Jesus taught us the same thing ("Our Father in heaven" names God both by

---

<sup>1</sup> This is certainly not the main point of this passage, but worth noting that fasting is often associated in Scripture with prayer, especially confession and seeking God's mercy. Fasting is not particularly in fashion in conservative evangelical churches like ours, but we neglect it to our loss.

his power, *in heaven*, and his commitment to us, *Our Father*). And so it's worth asking ourselves: is this how we actually think of God as we pray? And is this how we pray?

Nehemiah then goes on to confession of sin. He sees behind the trouble of Jerusalem to the root cause: the sin of the people. He doesn't relegate this to the distant past (not just the generations before the exile); he doesn't limit it to just the people generally, but owns his own share in it ("Even I and my father's house..."). He recognises the internal problem ("corrupt") and the external results ("have not kept the commands, the statutes and the rules"). Even though this is a very brief confession, it is very full!

This is worth pausing on. In the UK, the church has been shrinking and becoming increasingly unfaithful. In the last few years, the Methodists have become so fully apostate that most of the evangelicals have now left; while we hope and pray better things for the church of England, the signs are not encouraging. Rather than walling ourselves off in our relative comfort ("things will be OK in CCD/the IPC"), we should see ourselves as part of the wider church and grieve and pray and confess. What are some of the things we can see has led to our decline? Are those things present in our own hearts? There is plenty of room for confession.

From confession, Nehemiah moves on to his argument before God. If the confession is all about the people's sin, the argument is all about God's goodness. He first argues on the basis of God's *promise* (v8-9): God promised to exile them, which he has done, but he also promised to restore them if they repent. [The "word that you commanded your servant Moses" is not a direct quote from Moses, but more of a summary of Deuteronomy 28-30, especially 30:1-10. If you have time, it might be worth reading Deut 30:1-3 together at least.] And he secondly argues on the basis of God's *actions*: God has committed himself to Israel by saving them from Egypt, and now they are his people. He cannot abandon them without abandoning his own glory.

Again, this is a model for us. It is absolutely appropriate to argue with God: he wants us to! And our arguments are on the basis of God's character (v5), his promises (v8-9), and his saving acts (v10). We ask him to save us because he is good, not because we are worthy. Of course, we know far more of God's character, promises and acts than Nehemiah did, because we are on the other side of the Lord Jesus.

Finally, Nehemiah returns to his appeal to God to hear his prayer and grant him favour before the king (v11). And that leads into the action of chapter 2.

### Walkthrough 2: Nehemiah as type of Christ

As Nehemiah prays, we should remember that Christ is a priest who intercedes for us. (This is a big theme of the book of Hebrews – key verses include 4:14-16 and 7:25.) We don't need to go over every detail again, but we can pick out some important points.

Nehemiah's reaction to his people's shame is striking: "I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." (v4) We shouldn't push this too far – the Lord Jesus has entered his joy in the presence of his Father, and isn't fasting in heaven. And yet the heart that this reveals *is* the heart of Christ. He cares for us; he feels deep compassion for our sorrows. He came to earth for us; he wept on earth for us; in heaven now he intercedes for us with great tenderness and urgency. (Worth asking: is this how

we instinctively think of Christ? When we are in trouble, especially the trouble caused by sin, do we instinctively go to him as sympathetic, compassionate – or do we imagine him looking down his nose at us?)

When Nehemiah confesses sin and includes himself in that confession (v6b-7), again, we can't push that too far: Jesus was sinless, after all! And yet, wonderfully and remarkably, he did truly identify with us in his sin. That's why he is baptised ("a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins", Mark 1:4); even more centrally, it's why he dies. He takes on our sinfulness and represents us to God. Remarkably, then, when I confess my sins to God, there is a sense in which Jesus is on *my* side of that dialogue, representing me to the Father and bringing my confession to him.

When Nehemiah appeals to God's character, promises, and actions, again we can see Christ. Christ entrusted himself completely to God ("Father, into your hands I commit my spirit") because he knew him and his promises. And in Christ we have received better promises and a clearer sight of God's character than Nehemiah had. (For some lovely examples of God's promises in Christ, see John 5:24, 10:27-29; 1 Cor 10:13; Rev 3:12; and many others!).

And in Nehemiah's urgent appeal (v6a, 11), we see Christ's urgency. He is more concerned for our salvation than we are.

### Suggested Study Outline

I suggest walking through the passage twice, as above. Rather than pausing after every verse to apply this to ourselves, though, I would have two big points of application, one at the end of each walkthrough.

The questions might go like this:

1. (v1-4) What does Nehemiah hear at the start of the book? How does he react? What does that show us about his priorities?
2. In v5, Nehemiah opens his prayer by praising God. What things does he specifically say about God? Why is this relevant?
3. In v6-7, Nehemiah confesses the sin of the people. What can we learn from (a) *who* he says has sinned in v6 and (b) *what* he says their sin was in v7?
4. In v8-10, Nehemiah argues with God for mercy. What are his two big arguments?  
*It might be worth going to Deut 30:1-3 if you have time.*

*Apply:* Nehemiah is a model of faithful prayer here. What can we learn from him? (Remember that the state of the church in the UK has some parallels to the shame of Jerusalem in Nehemiah, and see if you can outline a specific prayer for our church based on Nehemiah's prayer.)

5. We're now going to go through the passage again, more briefly, thinking about how Nehemiah is a "type" or shadow of Jesus Christ. Firstly, take Nehemiah's distress in v4. How does that reflect Jesus?
6. It might be odd to think of Jesus confessing sin, since he's sinless. But is there any way in which v6-7 reflect Jesus's attitude?
7. In v8-10, Nehemiah puts his confidence in God's promises and saving acts. When did Jesus do something similar?

*Apply:* how does seeing Nehemiah as a type of Christ help us when we are in trouble, particularly when we need to confess our sins?

## Nehemiah 2

Most of the book of Nehemiah is symbolically about the church age – rebuilding the walls, rebuilding the people. But the launch of the church age is the cross & resurrection of Christ. We get this prefigured in Nehemiah 2, as the great man comes from the emperor to the ruined city, goes to the ruins in darkness, gathers the people and gives them a great commission.<sup>2</sup>

### Passage Walkthrough

In Neh 2:1-8, we see Nehemiah summoning up his courage and going to the king. He is the cupbearer (see end of chapter 1), a very significant official, but also one who is tied to the king's side; a cupbearer is not much use in another part of the country! So Nehemiah's request, to go to Israel and help his people, is a tricky one to make.

I want to note Nehemiah's combination of planning and in-the-moment prayer. Planning: Nehemiah has clearly thought about his approach. Chapter 1 ends with him asking God for success before the king "today" (1:11). All through his months of fasting and prayer, Nehemiah has apparently put on the normal happy face in front of the king, but now he deliberately goes in sad. The king notices (people don't usually let themselves look sad in his presence!) and asks. (2:1-2) Nehemiah takes his opportunity and tells the king of his sorrow over his ancestral home (2:3); the king, no fool, recognises that Nehemiah is working up to a request, and tells him to go ahead (2:4); Nehemiah asks for permission to go, and it's granted (2:5-6), and asks for help and it's granted too (2:7-8). Note that Nehemiah is a canny operator. He doesn't immediately name Jerusalem as the city involved (as we'll see in the book of Ezra, Jerusalem is not always a popular name in Persia), and he doesn't start out with his religious concern for the city but rather his family concern. Without telling any lies, he understands the king and how best to approach and present things. We shouldn't think that this is at all unspiritual; rather, it's obeying Jesus's instruction to "be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16).

But Nehemiah is not only relying on his nous. In v4, we get possibly the most famous moment in the book, often called his "arrow prayer": in between the king asking and him answering, "I prayed to the God of heaven." Clearly this can't have been an out-loud prayer, and it can't have been at all a long or complicated prayer: "Help!" probably about sums it up.

It's important to note that this arrow prayer is not Nehemiah's *only* prayer; he's just come from days of fasting and prayer. In a similar way, we shouldn't think that we can get by on only arrow prayers. We'll be most likely to pray instinctive short prayers like this if we're spending disciplined time in prayer as well! But Nehemiah illustrates for us here what Paul means when he tells the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). It would be worth spending time in your groups talking about such regular little snippets of prayer and how you could make that part of your life.

---

<sup>2</sup> I preached on the second half of Nehemiah 2 back in June. I had more space there than I do in these notes, so you may find it helpful if you have half an hour lying around!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WrFftxE3go&t=1903s>

The script of that sermon can be found in the Appendix.

*Aside: is there a typological significance to 2:1-8?*

One of the things I emphasised in the previous study, and in the intro to Nehemiah, is that we'll get a lot more out of this book if we read it symbolically ("typologically"), especially seeing Nehemiah as a type or shadow of Christ, and Jerusalem representing the church. We could ask, then: does that symbolism apply in 2:1-8? We could imagine reading it this way, with Nehemiah representing the Son, the King representing God the Father, as the Son asks for permission to go to earth and save the world.

The brief answer to this question is: *no*, don't do that. (If that's all you want to know, feel free to skip the rest of this grey-box aside!)

The longer answer is: we mustn't press symbolism too far. The whole point of analogy is that you see the *similarity* between two *different* things. If those two things were the same in every respect, it wouldn't be an analogy any more – they'd just be the same thing! And so any analogy, any symbolism, is going to have bits where you go "that's similar, which is helpful" and bits where you go "those things aren't similar, and that's not the point of this analogy". Figuring out which is which requires some wisdom.

I think here, as all through the book, Nehemiah is indeed a shadow of Christ. His desire to save his people is certainly reflective of Christ's desire. Where I think it falls through is that King Artaxerxes does not seem to be a shadow of the Father. Scripture contains no hint that the Incarnation is the Son's idea and that he somehow persuades the Father to it; that's terrible Trinitarian theology, as well as not meshing well with verses like John 6:38. Also, there are plenty of details like Artaxerxes' ignorance (v4) and his wife at his side (v6) which just don't mesh well with him being a Father figure.

What that means is that the symbolism here is broad and one-sided, rather than being specific and detailed. We shouldn't press the individual lines in the conversation into a reflection of some kind of heavenly pre-Incarnation conversation, for example. In particular, given less than an hour to study on the whole chapter, I just wouldn't go here on these verses at all.

On to 2:9-20! Here Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, and here I think is where the symbolism really kicks into a higher gear. Here's the summary I preached in June:

The man comes from the great king to the ruined city. He brings with him the proofs of the king's authority, and the local rulers are horrified at his arrival.

On the third day, while it's still dark, he rises.<sup>3</sup>

The city is in a terrible state; but the man gathers together his people, tells them that he has received authority and blessing from on high, and gives them a great commission to join him in the work. The local rulers are no end of upset, but it turns out there's nothing they can do about it, and so up the walls go.

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that the chronology is a bit compressed. Nehemiah's trip in the dark seems to reflect the cross (see next footnote), but the fact that it's "on the third day" seems to reflect the resurrection. I wouldn't get too hung up about this; again, symbolism is never exact.



Fairly clear, I think, that this chapter gives us an image of Christ's death and resurrection. But what particular *angle* on his death and resurrection is Nehemiah 2 showing us? I think the answer is *identification*. Nehemiah *joins* the people in their problems; he joins the people in their rebuilding.

Him joining them in their problems is seen in v9-15, and the first half of v17. He picks his way round the walls in the dark, humbly, even getting off his donkey.<sup>4</sup> And then he goes to the people and says "you see the trouble *we* are in" (v17). He didn't have to do all this; with the king's troops (v9) and his own significant authority, he could have ridden around in daylight and told them "I see the trouble *you* are in." But instead he identifies. Jerusalem's ruins are his problem.

Although that is in many ways a familiar thought, it's always worth being reminded of. Jesus' sufferings on the cross are *our* sufferings, that he enters for us; his ruin is a reflection of our ruin, a taking up of our ruin. It's because he joins us in our death that we can join him in his resurrection. It's well worth reflecting on Nehemiah's *determination* to identify, and how we see that all the more in Jesus. Nehemiah leaves behind the officers who could help him; Jesus refuses to call on the twelve legions of angels who could rescue him (Matt 26:53).

Similarly, Nehemiah identifies with the people in the *rebuilding*. This is the second half of v17. "Come, let *us* rebuild the wall of Jerusalem." He joins them in the work – and they can be confident because he has been granted authority, and he is with them (v18). In a similar way, Jesus says "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me... and behold, *I* am with *you* always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20). It is because Jesus' identification with his church does not stop at the cross (or even the resurrection!) that we can build with confidence. (See also Acts 9:4-5). This confidence even withstands the scariest of our opponents (2:19-20).

To sum up: if 2:1-8 gives a *model* of prayerful action, then 2:9-20 gives us a *basis* for prayerful action. Christ has joined us in our ruin and in our rebuilding, and because he is with us, the work will go on.

### Suggested Study Outline

Read 1:11-2:8.

1. Why might Nehemiah have been afraid? (2:2)
2. How does Nehemiah's approach show shrewdness and understanding? What does he emphasise? What does he not mention? (How is his shrewdness an example to us?)

---

<sup>4</sup> By the way, I think the names of the gates and pools are probably significant. Valley Gate, Dragon Spring, Dung Gate, Fountain Gate, King's Pool, Valley Gate (v13-14). Those are all names which tie in very easily to the cross. Christ goes through the Valley on the way to the cross, fights the Dragon (the devil), is treated like the dung of the earth, opens a fountain (Zech 13:1), is enthroned as King on the cross, and finally has his body taken down and through the Valley again to burial. Something like that! I wouldn't insist on it, and if anybody wants to disagree and think I'm seeing things, I won't fight you on it...

3. Nehemiah's prayer in v4 is famous, and often called his "arrow prayer" – a quick shot off to God in the middle of a difficult situation. Do we pray like this? In what kinds of situations might such prayers be helpful? How can we grow in this kind of prayerfulness?

Read 2:9-20.

4. We finally have the hero arriving in Jerusalem. This bit of Nehemiah seems to be full of quite specific symbolism to do with Jesus' death and resurrection. What details can we see which point in that direction?
5. *Entirely Optional (see footnote 3, above!): look at the names of gates and waters in v13-14. How might these give us an outline of Jesus' work on the cross?*
6. Look at the pronouns in v17 and v18. Why is it encouraging to the people that Nehemiah says "we" and "us" in v17? Why is it encouraging that he says "me" in v18? How does this picture Jesus for us (*hint: Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 9:4-5*)?
7. How does this identification encourage us when we consider
  - a) the ongoing ruin of sin in the world and in our hearts
  - b) the call to work for the kingdom?

## Nehemiah 3

In Nehemiah 3 we get our first long list. (There are more coming later in the book!) Don't be put off! In several of the details, but even more in the overall picture the chapter gives, there's plenty of encouragement to be had.

### Passage Overview

Chapter 2 finished with the people saying "Let us rise up and build" (2:18) – before facing opposition (2:19-20). Chapter 3 is something of a summary chapter: they rose up, and built (3:1). By the end of chapter 3, the wall is done: we've travelled all around the city, starting and finishing at the Sheep Gate (3:1, 32), and there aren't any bits missing. In chapters 4-6, we go over the wall-building more slowly, and with a lot more focus on the opposition they faced. Here, though, the focus is on the fulfilment of 2:18. They actually do it.

In a chapter like this, there isn't really a narrative flow, a beginning-middle-end structure. Nehemiah just goes round the wall and tells you who built what. So we'll look first at a few of the more striking details, before stepping back and taking in the whole picture.

#### 1. Details

The most important verse seems to be (no surprise) **verse 1**. Here there are two things to note: the priests **consecrate** the wall, and they consecrate it as far as **the tower of Hananel**. Consecrating the wall – i.e. dedicating it as holy to the Lord – is new. So far in the Old Testament, holiness has been more or less limited to the tabernacle/temple; the city as a whole, and certainly the walls which surround the city, have not been holy. So there is a sense of advance here, not just getting back what they had before but going on to something they've never yet had.

Together with the tower of Hananel, that points us squarely to Jeremiah 31:38-40. These three verses come straight after the famous verses about the New Covenant:

<sup>38</sup> Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when the city shall be rebuilt for the LORD from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. <sup>39</sup> And the measuring line shall go out farther, straight to the hill Gareb, and shall then turn to Goah. <sup>40</sup> The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the LORD. It shall not be plucked up or overthrown anymore forever.

In these verses we see several connections to Nehemiah 3:1: (a) the city rebuilt, (b) the Tower of Hananel as a marker, and (c) the extension of holiness (v40). Clearly Nehemiah 3 is in part a fulfilment of Jer 31:38-40, and so it is a shadow of the New Covenant promise. But it is *only* a shadow, only a partial fulfilment. The rebuilding in Jeremiah is bigger (v39), and in particular the holiness extends further – not just to the walls but to the surrounding fields and the nearby brook (v40). And of course the promise in Jeremiah is that the city will never be destroyed again (v40), but Nehemiah's rebuilding was thrown down by the Romans in AD70.

(By the way, a quirk of English is unhelpful to us here: it's worth knowing that "consecrate", "sacred", "saint" and "holy", which look like quite different things to us, all translate the same basic Hebrew word!)

In short, Neh 3:1 shows that God is keeping his promises and extending his holiness among the people. They receive in part what we are receiving more fully: the New Covenant promise and the holiness of God. (It might be fruitful to spend some time asking: do we value the privilege of holiness? In the New Testament, it is a core part of the identity of Christians: “saints”, holy ones. How might it help us to think of ourselves as saints?)

Moving on. Nearly everyone in the chapter does well; the exception comes in **verse 5**, where the Tekoites build, “but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.” In a chapter which honours people by name for their work, the only dishonour is given to those who were too *proud*. Isn’t that a remarkable illustration of how foolish pride is? It’s also a little illustration not to judge people too quickly by their leaders. The Tekoite nobles are fools, but the people are faithful. (They even do a second section – v27!) Often in Scripture we have good leaders leading rebellious people (Moses, Josiah – and of course Jesus!), but we also get faithful people led by faithless rulers. This happens more often than you might think. In the UK today, we might look at the Methodist church which has gone so badly wrong, or the Church of England where a number of bishops have recently come out in favour of changing the church’s teaching on LGBT matters. The fact that the leaders are duds is not a sign that there’s no life in the pews. Often there is, and we should pray for those sheep!

And in **verse 11**, we have a lovely little picture of restoration. “Malchijah the son of Harim” was one of those disciplined by Ezra for the sin of intermarriage with a pagan (Ezra 10:31).<sup>5</sup> Here the same man is honoured as one of those who faithfully builds. If that was so in the Old Testament, how much more in the New: our past failures and faithless acts are not a barrier to present faithfulness and a legacy of building the church.

## 2. *The Whole Picture*

When we consider the chapter as a whole, the striking thing is what a *united* effort this is. Rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem is not the work of a few keen beans, but takes the work of the whole people. Some do a lot (v13), some fairly small sections (v28). Some come from outside Jerusalem (the Tekoites in v5, the men of Jericho in v2), but many of the rebuilders just focus on the section where they live (v10, 23, 28, 29, 30). There are leading men, rulers of districts (e.g. v14-18), alongside priests (v1), goldsmiths and merchants (v31-32); but most of those involved seem to just be ordinary folk putting in a shift. All have a role to play.

This is clearly a lovely picture for us of the church. As we are repeatedly told in the New Testament, unity is vital: God intends for us to grow up to maturity *together*. Perhaps a particularly relevant NT passage here is 1 Cor 12:12-26 (in fact, if you have time in the study, this is a passage it might be worth reading together). As members of a body all have a role to play, so every Christian has a role to play in the life of Christ’s body, the church. Nehemiah 3 gives us that same truth in a different image: the walls go up as the whole people build, each labouring at the work God has given them.

Personally, I find this very encouraging. It’s easy to look at the state of the world, and the state of the church in the West, and feel pretty daunted. There’s so much to do, and what

---

<sup>5</sup> The whole story of Ezra 9-10, where intermarriage with pagan nations is seen as a national calamity and the solution is a mass divorce, is probably the part of Ezra-Nehemiah that modern readers struggle with most. We’ll get there in the Ezra sermon series, so don’t get too sidetracked here! The point is: Malchijah screwed up, and here he is, faithfully building.

difference can my tiny and feeble efforts make? Yet as each man builds his section of the wall, up it goes. I must focus on the work God has given me to do, particularly the work closest to hand (“each one opposite his own house”, v28), trusting that God will make sure my labour is not in vain.<sup>6</sup>

### Suggested Study Outline

I’ve leant a bit harder on “optional” questions for this one – you can decide how streamlined or not you want the study to be, and adjust based on how long you take. It’s worth saying that of course *all* these questions are optional: it’s a *suggested* study outline! But I’ve labelled these particular ones especially optional to highlight that they don’t form the main backbone of the study.

Also, I’m terrible at intro questions, so do feel free to substitute your own better one!

*Intro Question:* if you were helping rebuild a bombed-out city, what role would you personally most want to play in the efforts? (I know, I know, this sounds like a weird job interview question.)

Read Nehemiah 3.

1. Verse 1. “The Tower of Hananel” might not mean much to us, but it would have reminded them of a famous prophecy. Have a look at Jer 31:38-40.
  - a. What are the connections between Jeremiah’s prophecy and Nehemiah 3:1?
  - b. In what ways does the scene in Nehemiah fall short of what Jeremiah’s prophesying?  
So how does Jeremiah help us read Nehemiah 3?  
*Nehemiah 3 is a partial fulfilment of God’s promise of restoration – and we in the New Covenant are experiencing the greater fulfilment!*
2. *Optional, still on v1:* one of the major focusses of Jeremiah and Neh 3:1 is holiness. Before, only the temple has been holy: now Jeremiah sees holiness spreading over the whole city, and in Nehemiah the priests consecrate the wall. How is this spread of holiness fulfilled in the new covenant?  
The New Testament often calls believers “saints”, which means holy ones – how might this shape the way we think about ourselves and live our lives?
3. *Optional, on v5:* Most of the people are very willing, but there’s one exception in v5. What can we learn about pride from this verse? What can we learn about the relationship between leaders and people?
4. *Optional, on v11:* This is not the first time Malchijah son of Harim appears in Ezra-Nehemiah. Look up Ezra 10:31. How does that background make his appearance in Neh 3 an encouragement to us?

---

<sup>6</sup> By the way, I haven’t said anything in this study about the fact that the people are building a *wall*. Pretty much everything in these first three studies has talked about rebuilding in general terms, not the specifics of wall-building! We’ll have a whole study on the specific symbolism of walls later.

5. Consider the passage as a whole. How many different types of people can you spot? What does this teach us about the way the church is built?
6. Quite a lot of people in this chapter build the section of the wall near their own house. Why is this a sensible strategy on Nehemiah's part? How does it help us as we think about our own contribution to God's work in the world?
7. *Optional:* Read 1 Cor 12:12-26. What connection is there between Paul's point here and the lesson of Nehemiah 3? How would you express Paul's point in Nehemiah 3 language?

## Nehemiah 4

In Nehemiah 3, we covered the whole wall-building process, right down to the gates being installed and the bolts and bars fitted. Nehemiah 4-6 rewind and replay the wall-building process, focussing on the difficulties that they faced. Nehemiah 4 shows us external opposition; Nehemiah 5 shows us internal difficulties; and Nehemiah 6 shows us how external opposition and internal treachery can combine.

Our chapter this week, Nehemiah 4, is a very high-tension chapter, even though no fighting actually happens! Rather than just observe it all coolly, it's worth trying to worm our way into the feel of the thing.

It's worth saying at the outset that we should have two potential battles in our minds: first and foremost, the spiritual battle that we wage with the devil and his angels (2 Cor 10:3-4, Eph 6:10ff), and secondly the potential for hostile attacks from non-Christians.

### Passage Overview

We can split the passage roughly into three parts: the mockery (v1-6), the threat (v7-12), and the response (v13-23).

In **v1-6**, Sanballat and Tobiah hear that the wall is going up. These men are local rulers and bigwigs; we first met them in chapter 2, and they will keep come up again in chapters 6 and 13. They are *angry and greatly enraged* (v1); they do not want Jerusalem to be strong. And their first response is to mock.

As so often in Scripture, they mock with words truer than they realise. (Think of Jesus on the cross, for example – all the mockery directed at him is actually, wonderfully, true!) In this case, the mockeries are true both of Nehemiah's work and of Christ's work that he points towards. So we can respond to his mockeries (v2):

- “the feeble Jews” – Yes, God's people are feeble. God delights to work in weakness; the cross is terribly weak, and the church is built in weakness. (This is why mockery is such a theme in Scripture: those who think themselves strong laugh at the weak, but because God is with the weak their laughter rebounds.) And yet it is built and is stronger than the world's strength.
- “Will they restore it for themselves?” Yes, they will rebuild – and God has promised a far greater restoration to come.
- “Will they sacrifice?” Yes – they will worship God in the restored city, and that worship will be a sign of the New Covenant to come.
- “Will they finish up in a day?” They do build extraordinarily fast (52 days, we're told in 6:15!); and their restoration points forward to the day of Christ, when salvation is indeed achieved all in one day.
- “Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” Yes – indeed, this is one of the greatest glories of Christ's restoration, that he builds out of the ruins of the old, taking broken sinners and building them into his house.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> I got these observations from Matthew Levering's commentary. Tobiah's mockery in v3 is a little more difficult – it doesn't so obviously point to the successful restoration of Nehemiah's Jerusalem or of the New Testament church.

Not only the details, but the shape of this should encourage us. There is something about the way God works that invites mockery – he works in weakness, and weakness is very mockable. That means we should expect derision, and not be discouraged when we face it!

Nehemiah's response in v4-5 is appropriately robust, and full of faith. Rather than trying to meet their mockery with similar mockery, he takes it to the Lord and asks for justice. Those who are hostile to God's people are hostile to God and should face God's wrath. It's worth asking ourselves whether our prayers ever look like v4-5. They probably should, when situations are comparable! (Although we will want to combine this with Jesus' teaching that we pray for those who persecute us and bless those who curse us. Appealing for God to be just does not contradict this; if he blesses them by leading them to repentance, then he is just at the cross. So we can pray meaty prayers for God's justice alongside genuine requests for blessing on our enemies. Note that Peter applies verses very like Nehemiah's prayer to Judas in Acts 1:20.)

In v7-12, Sanballat and co move from mockery to more focussed hostility. Worth noting that the reason for this is the builders' success (v7). We should expect hostility to ramp up when we actually achieve things! And so the plot is made to attack (v8). Nehemiah responds with prayer and a guard (v9) – these will be developed in our next section.

In verses 10-12, we get a wonderful little summary of the *types* of discouragement that can arise from hostility. It's not only our enemies who can get us down! We have the whole range:

- Internal discouragement (v10). Amongst those who are actually doing the work, courage is ebbing.
- The enemies themselves (v11). Sanballat and co know that fear can be an effective preparation for war, so they make sure that all the people know their threats.
- The allies of the workers (v12). There is no shortage of people *on Nehemiah's side* who urge them to stop. This wall-building is really catching some negative attention; time to lie low for a while.

We should take note and fix these dynamics in our minds if we want to be ready for conflict. When good things are happening and the Lord is at work, we should expect some *in our midst* to find reasons for discouragement and “weak knees” (Heb 12:12), and we'll need to strengthen them. We should also expect threats and attack, possibly from humans and certainly from the devil. And we should expect well-meaning friends to come to us and go, “cool it!” (Note that the Lord Jesus faced all these issues too – disciples with faint hearts, enemies threatening, family and friends trying to hold him back.)

As we see in the next section, Nehemiah does not let any of these things throw him off course. The Lord Jesus did not either. And, in their footsteps, neither should we.



In v13-23, we get the detailed account of Nehemiah’s response. It’s thrilling and stirring stuff! In v13, he organises, paying special attention to the weakest and most exposed points.<sup>8</sup>

Then in v14, he exhorts them. “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.” Although you are weak, he is not, and he is with you. “...and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” We might not expect this second half of his exhortation! It seems if anything a little unspiritual compared to the first half. But there is nothing unspiritual about it. These are blessings the Lord has given, blessings that the people are right to receive with gratitude, to love, and so to defend. There is nothing wrong with loving and fighting for the Lord’s blessings, so long as it is within the context of “remembering the Lord”, loving him first and foremost.

And finally, in v15-23, he sets them to *guard*. The details here are very vivid – working in armour, working hampered by the need to be armed (v17), working alertly and ready to drop everything, with a concern not just for themselves but for the whole work (v19-20), working hard and long (v21), all in (v22), constantly ready (v23).

The great theme of these verses is the need for constant vigilance, alertness, watchfulness. When we ask “where does watchfulness come up in the New Testament”, we might naturally think of watching *for Jesus’ return* (e.g. the parable of the 10 virgins), since that is such a focus of some key Scripture passages. But, while that’s obviously important, it’s not really what’s going on here. Instead, we should remember the bits of the New Testament that warn us to be on guard against evil. And there are quite a few!

- We’re warned to be on guard against the devil (1 Peter 5:8) as well as opponents of the gospel (Mark 13:9)
- We’re warned to watch out for false teachers (Rom 15:17, Acts 20:31).
- We’re warned to watch ourselves because of the threat of temptation (Luke 12:15, Gal 6:1).

This idea of watchfulness and alertness is, it seems to me, not terribly *cool*. We associate it with conspiracy theorists and little insular churches who are always suspicious that everyone is out to get them. If any of us feel this, it’s worth saying that the gospel encourages us to engage the world confidently, to live generously including to those outside the church, and to trust God with joy. We don’t need to become cramped little souls.<sup>9</sup> But, at the same time: alertness is a definite theme in Scripture! As the old saying goes, it’s not a conspiracy theory if they actually are out to get you. The devil is real, the world hostile to God is real, and your flesh and tendency to sin is real, and those things will all fight against you. Alertness does not mean automatically distrusting your non-Christian co-worker, but it does mean *alertness*.

How to be alert in practice? Well, there is probably no clearer application of Neh 4 than the one Paul gives in Ephesians 6:10-20. The gospel in its many wonderful aspects, the word of God, prayer: these are the weapons and armour that, like Nehemiah, we should not take off while we work.

---

<sup>8</sup> This reminds me of 1 Cor 12:22-25, speaking of stronger and weaker parts of the body. Those who are strong in the church cannot have an “I’m all right Jack” approach to troubles. We are given strength in order to help the weak.

<sup>9</sup> Although we also shouldn’t assume that those little fundamentalist churches *are* full of cramped little souls. Some of them will be. Some will be full of godly wisdom.

## Suggested Study Outline

*Intro Question.* When in your life have you felt most under pressure?

In Nehemiah 3 we took in the rebuilding in one go. Now in Nehemiah 4-6 we go over it again more slowly.

*Read the passage*

1. Sanballat and co mock the rebuilding (v1-3). Why?
2. One common theme in Scripture is that those who mock God's people often end up accidentally pointing to the truth. How do Sanballat's questions ironically end up highlighting God's salvation – both in Nehemiah's day and in God's salvation through Christ?
3. Nehemiah responds with a very firm request to God for justice (v4-5), and he is right to do so (see Rev 6:9-10 for a New Testament example!). Do we ever pray like this? When might it be right to do so? How do we combine this with Jesus' teaching that we should pray blessings on our enemies (Matt 5:44)?
4. In v7-12, we get a picture of the pressure that Nehemiah and co face. They get pressure from three different directions – what are they (v10, 11, 12)? How do we see the same thing in pressure on the church today? Which one of the three do you think you are least prepared for and alert to?
5. In v13-23, we see Nehemiah's response. What two things does he appeal to in v14? How do these two go together?
6. How would you sum up the actions in v15 onwards? Given that we're unlikely to face pitched battles in our Christian warfare, how do we apply these verses today?

*Helpful to have 1 Peter 5:8, Acts 20:31, Gal 6:1, and especially Eph 6:10ff in your back pocket!*

## Nehemiah 5

Nehemiah 3 showed us the rebuilding of the wall in one chapter; Nehemiah 4-6 goes over the process again, highlighting the difficulties and opposition that they faced. In Nehemiah 4, our last study, the focus was on external opposition. In Nehemiah 5, the focus turns to internal problems. (In Nehemiah 6, we'll see how external and internal opposition can work together for a particularly nasty double whammy.)

This wall-building context is helpful to keep in mind as we go through the chapter. Nehemiah only mentions the walls briefly in v16, and at first glance the problem is not immediately related. But a very little thought shows how the problem Nehemiah faces here has the potential to derail the whole project.

With that context in mind, let's get into the text.

### Passage Walkthrough

The problem is presented in **5:1-5**. In v1, the heading is a complaint (in fact, "a great outcry") *within* the community. This has the potential to blow everything up.

There are in fact three groups of complainants, and they follow the same theme but go from bad to worse. The first group (v2) are poor – so poor that they're struggling to eat. The second group (v3) are losing their property on account of this poverty, thus potentially putting them in permanent poverty as they lose the means to produce wealth. And the third group (v4-5) are losing themselves; as a result of borrowing money they and their children are going into slavery. In this sequence we see a reversal of God's promises to his people; the first group are not experiencing God's promised blessings, the second group are losing God's inheritance (the land), and the third group are virtually going back to Egypt (slavery).

This all sounds very horrible, but why is it an outcry "against their Jewish brothers" (v1)? This becomes clear in the next paragraph.

In **5:6-10**, we see Nehemiah's analysis. The summary is very brief, in v7: "You are exacting interest." In v6, we see that his (right) response to this is intense anger. In v8, he accuses them in public and sharply criticises them: while some in the community have been seeking the common good (buying Jews out of slavery), others *among the Jews themselves* have been reversing that good and putting people back in slavery.

A bit of OT law context might help here. Nehemiah might have had in mind these verses:

*Exod 22:25* – If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him.

*Lev 25:35-36* – If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you.

(See also Deut 23:19-20, Ps 15:5, Ezek 22:12).

The thrust of these laws is against *exploitation*. It is easy for the rich, who have resources, to exploit the poor, who are desperate and in no position to bargain. Loan sharks are not a new phenomenon!

This is exactly Nehemiah's point as he critiques them. In fact, he echoes Lev 25:36 in v9, when he says that instead of giving interest they should walk in the fear of God. And in v10 he returns to his own good example: he has been busy trying to help the poor, while others in the same community have been leeching off them.<sup>10</sup> It's time to all pull together.

In **5:11-13**, Nehemiah gets down to brass tacks. Verse 11: give it back! All that stuff you got by interest, which the Lord forbids: give it back. Restore the inheritance, give back their money. And the people agree (v12). Then, to bind them to their promise, Nehemiah gives a terrible curse: let all who do not keep the promise get shaken out of Israel (v13). If you take the inheritance of others, you lose your own inheritance.

This is a good point to pause and consider the application to us. The Venerable Bede (who wrote the first full commentary on Nehemiah in church history) has this to say on this passage: "it behooves us not to scrutinize the allegorical meaning but to observe the literal meaning of the text by performing it as diligently as we can." In other words, let's not weasel out of this by spiritualizing it. Let's make sure we first of all just do what this is teaching us. Bede *loved* allegorizing, so for him to say this is a big deal! But he's absolutely right. As we look at Nehemiah denouncing exploitative practices of the rich against the poor, the first and most urgent question for us is how *we* treat the poor.

This is no less a big deal in the New Testament. When Jesus is teaching his disciples before his death, his very last parable, the sheep and the goats, focusses on how we treat the poor (Matt 25:31-46). When Paul went to Jerusalem to check that his gospel matched the other apostles, they agreed on everything, and Paul adds this one little comment: "Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." (Gal 2:10) The letter of 1 John, which has a great deal to say about loving one another, contains just one concrete example of what that love looks like: helping the poor (1 John 3:17). When the apostle James wants to illustrate the kind of dead faith which does not save, he imagines someone who is full of kind words but who does actually help the poor (James 2:15-16). And we could multiply plenty more examples. This is *not* a minor theme in Scripture!

In particular, it's striking that it should be money matters which threaten to undo the unity of God's people. We see exactly the same thing in Acts 6 – the first issue in the early church which really threatened division was about the distribution to the poor. In response, the whole office of deacon was instituted! One of the key applications of Nehemiah 5 to us, then, is to pray for, support, and follow our deacons as they lead the church in serving the poor amongst us.

The end of the passage, **5:14-19**, reinforces this theme by looking at Nehemiah's own example more generally. As the governor, he had the right to use public revenue (v14) and the power to line his own pockets (v15). Others had done so before him! But he didn't, again

---

<sup>10</sup> If you look at the commentaries, you'll find there's a bit of disagreement in v10. Is Nehemiah offering himself as a *contrast* (and hence a good example of non-exploitative lending) or including himself in the general confession (and hence saying, we've all done this, and we all need to stop)? I think, given the anger of v6, the positive example of Nehemiah in v14 onwards, and the fact that he doesn't say he lent *at interest*, it's actually pretty clear that Nehemiah is offering himself as a positive example and contrast to the other rich Jews.

“because of the fear of God”. In v16-18, he expands this picture: the work was hard, the costs to Nehemiah were pretty heavy, and yet he bore them for the sake of the people, and not only did he not line his own pockets, he didn’t allow anyone working for him to do so either.

Reading this, it’s hard not to be reminded again of the New Testament, two passages in particular. The first is when Jesus tells his disciples that, although Gentile rulers lord it over the people, they are not to do the same in the church (Mark 10:42-45). Jesus is not giving them a new command – he’s just telling them to follow the example Nehemiah (and other OT figures like Moses) had already set. We see that example most clearly in Christ himself, but it’s already there in the faithful OT leaders of God’s people.

The other passage is 1 Cor 9:1-18, where Paul talks about his rights as an apostle, and how he didn’t make use of them. Rather than let the Corinthians pay him, which he had a perfect right to, he lived off his own means. Again, Paul is just doing a Nehemiah here.

What do we learn from this? Most in leadership will not have the resources to do what Paul and Nehemiah did (Paul notes that most of the other apostles weren’t doing what he did, and that was fine). But all should have the *attitude* that they had: not grasping after their rights, but eager to give as freely of themselves and what is theirs as they can. All those in church leadership should search their hearts on this matter, and all of us should be praying for our leaders on this!

More generally, Nehemiah wonderfully illustrates the opposite of the grasping sin in the first part of the passage. The point is not merely that the rich should avoid exploiting the poor; the point is that those who have should use what they have for the sake of those who have not. The strong should serve the weak; the powerful should serve the powerless; the mature should serve the young in faith; the rich should serve the poor. This is the pattern of Nehemiah, of Paul, and of the Lord Jesus.

### Suggested Study Outline

*Intro Question:* last study, we saw the threat to God’s people from outsiders. This week we’re going to see how God’s work is threatened by problems inside the church.

When you hear “problems inside the church”, what springs to mind? What potential problems should we be alert to?

*Read* Nehemiah 5.

*Question 1:* in 5:1-5, what issue does Nehemiah face? (*Potential prompt questions:* what are the three groups complaining? How do their complaints build on each other?)

*Question 2:* in 5:6-10, how does Nehemiah respond, and why? (*Potential prompt questions:* what is his *emotional* response in v6? What is his analysis in v7? Read Exod 22:25 and Lev 25:35-36. What are the principles at play here?)

*Question 3:* in 5:11-13, what does Nehemiah get the people to do?

*Question 4:* so far, the walls haven’t been mentioned. But how did the situation Nehemiah faced threaten the building?

*Question 5: can you think of any New Testament passages or stories which seem connected to this one? How does this passage hit home in our church today?*

*I'd particularly gun for Acts 6 – where treatment of the poor threatens a similar crisis of unity in the early church, and where the response is to appoint deacons. I'd also encourage people to think of at least one or two of the numerous passages which suggest that how we treat the poor (literally, not just figuratively!) is really important to the Lord Jesus.*

*Question 6: If the first part of our passage shows us the problem, the last bit shows us the solution in Nehemiah's own example. What does he do? How does this give us an example to imitate today? How might it shape our prayers?*

*If you have time, Mark 10:42-45 might be a great passage to look at here.*

## Nehemiah 6:1 – 7:4

In Nehemiah 4-6, we see three different difficulties that Nehemiah faced in building the wall. In Nehemiah 4, there was the external threat of attack. In Nehemiah 5, there was the internal threat of division because of the mistreatment of the poor. And in Nehemiah 6, we get a threat that is both external and internal: the threat of being derailed by fear.

### Passage Walkthrough

Fear is the dominant theme in this passage. Sanballat and co want to frighten the workers (v9); they hire Shemaiah to make Nehemiah afraid (v13), and again they hire a bunch of false prophets to make Nehemiah afraid (v14). But when the wall is finished, it's the *opponents* that are afraid (v16). And, finally, Tobiah keeps on trying to make Nehemiah afraid (v19). Not only is this a lot of references to fear, but they conclude all the major sections of the chapter (v1-9, v10-14, v15-16, v17-19).

It's helpful to identify this theme, because at first glance the problems Nehemiah faces look quite different. He's at threat of physical harm (v4), the emperor's displeasure (v7), assassination (v10) and treachery (v19). These are pretty serious problems! But it turns out that each time, the real aim is fear; and Nehemiah thwarts the enemies' plans simply by sticking the course, not deviating, and not being afraid.

The first attack comes in the form of five messages from Sanballat (**6:1-9**). The first four are all the same: come and talk with us (v2). The proposed meeting point is about halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria. Even if the meeting was totally innocuous, it would still have meant Nehemiah leaving the work for several days at a particularly crucial time; and in fact it wasn't innocuous, for "they intended to do me harm". Nehemiah rebuffs them (v3): I am doing a great work. And he has to repeat himself another three times (v4). (This sounds easy, by the way, but it's all too common to resist an attack or temptation at the first attempt and then be worn down, or let your guard down, and give in on the second or tenth attempt. Remember Samson and Delilah! Nehemiah's steadfastness is exemplary.)

For the fifth message, Sanballat ramps things up a bit. He sends allegations in an open letter (v5), meaning that quite likely most of Jerusalem's leaders would have heard the details. The allegations are of insurrection: Nehemiah wants to be king and is fomenting rebellion. This is obviously a very serious allegation, and if it got back to the emperor and was believed it could completely undo Nehemiah's work and endanger his life. It would have been very tempting for Nehemiah to throw his energies at refuting the allegations, summoning judges and witnesses and trying to get to the bottom of where it all started. But, again, he recognises that this is exactly what the enemies want, and his answer is gloriously dismissive (v8).

Verse 9 summarises this section: they all wanted to frighten us, thinking that this would stop them working. In other words, the messages of v2 and the accusations of v7-8 are not the real ploy (though no doubt Sanballat would have been delighted to assassinate Nehemiah or turn the emperor against him); the real ploy is that these *apparent* threats should cause enough distraction and fear to stop them working. The fear is the point. Nehemiah sees through it, and refuses to box shadows: he doesn't try and deal with the trumped-up charges or conduct diplomacy at a distance; he simply says "no thanks" and ploughs on with the work.

The next ploy (**6:10-14**) has a different structure but the same goal. Nehemiah goes to the house of Shemaiah, who tries to persuade him that he's under threat of assassination, and that

he should hide in the temple. (The poetic repetition of v10 suggests that Shemaiah is pretending to give Nehemiah a prophecy from God.) Going to the altar for refuge certainly has some precedent in the OT (Exod 21:14, 1 Kings 2:28), but Shemaiah's proposal of shutting the doors suggests they should go past the altar into the Holy Place. There are two levels of bad to this plan, and Nehemiah answers both of them. Firstly, for Nehemiah to flee at all (even to the altar, say) would be an expression of fear that would put fear into the hearts of the workers: "Should such a man as I run away?" Secondly, Shemaiah wants to use Nehemiah's fear to make him break God's laws by going where only priests could go,<sup>11</sup> thus either bringing God's judgement down on him or at least earning the condemnation of the faithful workers: "What man such as I could go into the temple and live?"

Nehemiah has seen through the attack: the issue, again, was not assassins but fear and the actions fear would lead to (v12-13). They kept trying this ploy, no doubt dressed up in various ways, and Nehemiah kept refusing to be afraid (v14).

And then, in **6:15-16**, the wall is done! Fifty-two days is remarkably fast; it was done with the help of God. And when Nehemiah's enemies see it, they are humbled and they become afraid. This is one of those poetic justices that Scripture loves: "his mischief returns on his own head" (Ps 7:16).

It would be very satisfying if that were the end of the story. Nehemiah had to keep his wits about him, but then the wall was finished and he could put his feet up. But that's not what we find! The same basic issues continue. In **6:17-19**, we return to Tobiah and his attempts to "make me afraid" (v19). Tobiah is related by marriage to some significant figures in Jerusalem and has a number of allies. They keep urging Nehemiah to ally with Tobiah himself (v19), and Nehemiah knows that all his private counsels will get reported back to Tobiah – a pretty miserable situation. Tobiah seems more well-connected in Jerusalem than Nehemiah himself! And through it all Tobiah keeps trying to make Nehemiah afraid to stay the course. (Tobiah no doubt claims, like the Samaritans in Ezra 4, to be a worshipper of the true God; his name means "Yahweh is good". It's easy to see how a lot of Jerusalemites might have thought it would be better to have him onside, and that Nehemiah's refusal to work with him was an unnecessary stubbornness.) Evidently, this didn't just last through the 52 days of wall-building, but through the whole 12 years of Nehemiah's governorship.

And so, in **7:1-4** we find Nehemiah providing for continued vigilance. The wall is done, so the extreme measures of chapter 4 aren't needed; but the gates still need to be guarded, the walls manned. Nehemiah puts the faithful Hanani and Hananiah in charge, and the instructions in v3 limit how much time the gates are open for. Again, the great importance of *perseverance* is being illustrated for us. Nehemiah has done very well and won a great victory in building the wall; that victory must be followed up by more ordinary day-by-day care and watching.

---

<sup>11</sup> Some have suggested that Shemaiah is not talking about the Holy Place, just the temple – and that the reason Nehemiah can't go in is that he's a eunuch. Eunuchs were not allowed in the temple at all. This is certainly possible, and commentators debate how likely it is. But we're not told for sure. In any case it doesn't change the thrust of this passage.



## Lessons and Application

The striking thing about the way Nehemiah responds in this chapter is that... he doesn't! Over and over, his enemies try and prod him into action of some kind. And he simply tells them he won't, and gets on with his actual duty.

This is certainly not an argument for never responding to threats. Nehemiah responds very vigorously to actual threats in chapters 4 and 5! But throughout chapter 6, the real danger is not the apparent threat but the *fear* of that threat.

We meet a very similar story in the gospels, in Luke 13:31-32:

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.'"

Like Sanballat and Shemaiah, Jesus is faced with enemies who pretend concern for his welfare; like Nehemiah, Jesus tells them to get lost. He will keep on doing the work the Lord gave him.

How do we tell the difference between a chapters 4-5 situation, which needs response, and a chapter 6 situation which needs to be ignored? It calls for wisdom! At least one principle is obvious: if the proposed response is to bend God's law a little because the situation is really urgent, that's a non-starter (v11). Similarly, Nehemiah's response to slander is very wise: attempting to answer it would simply get him dragged into the mud with them. The Royal Family's unofficial motto of "never complain, never explain" is not only the most dignified approach, but also often the most effective response to slander in the long term. Beyond these observations, we need wisdom: an understanding of God's priorities and commands, paired with an understanding of the actual situation we're in. Nehemiah clearly had both; we should pray for similar wisdom (and pray with confidence, James 1:5).

Having admitted that this chapter needs wisdom to apply, however, the great lesson is clear. Fear is an enemy. Very often, an apparent threat will arise, and the *real* threat is that we might be unduly afraid. The church's martyrs have understood this. The lions or the torture instruments look like the real threat; but they understood that it would be far worse to renounce Christ. The fear is worse than the fire. As the writer to Hebrews puts it, "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls" (10:39).

It is worth applying, then, by asking: what threats to the church, and what threats to individual Christians, tempt us to bend God's law or leave God's work? A few suggestions to mull over:

- Fear of attack. If I say this thing or fail to go along with this HR initiative, I might lose my job.
- Fear of loneliness/family breakdown. If I don't marry this non-Christian, I might never marry; if I speak up against what this family member is doing, my whole family will turn against me.
- Fear of division. If I maintain this truth, I'll lose this fellowship. (For ministers: if I say this from the pulpit, people will leave the church.)

No doubt you'll be able to come up with more from your own experience!

Finally, it is worth asking how Nehemiah stood so firm. Heb 10:39, quoted above, makes clear that the opposite of fear is *faith*. Nehemiah entrusted himself to God. 1 John 4:18 also says that the opposite of fear is *love*. This may be less obvious, but consider how much love for God's people and God's honour is shown in Nehemiah's firmness, perhaps particularly in v3. In a similar way, Jesus resolutely finished his work through his trust in his Father and his love for his people.

### Suggested Questions

*Intro Question.* What's the best magic trick you've ever seen?

Magic tricks often work by *misdirection* – you look at one thing while the real action goes on elsewhere. Here in Nehemiah 6, we face a number of apparent threats, each of which conceals the real deeper threat.

*Read Nehemiah 6.*

1. What is the repeated phrase that sums up the aim of Nehemiah's enemies?
2. In **v1-4**, what message does Nehemiah receive? What's his reply? Why would it have been a bad idea for him to listen to them?
3. (*Why do you think we're told that the same thing happens four times? What might that teach us about dealing with temptation?*)
4. In **v5-9**, what threat does Nehemiah receive? How might he have been tempted to deal with it? What does he actually do?
5. (*What might this show us about how best to deal with slander?*)
6. What is the apparent threat in these verses? What is the actual threat (v9)?
7. Again in **v10-14**. What is the apparent threat? What is the actual threat?
8. In **v15-16**, what's Nehemiah's assessment of how they built the wall so fast? What is the response of the enemies? What's ironic about it?
9. In **v17-19**, what does Tobiah get up to? Why do you think we're told that the fear-mongering doesn't end with the wall being finished?
  
10. We saw in chapters 4 and 5 that sometimes threats need a vigorous response. What makes the threats in chapter 6 different? Are there any principles we can apply here?
11. In what sorts of situations might we be tempted to ungodly fear – as individuals and as a church?
12. What makes Nehemiah able to withstand fear? (*You could consider Heb 10:31 and 1 John 4:18 – faith and love are enemies of fear.*)
13. How does Nehemiah in this chapter remind us of Christ?

## Bonus Study: The Meaning of Walls

The first half of the book of Nehemiah is all about the building of walls around Jerusalem. In our studies of these chapters, we've applied this fairly generically to doing God's work and in particular to "building up the church". But it's worth asking: why the emphasis on *walls* in particular? Nehemiah 7:4 tells us that, even after the walls are completed, many of the houses in Jerusalem are still ruined and loads of them are empty. The city as a whole hasn't been rebuilt, and yet it matters that the walls are finished. So there seems to be something specific about walls going on! This study is an attempt to try and uncover the Biblical significance of city walls, and then to re-read Nehemiah in light of that significance.

A study like this one is quite different from most of the ones we do, in that it isn't based on one passage but tries to pull quite a few together. So instead of a "Passage Walkthrough", I've got a study in three parts: first, what walls do, second, what walls are, and finally, the walls of Nehemiah. Then as usual I've included some study questions.

### Study Part One: What Walls Do

The basic function of a city wall is pretty obvious: it keeps out enemies.<sup>12</sup> However, there's a bit more depth to the Biblical picture than just enemies. What I want to do in this section is put three Biblical texts on the table, with brief comments, and then try and summarise the picture we get.

- 12        Walk about Zion, go around her,  
          number her towers,  
13        consider well her ramparts,  
          go through her citadels,  
          that you may tell the next generation  
14        that this is God,  
          our God forever and ever.  
          He will guide us forever.

Ps 48 is all about how God saves his people from their enemies, so we're seeing here the basic function of walls: they keep the enemies out. But there seems to be a bit more, doesn't there? There's something lovely about the walls, something glorious. They're not like a sewage system, necessary but best kept out of sight. Walls are beautiful.

Here's the end of Psalm 51 (verses 18-19):

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
build up the walls of Jerusalem;  
then will you delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

---

<sup>12</sup> This is the main reason why modern cities don't have walls; with modern artillery, they wouldn't do very much.

Notice how the good of the whole city and the good of the walls seem to go together. Strong and prosperous city, strong walls, and vice versa. The walls seem to be almost a symbol of the whole city.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, we can consider the whole story of the Bible. Adam is put in an (unwalled?) garden to work and *guard* it (Gen 2:15).<sup>14</sup> He loses the garden, and the story of the Bible takes us to a restoration – not back to the original garden, but back to what the garden should have become, the *garden-city* of the New Jerusalem. And this city has walls! I won't copy out the whole passage here (do look it up), but Rev 21:9-27 contains a description of the New Jerusalem that is mostly concerned with walls, gates and foundations. Here, all the themes we have seen so far come together. The walls keep out enemies: “nothing unclean will ever enter it” (21:27). And yet it's a funny kind of defence, a defence that will never actually be needed against an enemy – you can tell, because the gates are never shut (21:25). And we notice, as we read, that the focus isn't just on strength anyway: the wall is also gloriously beautiful (21:18). The walls and gates together show the glory of the city, in a way that reminds us of how a bride's clothes adorn her beauty (21:2, 9).

So what can we say from these passages? Walls defend; but walls are also *glorious*. Their strength is for beauty and joy as well as battle.<sup>15</sup>

### Study Part Two: What Walls Are

All of this makes walls sound pretty good. But if we want the blessings of walls, where do we look? What is the spiritual thing that walls signify?

In order to answer this, we need to back up briefly and note something about Biblical symbolism. We're probably fairly happy with the idea that the city of Jerusalem represents the church. (You can't really get around that after Rev 21!) We're also probably used to the idea that a single human being can represent the church – we're “the body of Christ”, the “bride of Christ”, and so on. We might be slightly less used to the third leg of that symbolism triangle, however: a *city* can represent a *person*.

But a city can indeed represent a person, and that's what we find in one or two helpful Old Testament passages. First, a slightly left-field one from the end of Song of Songs, Song 8:8-10.

---

<sup>13</sup> A little titbit that I would develop further if this study was twice as long: in the book of 2 Chronicles, one sign of a good king is that they build up Jerusalem's walls. Asa (14:7), Uzziah (26:9), Jotham (27:3), Hezekiah (32:5), repentant Manasseh (33:14). No wicked king builds up the walls, and in fact during the days of the wicked Amaziah the wall is broken (25:23) – not to mention the final breaking of the wall in the exile itself. So Nehemiah is not doing a new thing; he's just following in the footsteps of Israel's past godly leaders.

<sup>14</sup> ESV translates it “work and keep”, but this is “keep” in the way that a gatekeeper keeps a gate or a goalkeeper keeps a goal.

<sup>15</sup> I've left out of this analysis a fascinating little passage: Leviticus 25:29-34. This is about the restoration of land in the Jubilee year. In Israel, you can't really *sell* a field; you can only lease it out until the Jubilee, when it must return to your family. But, interestingly, city walls make a difference here. Within the walls of a city, you *can* sell land, and really sell it and not get it back.

I've left this out because I've not quite settled in my own mind what's going on here! If I had to take a stab, this law (including the bit in v32-34 about fields and cities for Levites) shows us that inheritance in a city is a better, higher thing (and a harder thing) than inheritance outside a city. The Israelite inheritance was just a shadow; our inheritance in Christ, where we cannot lose our stake in the eternal city, is the reality. That's my instinct, anyway.

In this passage, which you can look up for yourself, the woman's brothers sing about their sister: will she be a wall or a door? If she's a wall, they'll adorn her; if she's a door, they'll board her up. The woman replies that she is in fact a wall, and so has brought peace to her husband. The imagery here is fairly straightforward! To be a wall is to be *chaste* – which is of course a very desirable thing.

(I'm not actually going to include this passage in the study questions! Although I would very happily preach it, I think I would find it an awkward passage to read and discuss in a mixed group. You can tell people to go away and look it up for themselves!)

An even more straightforward metaphor is in Proverbs 25:28:

“A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.”

In Song of Songs, a wall is *chastity*; in Proverbs, walls are *self-control*. The two are obviously connected, since chastity is really a specific form of self-control.

At this point, I think, we've got our answer. What do walls signify? If the city represents an individual person, then the wall represents self-control. Self-control, of course, is like a wall – able to shut out evil and protect the good. It's a natural picture.

This might be a little surprising. We've spent a lot of time in Nehemiah on the walls: they really matter. Does self-control matter this much? And the answer is: yes, absolutely! Think about Jesus calling all his disciples to *deny themselves*. He doesn't use the word self-control, but the idea is very much there. Acts 24:25 summarises Paul's preaching to Felix as being about “righteousness and *self-control* and the coming judgement.” Galatians 5 ends the list of fruit of the Spirit with self-control, and just like love at the start summarises all the others, so self-control at the end underpins all the others. And in Titus 2 Paul keeps on telling Titus to teach self-control (it's the *only* thing he needs to teach the young men!), before saying that the grace of God trains us “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live *self-controlled*, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (2:12) – in fact, this is why Jesus died.

If we connect this to what we've already seen about walls in the previous section, what do we learn? Self-control defends us against harm (that's Proverbs 25:28); but also, self-control is *glorious*. We were made to rule creation (Gen 1:28); to do that we first need to rule ourselves. And a human being who rightly rules himself or herself has something of that original creation glory. In fact, although we tend to think of self-control when we're thinking about sin, Revelation 21 shows us that it's much deeper than that. Even after all the enemies are defeated, the city will still have walls; in the same way, when we are resurrected, we won't give up on self-control because we don't need it – instead, we'll finally be fully and gloriously self-controlled, ruling ourselves completely, to God's glory.

What about the church?<sup>16</sup> If walls represent self-control in an individual, what do walls represent when Jerusalem symbolizes the church? The same thing but on a corporate level: corporate self-control. In other words, church discipline. “Church discipline”, by the way, is not the same thing as excommunication. Just like the act of saying no to a temptation is the most obvious moment where someone is self-controlled, so excommunication is the most obvious moment where church discipline happens; but self-control is a deeper richer thing than

---

<sup>16</sup> I include this question and my answer for completeness; for simplicity, I haven't put any questions on this topic in my suggested study outline. But you're welcome to do so if you like!

just saying no to a bunch of temptations, and church discipline is a deeper thing than excluding unrepentant sinners. It refers to the whole *discipling* of a church; to all the ways in which a church says no to evil and yes to good, all the ways in which leaders exercise authority and the church receives their leadership, all the ways in which holiness is upheld. These are the walls of a church, and they are beautiful to the Lord Jesus.

### Study Part Three: Walls in Nehemiah

If walls represent self-control, what does Nehemiah add to this picture? Six whole chapters on rebuilding no doubt contains a great deal more than we can cover here (feel free to reread these chapters yourself and come up with your own applications!). Let me suggest three ways in which Nehemiah helps us.

1. The disgrace of ruined walls shows the shame of lacking self-control.

When the broken walls are introduced, *trouble and shame* is the key note (1:3). Nehemiah mourns and weeps (1:4). When he speaks to the people, again he emphasizes *trouble* and *derision* (2:17).

In a sense this should be obvious: if walls are for glory, then ruined walls bring shame. But perhaps you, like me, don't naturally think that lack of self-control is shameful. Our culture likes to laugh about lack of self-control. We should not laugh with them. We were made to rule the world; if we cannot rule ourselves, that is a deep disgrace. (It is not a disgrace with no remedy, praise the Lord; but we won't help ourselves by pretending it doesn't matter.)

2. Self-control is a whole-person thing; the whole wall goes up together.<sup>17</sup>

In a sense the whole of chapter 3 makes this point, as we travel around the *entire* wall. We get a similar sense in 4:6, when all the wall is joined to half its height; and in 6:1, when the last breach is repaired, though the gates are not fixed; and in 6:15, when the whole thing is finished. A good wall must circle the whole city! If the front looks very impressive but enemies can pour in the back, then the front is a phony glory.

In a similar way, self-control must be complete to be worth anything. Often in our struggles we fixate on one particular area and neglect massive breaches elsewhere. We want to be self-controlled when it comes to lust, but not self-controlled when it comes to food; or we fight hard for self-control to be diligent, but not self-control to be patient. We need to have a more joined-up view of the Christian life! A whole wall "joined to half its height" (4:6) is worth a great deal more than a wall that looks imposing in one place and is completely missing elsewhere.

3. It really is possible to build the wall; self-control can be attained.

---

<sup>17</sup> If we apply this imagery to the church, it shows that corporate self-control is a whole-church thing. My holiness is not independent from yours.

The end of chapter 6 and start of chapter 7 sees the wall built and finished, while the threats continue. The gates still need to be manned; Nehemiah still needs vigilance. This is *not* a vision of the New Creation (compare Neh 7:3 with Rev 21:25)! But that is actually very encouraging. It means that this period, when the wall is actually built, shows us something about life *now*.

Although there is no stage of the Christian life when we have “made it” and can stop caring about self-control, there is a genuine Christian maturity where that wall is in place. We see this in Phil 3:12-15,<sup>18</sup> Heb 5:14, Gal 6:1, and so on.

Sometimes we can talk about the ongoing presence of sin in the Christian life as if the whole Christian life is one long failure. But that is not the picture the Bible teaches us! Yes, we will have to do battle with the flesh all our lives; but a genuine Christian maturity, a genuine victory of the Spirit over the flesh, is possible. Nehemiah built the wall. Let’s do the same.

### Suggested Study Questions

*I’ve been fairly expansive in the notes above; the study questions below are a good bit more streamlined. Feel free to expand them (e.g. by adding an intro question!).*

The purpose of this study is to consider the Biblical symbolism of walls. We’ve spent 6 chapters on walls so far, but have mostly thought about this in quite generic terms. However, walls mean something; they’re not just a generic part of a city.

1. Read Ps 48:12-14 and Rev 21:9-27. There’s lots of detail in here that we won’t cover! But what do these passages say about walls? Are these walls purely for defensive purposes?

*Hopefully from here you get towards the idea that walls are necessary against enemies, and also that walls are glorious. Don’t worry if you see more than that, of course – there’s plenty in these passages! But also, don’t spend too long here if you want to get to Nehemiah...*

2. Read Proverbs 25:28. If we compare a city to a human being, what does the city wall correspond to?

*Self-control. (For further study, perhaps not in a mixed group, Song 8:8-10.)*

3. In what ways is a city wall like self-control? What does the glory of the walls in Ps 48 teach us then? How about the fact that the New Jerusalem still has city walls even after all the foes are defeated?

If walls equal self-control, then it’s worth asking what Nehemiah’s wall-building teaches us about self-control.

4. Consider 1:3-4, 2:17. What is Nehemiah’s reaction to broken walls? Is that our reaction when we lack self-control? What should our reaction be?

---

<sup>18</sup> Note how Paul says that even he is not *perfect* (v12), and then says “let those of us who are *mature* think this way” (v15). In Greek, the word for perfect and mature are the same word! Paul says that in one sense he isn’t finished, perfected (and nor are you); in another sense, it is possible to be finished, mature. Nehemiah’s wall – built, but still needing to be guarded – seems to me like a good illustration of this.

5. Consider 4:6 (and the whole of chapter 3!). Is a wall any good if it only goes half-way round? What might this teach us about growing in self-control?
6. Consider 7:1-4. The wall is finished, but Nehemiah is still vigilant. This isn't a picture of heaven; this is still a picture of the Christian life. What does this teach us about the potential for victory in the Christian life? How is that an encouragement? How is it a warning?

*Galatians 6:1 might be a helpful cross-reference here. There are Christians who are genuinely "spiritual" (Paul elsewhere calls them "mature"). And yet they still need to keep watch on themselves.*



## Nehemiah 8:1-12

In this study we embark on the second half of Nehemiah. The first half was all about rebuilding the ruined walls, but that's done now. Most of the second half of the book focusses on the great gathering of the people in chapters 8-12, in which they read the law, confess their sins, rededicate themselves to God, and set in place what will be needed for long-term obedience. The first half focussed on rebuilding the *walls*, the second half on rebuilding the *people*.

### Extra Detail: The structure of Ezra-Nehemiah

This is not going in the study questions (unless you add it in!), but you might like to know a little more about the structure of these two books.

Lots of the commentaries observe that both Ezra and Nehemiah have two parts: the first part is a physical building project (Ezra 1-6, the temple; Neh 1-6, the walls), and the second part is about the spiritual building and repentance of the people (Ezra 7-10, Neh 7-13). In both cases, the second half of the book starts by focussing on the man *Ezra*, the teacher of God's word. So in both books we have reinforced how crucial the word of God is for building up God's people.

However, we can go a bit deeper. Nehemiah 7 is more or less an exact repeat of Ezra 2,<sup>19</sup> a list of the people who returned in the first wave of exiles. (This is why we're not having a separate study on Neh 7; I already preached on Ezra 2, and I wouldn't have much more to say!) If we take Ezra-Nehemiah as basically one book, which it seems to be, then this long repeated list seems like a very obvious marker of the book's structure:

Ezra 1: the decree to return

Ezra 2 – Neh 7: the exiles return and rebuild

Neh 8-13: after the rebuilding

That helps us to see that Neh 8-13 is doing something a bit new. It's looking *ahead*. Now that everything is rebuilt – the temple is up, the people have been purified, the walls are up – what now? What will faithfulness look like, and what will keep them faithful?

So, there are two approaches to the structure of Ezra-Nehemiah. I think they're probably both true! And both of them focus our attention on this passage, the first thing after the rebuilding is done, when Ezra brings the word of God to the people.

### Passage Walkthrough

We can group this passage into two parts: *approaching* God's word (v1-8) and *responding* to God's word (v9-12).

Consider, in verses 1-8, all the details which show us the attitude of the people to the word of God. We can get something out of every verse:

---

<sup>19</sup> Not *quite* an exact repeat. Some details are different, mostly in the numbers. Most commentaries assume that these differences are the result of scribal errors. I'm open to the possibility that there's a bit more going on, but I haven't done anything like enough study to know what that would be!

1. It is the people who tell Ezra to bring them the word (v1). This is not a sermon from a determined minister to a reluctant people (as useful as those can be!); this is a people eager to receive the word.
2. Nobody who can receive the word is left out – not only men are there, but women and “all who could understand” (v2).<sup>20</sup> They *all* want the word, and they want to receive it together.
3. Note how much time they spend on it – from dawn until noon (v3)! (This is probably not just a solid unbroken reading of Deuteronomy, as we’ll see in v7-8; it is reading and explanation together, reading and application.)
4. See the authority that is invested in the word: Ezra the scribe reading on a platform above the people, flanked by leaders of the people on left and right (v4). The word is central and the people’s leaders support it; a striking visual picture that the word is the highest authority.<sup>21</sup>
5. When the Book of the Law is opened, all the people stand (v5). This is a concrete mark of their respect.
6. Even before they’ve heard the reading, they praise God for the word (v6).
7. The people want to understand. As Ezra, the great teacher, proclaims the word to the people, lots of little sub-teachers are going through the crowd making sure everyone is getting the point (v7-8). The mere sounds of the words aren’t magic; they aren’t Muslims, who will happily learn the Qur’an by heart without understanding a word it says. They want to *understand* God’s word, so that in hearing it they are truly hearing him.
8. That process of understanding isn’t done on their own; there’s a clear emphasis on trained teachers who give the word to the people (v7-8). Although in the New Covenant there is a gloriously greater understanding given to every member of the church (Rom 15:14), yet it is still the case that we have people set aside to lead us in understanding (Heb 13:7). Bible study is not a lone-wolf activity.

Put this together: the people *want* the word, they *all* want the word, they *devote themselves* to the word, they recognise the word’s *authority* and *respect* the word, they *praise God* for the word, and they work hard to *understand* the word with the help of their *teachers*. Those points are a good little health-check for us! Both as individuals and as a whole church, we should ask ourselves: does our attitude to God’s word look like this? Is there anything we might be missing, or that we could grow in?

Once they understand the word, the response of the people is very striking. They weep! And yet Nehemiah and Ezra and the leaders urge them not to weep, but instead to rejoice (v10-11). And so the people turn their weeping to gladness (v12). These are truly lovely verses. “The joy of the LORD is your strength” (v10) in particular should lift our hearts. And v9 and 11 are

---

<sup>20</sup> The emphasis isn’t on exclusion but inclusion here. Almost certainly the babies who couldn’t understand were also there (who would have been looking after them otherwise?!). But the point is that nobody who could understand was missing. The people receive the word together.

<sup>21</sup> If you want to get into the details, you might notice that there are 6 men on Ezra’s right and 7 on the left. That makes two lots of 7, the number of completeness, and Ezra is the one just to the right of the centre. If we imagine that the invisible Lord is ruling his people in the middle, then we have the word at the Lord’s right hand. A little picture of Christ, the Word of God, seated at the right hand of the Father? Maybe.

a very helpful little reminder on holiness; if we're tempted to think of holiness as a rather dreadful thing, then these verses shows us that holiness and sorrow don't go together. Where holiness is, joy is, and sorrow flees away.

But let's consider these two responses, weeping and joy, in a bit more depth. Why do the people weep? Nehemiah 8 doesn't tell us. It's not hard to figure out, though: they weep because the reading of the Law convicts them of sin (see 2 Kings 22:8-13 for a similar OT example). In a similar way, we must expect that God's word read and preached will often expose us and cut us to the heart (Heb 4:12-13). This affects how we hear. We should come to our Bibles each day, and to church each week, with a humble expectation. The great words of Isaiah 66:2 are well worth remembering:

But this is the one to whom I will look:  
he who is humble and contrite in spirit  
and trembles at my word.

But the sorrow of conviction is not the end of the matter. Rather it leads to joy. Three reasons are given for this joy: "this day is holy" (three times, in v9, 10, 11); "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (v10), and "they had understood the words that were declared to them" (v12). All three reasons point us to the same thing: to be convicted of sin by the word of God is a rich blessing, because it means we have received God's goodness. It is drawing near to the *holiness* of God. It is to receive a gift from the God of all *joy*. It is to *understand* the words, the self-revealing, of the good God.

To receive the Lord's rebuke as his enemy, or to hear it on the final day of judgement, is a crushing thing. There is no return from that! But to receive the Lord's rebuke as a Christian is actually a joyful thing. It is his goodness to us that he has not kept silent. It is a mark that we are truly his children if he disciplines us (Heb 12:6). The rebuke is painful at the time, but it carries the promise of the "peaceful fruit of righteousness" with it (Heb 12:11).

Our sinful nature does not think this way. As sinful humans, we naturally want to run a very long way from God's rebuke. But if we are God's children, then we should increasingly have the opposite attitude: I *want* to receive all that God says to me, and when he says something painful then that is a gift for my growth, and I can rejoice in it.

### Suggested Study Outline

I have deliberately kept questions here to a minimum. This is a great passage for spending some good time on application!

#### *Intro question:*

Think of an event designed to honour someone (e.g. a retirement party for a really good boss – or a king's coronation). What elements of that event most powerfully convey honour?

1. In v1-8, the people approach the word of God. What can we learn from these verses about the appropriate way to come to God's word? (See if you can dig something out of every verse!)
2. Are any of these lessons particularly striking to you? Are there any ways in which we need to grow as a church in this?
3. In verses 9-12, what is the initial response of the people to the word? What response are they encouraged to have? Why?
4. What does this teach us about what the word of God does for us? (Hebrews 12:5-11 might be a helpful cross-reference here.)

## Nehemiah 8:13-18

*This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through  
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue  
They're all expecting me at heaven's open door  
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore*

So goes the old Negro spiritual. And so goes this passage. Nehemiah and the exiles have just finished the walls; at this moment, when they might be most tempted to get comfortable, they celebrate the pilgrim Feast of Booths.

### Passage Walkthrough

In the previous passage, we saw Ezra leading the whole people in a long study of God's word. The next day, v13, the study continues; not gathering the whole people again, but *the heads of fathers' houses* along with *the priests and the Levites*. These are the men responsible for making sure the word is continually taught amongst the people. Priests and Levites are set apart for that job, but it is also the responsibility of the head of every household, both in the Old Testament and the New (Deut 6:7, 1 Cor 14:35, Eph 6:4). Nor is this passive learning; although Ezra clearly takes the lead, everyone involved comes to *study* the word. Heads of households take note!

The focus of the passage, however, is on what they find (v14-15). God had appointed the Feast of Booths in Lev 23:33-43 to happen every year in the seventh month, starting on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month. Conveniently (although perhaps Ezra led them to it!) they're in the seventh month: this is a command they can get on and obey right away. And they do! The proclamation goes out, the people get ready, and when the day comes they do what was written (v16). It's the first time since the days of Joshua that they've kept the feast so thoroughly. (It had been celebrated since then – for example, Ezra 3:4 – but evidently they do exactly what is written in a way that hadn't been seen for centuries.) They take branches from various trees and make rudimentary tents or booths with them – and then, for seven days, they live in those tents instead of their homes.<sup>22</sup>

The Feast of Booths was one of the major feasts of the Israelite calendar. It was a yearly reminder of Israel's 40 years of wandering: just as they lived in booths in the wilderness, so Israel was to live in booths for a week every year. Two facts about the timing make this particularly striking. First, it is the seventh month – and seventh is always about rest and completion. Second, it is the end of harvest – the most comfortable and settled point in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Is there any significance to the location of the tents? A couple of commentators that I've read think so. Brown, in the *Bible Speaks Today* commentary, points out that the tents cover every area of life. Tents on the (flat) roof of your house – family life; tents in your courts – social life; tents in the Lord's courts – religious life; tents in the squares of the city – business life. The tents cover all of life, because we are pilgrims in every part of our earthly life.

The Venerable Bede, writing in the 700s AD, takes a more spiritualising approach. The roof of your house – because we are to ascend up from our ordinary material existence to spiritual things. The courtyards – we're to emotionally leave our comforts and live as outsiders. The courts of the Lord – although we're not yet *in* the Lord's temple, we're to lay siege to it, seeking entry with our whole lives, "setting our minds on things above". The court of the Water Gate – we're to long for God as a deer pants for water. The court of Ephraim – we're to be fruitful (Ephraim means fruitful).

I think there's probably something to both approaches, but I haven't settled the matter to my own satisfaction and so haven't included any questions on it in the study. But you should feel free to do so if you think there's something there!

year, with the barns full. It is precisely at this point that the Feast of Booths reminds the people that they're not there yet: just as their ancestors wandered in the wilderness, so they are still pilgrims. "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb 4:9). And, of course, there is an extra edge to this for Nehemiah's exiles: they've just finished the wall, and so this year more than any other might feel like coming home. And so they need to hear, "you're not home yet."

In light of that, the end of v17 is striking. *There was very great rejoicing*. We might think that being reminded "you're not there yet", and taken out of your home to live in tents, would be a rather grin-and-bear-it experience. Certainly our flesh doesn't like to be reminded that this world is not our home. But for the believer, this is in fact a joyful thing. This is obvious for any in the middle of suffering; but it is true for all of us, in good times and bad. It is painful to realise that all the comforts of this life are fleeting, *until* we remember that this is because God has something better in store. We're going to swap fleeting pleasures, mixed with pain, for eternal joys without tears.

It's worth us asking ourselves, then: where is my "seventh month"? Where and when am I most tempted to feel at home in the world? And what might help remind me that, to quote the old spiritual, "I'm just a-passing through"?

One answer is there in v18: we keep coming back to the word of God. Ezra reads from it every day of the feast. As we live in this world, God's Word is a message from the New Creation, breaking and re-breaking the illusion that this is all there is, and calling us forward and upward. Let's keep coming back to it.

Another answer is at least hinted at in v18, too: solemn assembly. We don't celebrate the Feast of Booths; that's one of the shadows that passed away with Christ. But the Lord hasn't left us without reminders. The Sabbath is a reminder; so is the *solemn assembly* of Sunday worship;<sup>23</sup> and so in particular is the Lord's Supper. The Sabbath is a reminder because we rest from our works in anticipation of eternal rest (Heb 4:9). Every Sunday, we gather to worship God as a taste of the heavenly worship we'll enjoy forever (Heb 12:22-24). And most of all the Lord's Supper should point us forwards: a "feast" that consists of a bite of bread and a sip of wine, because it's just a foretaste of what's to come. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Cor 11:26) Every time we take it, we look *back* to Jesus' death (this is probably what we most naturally think of); but we also look *forward* to his return, when we will feast with the Lord. Every week, then, God is giving you reminders that you're not at home here. Let them keep you from becoming too comfortable – and rejoice!

---

<sup>23</sup> It's interesting that the feast goes for seven days and then ends with a solemn assembly on the *eighth* day (v18). If seven days represent the full work of creation, then the eighth day is the start of a new creation. That's why circumcision happens on the eighth day; and, of course, Jesus is raised on the eighth day (=first day) of the week. This is why we worship on the first (eighth) day of the week, not the seventh like they did in the Old Covenant: we're New Creation people. We've started to enjoy the firstfruits of the New Creation, and we long for more.

## Suggested Study Questions

### *Intro Question*

What things make you feel most at home? What are your favourite “creature comforts”?

### *Passage Study*

Read Neh 8:13-18.

1. The people have just finished the great wall-building project and gathered for a full day of worship and teaching. What happens on the next day (v13)
2. Why do you think the *heads of fathers' houses* gather as well? What might we learn from that little detail?

*Heads of households still have a responsibility of spiritual leadership in the home – you could look at any or all of Deut 6:7, 1 Cor 14:35, Eph 6:4 to help see this.*

3. What do they find as they study (v14-15)?
4. The law referred to here is the Feast of Booths. Go to Leviticus 23:33-43 and read what Moses wrote. What is the purpose of this Feast? What is it meant to remind Israel of?

*The Feast of Booths is a pilgrim feast – reminding a settled people that God rescued them in wandering, and that they are still pilgrims on their way to a better city.*

5. What do we learn from the people's reaction in v16-17?

*In particular, their rejoicing is striking. It is good news to know you're not home yet.*

6. Nehemiah's exiles have just finished the wall; they're in the seventh month, and seven means rest; and it's the end of harvest, the most comfortable time of year. So this is a *great* time for them to be reminded not to get too comfortable!

When and where are we tempted to get comfortable in this world?

7. We don't celebrate the Feast of Booths any more; that's an OT shadow. But what has God given us which can help us stay away from complacency? (You might find some ideas in v18).

## Nehemiah 9

In Nehemiah 8, the people read the law and wept. But they were told: don't weep, for today is holy. So instead they rejoiced, and celebrated the Feast of Booths. But there is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh" (Eccl 3:4), and after the celebration they come back and fast and mourn and confess their sins. This is the subject of Nehemiah 9. It's one of the longest and most complete overviews of Israel's history in the Bible<sup>24</sup> (it will take you about ten minutes simply to read it out loud), and so we're not going to examine every detail. But simply sitting with it and letting some of its themes teach us will be very helpful.

### Passage Walkthrough

The Feast of Booths finishes on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the month; two days later, on the 24<sup>th</sup> day, the people gather again (v1); they have unfinished business of confession and mourning.

They take this business very seriously. Not only do they do the whole sackcloth thing, they "separated themselves from all foreigners" (v2) – the same language as the mass divorce of Ezra 10. This doesn't seem to mean divorces in this instance (that took months in Ezra, and here they gather after two days), but the principle is the same. For confession of sin to be serious, it must be joined to putting away sin. And again they read from the Law, and then they spend a quarter of the day in confession and worship (v3. Evidently what we have in chapter 9, although long, is only a condensed and summary version of their prayer!). And, just as with the teaching, so in the confession God's appointed leaders show the way (v4-5); the people have sinned *as a people*, not just as individuals, and so they need a corporate repentance not a piecemeal individual one.

Here's a bare-bones outline of the prayer of confession:

1. *God's blessedness and goodness in creation* (v5-6)
2. *God's goodness to Israel* (v7-15)
3. *Israel's rebellion and God's patient mercy* (v16-31)
4. *Final plea* (v32-37)

We'll work through these parts in turn.

First, their confession starts with praise. "Stand up and bless the LORD your God", v5. The focus of much of the prayer is going to be on God's goodness *to them*, but that's not where they start; they start with his goodness and majesty in and of himself (v5) and his goodness and majesty in all of creation (v6). Our sin tends to distract us and keep us from honouring God (indeed, ingratitude and dishonour is at the heart of sin, Romans 1:21); so honouring God is exactly the right frame for starting to put our sin in order.

Second, their confession starts with an extended discussion of God's goodness to them (v7-15). These verses don't yet contain any hint of the people's sin; the focus is squarely on God's goodness and kindness.

A few details in this section are worth picking up. In particular, we start with Abram. Outside of Genesis, v7 is the only place in the Bible which comments on God changing

---

<sup>24</sup> Others include Psalms 105 and 106, and Acts 7.



Abram's name to Abraham, and it's well worth going back to Genesis to see why. Genesis 17:3-6:

<sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, <sup>4</sup>“Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.

Abram means “exalted father”, and Abraham means “father of a multitude” – and God explains that he means a multitude *of nations*. (Three times in three verses: lots of nations!). Also, “kings shall come from you” indicates that these are not going to be slave nations, but honoured nations with their own kings. Many whole peoples, free and glorious: that is what God is promising Abraham.

This sets a theme for the prayer in Nehemiah 9. By calling attention to the name change, they are referring back to the nations-and-kings promise God gave Abraham. Nations and kings will keep coming up. Indeed, they come up in the very next verse: God made a covenant with Abraham to give him the land of several nations (v8). God's people are meant to rule other nations, not be ruled by them.

The rest of this section focusses on the Exodus. God redeems his people from an oppressive king, Pharaoh, and then he himself rules them as their king, giving them “right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments” (v13). Strikingly, only one of these commandments is specified: the Sabbath (v14). The Sabbath is described as “*your* holy Sabbath”; by giving them the Sabbath command, God is opening up to Israel his own rest and inviting them (commanding them!) to come in. God is with them (v12), he provides for them (v15), and the crunch comes when he commands them “to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them” (v15). Disobedience arises at the exact point of God's greatest kindness: it is his *generosity* that they reject.

The emphasis in every verse of this section is on God's goodness and kindness to his people, a goodness that involves deliverance, guidance, provision, and laws. All of these are different angles on God's generosity.

But, v16-31, Israel don't want it. V17 in particular is a striking verse: they try and “return to their slavery in Egypt”. God delivers them from slavery, but in their sin the people actually *want* slavery. And the cycle in this long section of the prayer is that the people rebel and God is patient and good to them anyway. That patient goodness involves discipline (e.g. v27), but it is always aimed at mercy. God seeks to give them deliverance, guidance, provision, laws – but over and over they throw themselves back into slavery. God multiplies them and gives them nations and kings (v22-24), but they rebel and so end up under the dominion of other nations and kings (v27-28). The trend of this passage is towards more punishment (v27 is actually the first time God's punishment is mentioned!), because Israel's history was a downwards spiral; but even right at the end of this section, they are still noting God's mercy and praising him for it (v31).

Finally, in v32, comes the request: *let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us*. Don't ignore our suffering! This basic request is sandwiched in between a list of God's

attributes (the great, the mighty, the awesome) and a list of their rulers who have fallen (our kings, our princes, our priests). In rejecting God's rule they have lost their rule.

And in v33-37 they simply lay out their situation before God: God has been good, they have been sinful, and as a result they are slaves serving foreign kings (v36-37).<sup>25</sup> The Exodus has been undone, and the promise to Abraham is up in the air. "We are in great distress."

Reviewing the whole prayer, the twin themes of *kings/nations* and *slavery* are well worth drawing out. Take kings and nations: God is the mighty king, creator of all; he promised Abram that he would make him the father of a multitude of nations, and kings would come from him; he brought Israel out from the dominion of other kings and nations, ruled them himself with good laws, and gave other kings and nations into their hands. But through their rebellion they lost their rulers, kings and princes, and became subject to other nations.

Or, taking slavery: God delivered his people from the distress of slavery in Egypt, making them free and giving them all the good things enjoyed by free people. But they refused to take hold of his good gifts, and instead preferred to return to slavery. God keeps freeing them from slavery, and they keep plunging back into it. They are now slaves of another kingdom, in great distress.

What do we learn from Nehemiah 9? I think we are reminded of helpful things about both *sin* and *confession of sin*.

When it comes to sin: to sin is to reject God's generosity. It is to balk at his blessings! It is precisely when God tells Israel to take the land that they rebel. That is a helpful way for us to consider the sins we are tempted to. What are the blessings that we are unwilling to accept here? How should God's treatment of us already (in creation, in Christ, and in our own individual lives) be leading us to embrace his goodness?

When it comes to confession: a striking amount of Nehemiah 9 is focussed not on their sin but on God's goodness. Not all prayers of confession in Scripture are like this, so we can't make it a rule – but it's still helpful to ask, how can I make my confessions more like this? Say I struggle with impatience and anger (with a coworker, say, or a child). What might a Nehemiah 9 confession look like? Something like this, maybe: "Lord, you have been so patient with me, over many years. You have forgiven my sins at the great cost of the cross. You have given me the Spirit of peace, so that I might grow the fruit of patience. But I have been impatient with this person. I have not forgiven as you forgave me. I have quenched the Spirit and not borne his fruit. Have mercy again, Lord, forgive me again, be even more patient with me, and work in me patience that pleases you by your good Spirit."

There is another element to their confession, so simple that we might easily overlook it. They accept the whole history of Israel's sin *as their own*. They do not try and distance themselves from their fathers, but identify with them in confession. This is enormously helpful to us. When we consider the problems of the church in this country (and there are many!) it is very tempting to do so from a distance. The problem with that generation, the problem with

---

<sup>25</sup> The point is not that they are literally slaves; Nehemiah and Ezra, clearly, are not. But the nation as a whole is in slavery, subject to foreign laws, foreign control, foreign taxation. Although there are free men in Israel, Israel is not free.

this church culture which I am going to fix. But in Nehemiah 9 we see a wiser way. This people are committed to not repeating their fathers' mistakes; but they do not stand aloof from the fathers and criticise them, but join themselves to them and confess.

Finally, as Christians, we can rejoice that we live in a better covenant. Although there are serious problems with the church (we are certainly not yet grown up to maturity!), still, many nations and peoples have come into the kingdom. And, while the church in one part of the world may struggle or even have the lampstand removed (Rev 2:5), yet the church as a whole will never return to the slavery of Nehemiah's day. Instead she will be shaped by her Lord into increasing beauty and maturity (Eph 4) until he comes to claim her as his bride.

### Suggested Study Questions

*Intro question:* can you think of a time you rejected something and then regretted it?

*Read* Nehemiah 9.

1. What do we learn in v1-5 about the people's attitude as they come to confession?
2. How do they start their prayer in v5-6? Is there anything surprising about this?
3. Look again at v7-15. What is the focus of this section? Have we got to confession yet?
  - a. V7 is the only bit of Scripture after Gen 17 to mention Abram's name change. Go back and read Gen 17:3-6. What is the significance of that change of name? Why do you think it gets mentioned in Neh 9?
  - b. V13 mentions God's "right rules and true laws". Only one of those laws is specifically mentioned (v14). Why do you think that one might be singled out?
4. In v16-31, we finally get on to confession.
  - a. The previous section set up the theme of nations/kings (Abraham) and slavery (Egypt). How do these themes come up in this section?
  - b. What is the trigger for the first mention of their sin (v15-16)?
  - c. What does God do in these verses?
5. In v32-37, we get on to the people's request.
  - a. What is the request (v32)?
  - b. How are themes of nations/kings and slavery developed here?
6. What does this prayer teach us about:
  - a. God?
  - b. Sin?
  - c. Confessing sin?
7. What difference does it make to us that we live in the New Covenant? In what ways are we in a similar situation to them? In what ways are we in a better situation?

## Nehemiah 10

Nehemiah 10 is central to the whole second half of the book. In Neh 8, the people met, read God's law, and celebrated the festival; in Neh 9 they confessed their sins; and now, after their confession, they make a fresh covenant with the Lord to commit to obedience. Most of chapters 11 and 12 shows them working out this commitment in practice. So the previous two chapters have led to this one (reading God's word and confessing sin), and the following two chapters show its effects.

It might be worth asking yourself: if you were leading Israel in confession and repentance, a repentance covering not just one sin or a year of sins but generations of sin, what would that repentance look like? What would you want to *do*? Nehemiah 10 shows us, and it may not be exactly what we would expect.

### Passage Walkthrough

The passage really starts in 9:38; after confession, the people make a covenant. They commit themselves.<sup>26</sup> And our chapter starts with the names of those who have committed (v1-27). Along with Nehemiah (1), we have 22 priests, 17 Levites, and 44 chiefs of the people. Everyone else joins them as well, right down to the kids (v28), but it is these leaders who get named. Again we see the same thing we saw in Neh 8:13: it is the heads of the people who have to take the lead in faithfulness. Adding up the numbers, we find there are  $84 = 12 \times 7$ , showing that these leaders together represent the whole people of God.<sup>27</sup>

Having listed the signatories, we then move on to the commitment itself (v28-39). This can be split into three: the headline (v28-29), two critical specifics (v30-31), and arrangements for worship (v32-39).

The headline is a return to the Law. They have separated from the peoples *to* the Law of God (v29); repentance is always both a turning *from* and a turning *to*, and here they are turning *to* the Law. It is the Law that they commit to walking in (v30), his commandments and rules and statutes. And, in a very Deuteronomy-esque way, they enter into "a curse and an oath" – which reminds us of the curses of Deut 27 on those who break the Law.

The two critical commands are *separation* (v30) and *Sabbath* (v31). We spent a fair bit of time on separation in Ezra 9-10 recently, so we don't need to say much more here; but note particularly that their recommitment is an act of separation in the first place (v28 "have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands"), so the promise not to intermarry in v30 is also a promise to keep this faithfulness going from generation to generation.

The Sabbath perhaps deserves more comment. We saw in chapter 9 that it was the only one of God's laws to get a specific mention (9:14). Here it comes up again. Why? The Sabbath is

---

<sup>26</sup> You might be thinking, "This feels a bit different to other biblical covenants! Normally God initiates the covenant and makes promises, whereas here the people take the initiative." That's correct, and it's helpful to know that the word for covenant here is not the usual one. When God makes a covenant, he makes a *berit*. That's what a king makes with his underlings. Nehemiah 10, as the people recommit to faithfulness, they don't make a *berit*, they make an *amanah*. Perhaps "firm commitment" would be a better translation.

<sup>27</sup> 12 is the number for God's people, and 7 is the number for completeness, so I think "God's complete people" is probably the basic message here. *Possibly* (and here I feel more tentative), it might be indicating God's people, Jew and Gentile. 7 is sometimes the number for God's worldwide (=more than Jewish) people. For example, when Jesus feeds the 5000 in Jewish territory, they pick up 12 baskets of leftovers; when he feeds 4000 in Jewish territory, they pick up 7 baskets of leftovers. Take that for what it's worth!

more than one among other laws. It is also the specific sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exod 31:13, Ezek 20:12.) And it signifies *rest*. More than any of the others in the 10 commandments, the Sabbath preaches the gospel. You trust God to work for you and so you rest from your works! The Sabbath points back to creation (Exod 20:11) and to salvation (Deut 5:15) and forward to eternity (Heb 4:9-10).

In particular, the people pledge not to buy from their pagan neighbours on the Sabbath. This is a faithful application of the general command not to work. Moses never commanded the people not to buy and sell on the Sabbath, but it is the clear implication of what he did teach; and so, rather than committing to Sabbath-keeping in vague, hand-wavy terms, they speak specifically about the way that they will be most tempted to disobey. (There's great wisdom for us here! There's always a temptation to speak in comfortable generalisations when we should be speaking in painful specifics. In Nehemiah 10, they do not fall for this trap.) And they will observe not just the 7-day patterns but the 7-year patterns as well, the crops (Lev 25:1-7) and debts (Deut 15:1-3).<sup>28</sup>

Finally, they commit to not neglecting the house of the Lord (v32-39). They will give money to ensure the practical needs are met (v32-33), and also the wood (v34 – this isn't a trivial obligation, since the altar fires need to keep going constantly!). And they will contribute their firstfruits – crops, fruit, children, animals, dough, wine, oil (v35-37),<sup>29</sup> and go so far as to specify the procedure for how it gets brought in (v38-39). These firstfruits are part of their worship, but they also provide the food that the Levites and priests will eat. So in various ways they commit to providing for the ongoing ministry at the Temple. Again, like with the Sabbath, it would be easy for them to make airy and vague commitments and fudge the details. But they go the opposite route, binding themselves to specific obedience.

What can we learn from all this? There is plenty to learn from each of the details. As we saw in Ezra, we should still avoid intermarriage (v30); we must still worship on the Lord's Day, and enter into God's rest (v31); and we still need to provide practically for God's worship (v32-39). It's well worth discussing the detail that this might require of us.

However, it's also worth seeing the big picture. In the history that they confessed in chapter 9, Israel committed a *lot* of sins, a big variety. For example, they have both oppressed the poor and committed disgusting sexual sins (Amos 2:7); they have perverted justice (Amos 5:12); they have dishonoured authorities (Micah 7:6). Most obviously, they have allowed idolatry over and over. But in Neh 10, and their recommitment, they mention none of these things. That is not because they are turning a blind eye to bribes and oppression. Rather, it's because they understand that *worship* is central. Everything they speak about is concerned with the right

---

<sup>28</sup> Christians still have a 7-day pattern, as we rest and worship on the Lord's Day (Heb 4:9-10). The more extended commands like the 7<sup>th</sup> year and the Jubilee year are part of shadows of the law that have passed away with the coming of Christ. But they still vividly illustrate for us the *trust* involved (not planting crops for a year is a big deal!) and the way that, now that God has given us rest, we should seek to give rest to others.

<sup>29</sup> The children are the odd one out here, since the families keep them! Firstborn children are symbolically given to the Lord and redeemed back with a ransom price, Exod 34:20.

worship of God.<sup>30</sup> Rather than trying to name every possible sin, they focus on the key area of obedience that will lead to all the others.<sup>31</sup>

This actually has enormous implications for us. There will be various times when we need to be wise about repentance. When we're talking to non-Christians, we need to know what we are calling them to and what we'd tell them to do if they repented! If we want to help Christians who are backsliding, again, we need to know what first steps of repentance should look like. And if we find ourselves mired in sin, we want to know what repentance will mean for us. In all three cases, we need to remember that worship is central. The non-Christian needs, first and foremost, to confess their sins, give praise to God, and join the church's worship. The backslider may have all sorts of mess to sort out, but they need to start by coming back to church. And if we find ourselves becoming lukewarm or increasingly tangled in sin, we need to pay close attention to our worship – are we regularly at church on the Lord's Day? Are we personally meditating on God's word and seeking him in prayer? What practical steps might we need to take to make this happen, and keep happening?

### Suggested Study Questions

*Intro.* Put yourself in Nehemiah's shoes. You've just finished rebuilding Jerusalem after exile. You're presiding over a great national repentance and recommitment. What areas of obedience do you focus on?

*Read Neh 9:38-10:39.*

1. What different groups get individually named in v1-27? Who else is signing (v28)? Why are those in v1-27 singled out?
2. In v28-29, what does their repentance particularly focus on?
3. What two commands do they then focus on (v30-31)? Why do you think these two get such attention?
4. What ties together the commands in v32-39?
5. We are no longer living in Israel, but how can we learn from these commitments (no intermarriage, honour the Sabbath, maintain temple worship) today? *Note that the Israelites are very specific – try and be specific about what similar obedience will look like for us!*

---

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps this is least obvious with the intermarriage issue. But the whole problem with intermarriage is worship: the unbelievers will lead their spouses and children away from true worship. This is why, when Ezra deals with the problem in Ezra 10, he is repeatedly called "Ezra the priest". The problem is a worship problem and needs a priestly solution.

<sup>31</sup> We might well ask: this looks like a good plan, but does it work? Does Neh 10 really make a difference? And the short answer is: no. No, it doesn't. We find in Neh 13 that they screw up on basically all of these commitments in a very short time! And we'll think about that more when we get there. But for now, that shouldn't make us throw out Neh 10. Neh 10 is actually God's people making a very good and godly commitment, with all the wisdom and skill of Ezra and Nehemiah involved. The issue is not that they try and do the wrong thing, but that without the gift of the Holy Spirit to God's people as a whole they don't have a hope of actually managing. We have received a better covenant.

6. Compare what the Israelites actually focus on with the suggestions you raised in the intro discussion. Why do they focus on what they do? How does this help us understand repentance better (for ourselves and others)?

## Nehemiah 11-12

This is a long section which is taken up mostly with names. I'm going to suggest two different ways to go through it – either at high speed, skipping some of the lists of names and hitting the highlights, in *one* study; or reading the whole thing and picking up a number of the smaller details in *two* studies. You know your group and your own preferences and can choose whichever works best for you!

### Passage Walkthrough

In the previous chapters, we've had the completion of the wall (Neh 6), the celebration of the Feast of Booths (Neh 8), a detailed confession (Neh 9) and recommitment (Neh 10). Here, Jerusalem is repopulated as volunteers from the surrounding settlements go to live there (Neh 11) and then, with all this in place, they finally dedicate the wall (Neh 12).

In **11:1-2**, the city of Jerusalem is repopulated by a kind of “human tithe”: one in ten people move from the surrounding villages to Jerusalem. It's not entirely clear what the process is – the casting of lots is involved (v1) but there is clearly a voluntary element as well (v2). This provides the final puzzle piece allowing Jerusalem to flourish; even after the walls were rebuilt, the city was largely empty (7:4).

The move to Jerusalem would obviously be a costly thing for people on a number of levels; most would leave family and fields behind to go somewhere where they had no roots. No wonder the other people bless them.

This is an instructive example of a common pattern. Frequently, the church needs *some* but not *all* people to do something. (If everyone moved to Jerusalem, Judah would collapse.) For example, the church needs ministers, but the church cannot be made of ministers; a church plant needs volunteers, but if everyone goes then there is no sending church left. Some will stay single for the kingdom, but most should seek marriage.<sup>32</sup> In such cases, it would be easy for tensions to develop between those who take on the role and those who do not. Here we see a better way: rather than feeling inadequate for not going, the people freely and gladly praise those who do go. The following verses unpack this honour by listing their names in Scripture for us to read millennia later!

In **11:23-24**, right at the end of the list of Jerusalem's inhabitants, we get a couple of references to the king. The Persian king has apparently made express provision for the singers (v23). Verse 24 suggests why; there is a Jew, Pethahiah son of Meshezabel<sup>33</sup>, at the king's side. Presumably this means he is a long way away from Jerusalem, living at the heart of empire as Nehemiah used to! But his knowledge of true Jewish worship means he can guide the king in what to support.

There is here a brief but vivid picture of Christ's work of intercession. He is at the Father's right hand, constantly making intercession for us (Heb 7:25); and so we receive the Father's special care and provision.

---

<sup>32</sup> Matt 19:11-12; 1 Cor 7:1-9.

<sup>33</sup> Both excellent baby names.



But there is also a striking emphasis on singing. Although the king has in fact made provision for the temple as a whole (Ezra 7:21-23), here the focus is just on his provision for the singers. Singing keeps coming up in these chapters (we already met singing in 11:17; it will come up again in 12:8-9, 12:24, and the whole account of the dedication in 12:27 onwards). Here, the connection between the king's advisor and provision for singing should focus our attention on it.

In the New Creation, we will not need to read Scripture, listen to sermons, or confess our sins. But we will sing! The saints and God's angelic attendants are shown to us singing in Revelation (e.g. Rev 5:9-10).

I think we can apply these verses generally: Jesus, who is always interceding at the Father's right hand, makes sure that his people are provided for. And we can also apply it specifically: Jesus intercedes for us so that we can worship. And even more specifically: Jesus intercedes for us so that we can sing.

(We'll say more about singing when we get to the dedication in chapter 12).

Chapter 11 finishes with a list of the villages of Judah and Benjamin (**11:25-36**). They have not gone to Jerusalem; but they are not forgotten by Scripture.

In **12:1-26**, a striking feature of the lists is the way that they are given at two different times: one list for the return (12:1-7), another in a later generation at the dedication (12:12-21). Each priest at the time of the dedication is explicitly linked to his ancestor who returned. This repeats for us a theme we have seen several times through Ezra and Nehemiah: the importance of genealogies, of *inheritance*, receiving the Lord's blessing from previous generations. For us, one of the applications will be to know something about, and give grateful thanks for, previous generations of Christians. If we come from Christian families, our physical family tree will help us here; whether we come from Christian families or not, we are part of the family of God in the church and should want to know something about where we've come from. (Reading Christian biographies is a good way to do this!)

Finally, in **12:27-43** we get the dedication of the wall. Everyone gathers (v27-29), especially the singers and Levites who will be leading the celebrations. They purify themselves (v30), because giving thanks is serious business and they don't want to do it inappropriately. And then Nehemiah divides them into two choirs. One marches round the wall to the south, with Ezra (v31-37), the other to the north, with Nehemiah (v38-39). Note that choirs & priests go in front, while rulers (including Nehemiah himself) go behind. To praise God is a greater honour than ruling! Finally, both choirs meet up at the temple (v40), with every significant leader there (v41-42), and they sacrifice and rejoice (v43).

What to make of this? A great deal, no doubt. Let me just note three things. One is the sequence of these stories. The wall was finished in chapter 6, but this outburst of praise only happens in chapter 12. Before that praise would be appropriate, there was work to be done on the people – teaching, confessing, recommitting. This really underlines the importance of praise! Praising God and thanking him is serious business.

Secondly, the whole business of going round the walls reminds us rather of Jericho (Joshua 6). There were trumpets, here there is singing. There the walls came down; here the walls are

established. But there is a similar sense that in going all around the place (cf Psalm 48:12-14) the whole city is being marked as belonging to the Lord.

Thirdly, why *two* choirs? Why not just do a loop of the walls all together (as they did at Jericho)? This is not the first time that we have multiple teams involved in worship. As we are reminded earlier in the passage, David set it up this way (12:24). But it goes back further than David, too. Joshua (following Moses' instructions) divided the people into two groups, one to pronounce covenant curses and the other to pronounce covenant blessings (Deut 27, Josh 8:30-35). We get something like this in our services when men and women sing different parts in a song, or when the service leader asks a question and the congregation answers in response.

All of that still doesn't answer the question, though: why? I think the answer is that singing and praise are about *witness*. (Remember that only one witness isn't a valid testimony; you need two or three). When we sing, we sing to God; but we also sing to one another and to all creation *about* God (Eph 5:19). As they dedicate the wall, they are praising God and so also witnessing to one another that God has been faithful. The same is true of our singing. It is an act of praise, pleasing to God in itself; and by being an act of praise, it is a strong witness to ourselves, to one another, to unbelievers, and to the watching angels, that God is good and worthy of praise.

After this great act of dedication, but on the same day, they do two further things: set aside men to oversee the contributions (**12:44-47**) and purify the people from anyone who should not be among them (**13:1-3**). This picks up on the emphases of the recommitment in Nehemiah 10: pure religion and practical religion all together.

### Suggested Study Questions

#### *Option 1: Two Studies*

If studying this passage over two weeks, I'd break it at 12:26. The first study would focus on the people, the second on the dedication.

#### **Study 1**

*Read* Nehemiah 11:1-12:26.

1. Look at 11:1-2. Why does Jerusalem need this? Why might it have been a bit tense between those who went and those who didn't? What happens instead?

Lots of Christian duties need all of us (for example: gathered worship!). But there are some good things which only some of us will do. How do these brief verses model what that should look like? (*N.B. 11:25-36 – those who stay behind are not forgotten!*)

2. Look at 11:23-24. What has the king specifically made provision for (v23)?
3. What is Pethahiah's role in all this? Who does he remind you of?
4. So it seems like these verses are inviting us to see a connection between Jesus's intercession for us and our worship, specifically our singing. What is that connection? Why is our singing so important?
5. Finally, look at the lists in chapter 12 (specifically 12:12-21). How is Nehemiah's generation connected up here with previous generations? Why was that important? What lessons for us might we find there?

## Study 2

Read Nehemiah 12:27-13:3.

1. Who particularly needs to be at the dedication (v27-29)? And what do they need to do first (v30)? What does this show us about how to respond to God's grace?
2. The walls were completed in chapter 6, and the dedication is only happening now in chapter 12. What are some of the things that have happened in between? Why did those need to come first?
3. How is the dedication celebrated (v31-43)?
4. How is this similar to the conquest of Jericho? What does that suggest about what's going on here? *In both cases, the cities are being dedicated – marked out as belonging completely to God.*
5. Why do you think there are two choirs? Can you think of any similar stories in the Bible? What does this suggest about the purpose of singing (compare Eph 5:19)?
6. On the same day as the dedication, what two things do the people do (12:44-13:3)? How does this connect to the covenant that they made (10:30, 39)? Why do you think they do these things on the very same day?
7. What lessons might we take away from this chapter about praising God?

### Option 2: One Study

1. *Read 11:1-2.* Why does Jerusalem need this? Why might it have been a bit tense between those who went and those who didn't? What happens instead?  
Lots of Christian duties need all of us (for example: gathered worship!). But there are some good things which only some of us will do. How do these brief verses model what that should look like? (*N.B. 11:25-36 – those who stay behind are not forgotten!*)
2. *Read 11:23-24.* What has the king specifically made provision for (v23)?
3. Pethahiah, who stands at the king's side and advises, is a mini-picture of Christ who intercedes for us. What does all this suggest about the importance of singing?
4. *Read 12:27-43.* How is the dedication celebrated?
5. How is this similar to the conquest of Jericho? What does that suggest about what's going on here? *In both cases, the cities are being dedicated – marked out as belonging completely to God.*
6. Why do you think there are two choirs? Can you think of any similar stories in the Bible? What does this suggest about the purpose of singing (compare Eph 5:19)?
7. What lessons does this whole passage have for our worship?

## Nehemiah 13:4-31

In Nehemiah 13 we have the very last piece of narrative in the Old Testament.<sup>34</sup> The whole rest of the book, though it has had sober moments, has been a story of triumph and joy: the wall rebuilt, the people reconsecrated, God's goodness celebrated. This final chapter ends the story on a sad and sour note that leaves us longing for Christ.

### Passage Walkthrough

We can divide this passage up into three by Nehemiah's prayers. In 13:4-14, Nehemiah restores the temple vessels and provisions; in 13:15-22, Nehemiah enforces Sabbath observance; and in 13:23-29, Nehemiah deals with intermarriage. 13:30-31 provide a summary and closing prayer.

First, then, *the temple vessels and provisions* (v4-14). We learn in v6 that, after serving as governor of Judah for 12 years (cf Neh 2:1), Nehemiah has had to go back to the emperor for an unspecified period of time. When he returns, he finds things in considerable disarray. In particular, our friend Tobiah from the first half of the book (e.g. 2:10, 4:3, 6:19) has reappeared – in the temple itself! Eliashib the high priest has brought him in (13:4);<sup>35</sup> in fact, to make way for him, they've taken the temple vessels and grain offerings out (v5, 9).

There's so much that's wrong with this. Tobiah is an Ammonite (2:10), and the people are meant to have *just* cleansed themselves from the presence of Ammonites (13:1-3). But here they have brought him right into the temple. The priests are those who are meant to enforce the boundaries between clean and unclean, holy and common (Lev 10:10) – instead, it's the high priest who have brought this unclean man into the holy place. And Ezra-Nehemiah started with the great joy of bringing the vessels of God back to the house of God (Ezra 1:7-11). Now the vessels have lost their place in God's house to a foreigner. No wonder that Nehemiah was "very angry" (v8).

So Nehemiah cleanses the house and restores things to their rightful places; and then he restores the regular provision of tithes and offerings, so that the Levites might return to their work (v10-13). He confronts the officials (v11), asking them to account for their disobedience. And then he asks God to remember him (v14) – but we'll consider his prayers together after we look at the next sections.

Secondly, *the Sabbath* (v15-22). The people are straightforwardly working on the Sabbath (v15). They're also buying on the Sabbath (v16), and doing it right in the holy city. This is not just Sabbath-breaking; it's the specific form of Sabbath-breaking that they swore they would not do (10:31). Once again, Nehemiah confronts the leaders (v17); here, unlike in the previous section, he points out that it was this sin which led to the exile (v18). And again he acts to stop the abuse (v19-21) and sets people in place to make sure the change is permanent (v22). The section closes with a prayer.

Finally, *intermarriage* (v23-29). The people have once again turned to foreign wives – this time with their modern enemies the Ashdodites (Neh 4:7) as well as the ancient enemies of Ammon and Moab (who, again, they have *just* separated from – 13:1-3). The result is clear –

---

<sup>34</sup> A couple of books, like Chronicles and Malachi, may have been written later; but in chronological terms, the narratives of the Old Testament end with Nehemiah pulling out people's hair.

<sup>35</sup> Eliashib is just called a priest in v4, but he's specifically called the high priest in v28.

the next generation don't even speak the language of God's people. (In the New Testament age, where we embrace many languages, this might not seem that bad! But the point is that if they don't even speak the language, they definitely won't know the culture, let alone know the word of God which is written in that language.)

Nehemiah again responds vigorously, pulling out hair, confronting them, and making them swear an oath to remain obedient in future. But note that, unlike in the previous sections, there are no officials appointed to ensure future obedience – no Minister for the Department of Marriage. The only official mentioned is the priestly descendant of Eliashib who has himself intermarried (v28). Nehemiah is reduced to making the people swear an oath – which is exactly what they did, on this very topic, back in 10:30. As with the previous section, Nehemiah reminds them that this behaviour has led to disaster in the past; but rather than just talk generically about past generations, he specifically mentions Solomon, whose disobedience was the root of all Israel's later downfall. This sin goes further back and digs deeper than the others. Finally Nehemiah prays. And this prayer is a bit different. The first two times he prayed for God to remember *him* and his good deeds. But here he prays that God would remember *them*, and clearly this is a negative prayer, asking God to punish the evildoers. So in multiple ways, this third sin feels even more depressing than the other two: a deeper sin, with less remedy.

What are we to make of all this? We still need to discuss the prayers, but first, a few comments about these three sections together.

First, the three problems Nehemiah faces are *exactly* the areas where the people swore obedience in chapter 10 (10:30-39). Chapter 13 works through them in reverse order: provisions for the temple (10:32-39), followed by Sabbath (10:31), followed by intermarriage (10:30). These things get worse and worse: from provision for worship, to worship itself, to the worshippers themselves.

Second, note Nehemiah's response. Each time he confronts the people, deals with the immediate disobedience and also tries to put in place measures to ensure ongoing obedience. But the fact that no officers are appointed in the third section reinforces the feeling that this is all rather hopeless. None of the previous reforms have worked: why would this one?

I think, in fact, that this is precisely the point of the whole section. The people are incorrigible. Good teaching, good leadership, good structures, enthusiastic promises – all of them have proven to be short-term sticking plasters. Nehemiah, a godly man, can lead the people in temporary outward godliness; but when he goes, we suspect the whole thing will collapse again.

Here, it's helpful to consider Nehemiah's prayers. Three times, in slightly different ways, he asks God to remember him and remember his deeds (v14, 22, 31). Like the thief on the cross asking for Jesus to remember him, this is both an admission of defeat and a sign of great hope. The defeat: Nehemiah will die, his work will end, and the people will show their rebelliousness again. But the hope: just as the thief knew that Jesus was coming into a kingdom, Nehemiah knows that the faithfulness of God will continue, and there is a future for God to remember him in.

I think that is where this passage inevitably takes us: forward to Christ. Here, right at the end of the OT narrative, we see very clearly the failure and stubbornness of God's people. They

don't just need external things putting right: they need new hearts, the hearts God has promised in a New Covenant.

For us to rightly apply this means recognising that we are *not* in the same situation as the people here. Their patterns of sin do show us what our natural, sinful selves are like; but in the New Covenant, the people of God have been given the Spirit of God. As well as recognising patterns of recurrent sin in our lives that look like Neh 13, we should also joyfully expect growth and victories over sin that look very different from Neh 13. And so a passage like this both sobers us (because it shows us how desperately deep sin is in our nature) and should help us glorify Christ who gives us the Spirit.

### Suggested Study Outline

*Intro question:* in “Groundhog Day”, the main character keeps having to relive the same situations over and over. What have you seen or experienced that feels like that – an inescapable loop?

*Read* Neh 13:4-31.

1. Nehemiah has to go back to the emperor (v6), and when he comes back he finds three disasters. For each section (v4-14, 15-22, 23-29):
  - a. What has gone wrong?
  - b. Why is that bad?
  - c. What does Nehemiah do to deal with it?
2. What is the same through the three sections? What changes as we go through?
3. Have a look again at the solemn oath the people took in 10:30-39. How does this passage relate to that one? What are we meant to learn?
4. This is the very last bit of narrative in the OT. How does it sum up the OT problem? In what ways are we the same as them? In what ways have we been given something better than them?

## Appendix: The Ruins and the Rebuilder

*This is the script for a sermon I preached on Neh 2:9-20, long before I returned for more thorough study on these books.*

How do you think history's going?

That might seem a rather odd question. Let me put it another way: does the basic sweep of human history fill you with enthusiasm, or depression?

My guess is that in this room there'll be some of each of those reactions. Some of you are basically positive people: yes, things were pretty dire back in the Bronze Age or whenever, but now we have democracy and flush toilets and we've put men on the moon and honestly it's a great time to be alive. Some of you may be a bit more downbeat: the story of humanity is a story of war and wickedness and a 100% death rate, and if you want a reason to be depressed on any given day just read the headlines.

Well, we're going to see that it is a good and practical thing for Christians to have a view of history, but that view is not primarily concerned with flush toilets (good as they are) or with the headlines (bad as they can be). Rather, what should fill our eyes and our hearts is the glory of Christ in the rebuilding of his church. The glory of Christ in the rebuilding of his church.

That might need a little bit of explanation. As great as it is to talk about the glory of Christ, aren't we *meant* to be focussing on Nehemiah chapter 2 this morning? Yes we are, but the two go together. You see, I want to tell you that even if you struggled to find Nehemiah in the Bibles this morning and never remember reading it before, if you've been around church any length of time you actually know this story very well. And to prove that, let me just tell the story again, in a way that you might recognise. Here is the story of Nehemiah 2.

The man comes from the great king to the ruined city.

He brings with him the proofs of the king's authority, and the local rulers are horrified at his arrival.

On the third day, while it's still dark, he rises.

The city is in a terrible state; but the man gathers together his people, tells them that he has received authority and blessing from on high, and gives them a great commission to join him in the work. The local rulers are no end of upset, but it turns out there's nothing they can do about it, and so up the walls go.

Now, I don't know about you, but to me that sounds suspiciously familiar. And the more I've studied this passage the more that feeling has increased. Nehemiah 2, from the big picture right down to the details, is full of echoes of Christ. Nehemiah, like Christ, is the man who comes to his ruined people, receives authority, and rebuilds. We won't get to every detail this morning, but with God's help we'll see enough for a blessing. I have two great themes I want to look at today, or you might think of them as two acts in the play of history: first the ruin of the church, that this passage spends so much time on, and secondly at the glory of Christ in the rebuilding of his church. First the ruin, then the glory. Let's get started.

## 1. The Ruin of the Church

The first thing we see when Nehemiah arrives is not the state of the church directly but the enemies of the church. Verse 10: “But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of Jerusalem.”

Who are these guys? Well, they’re the local rulers. Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab that we hear about later: they’re the governors and supervisors of this bit of the empire. They’re the local bigwigs. And when they hear that Nehemiah wants to do Jerusalem good, they hate it. They don’t want anything good to happen to Jerusalem. Which is bad, isn’t it? It’s bad enough having enemies; when the enemies are your local rulers, that’s so much worse.

That was the situation in Nehemiah’s day: it was also the situation when Christ came. Herod was not best pleased that the Messiah had come. The Pharisees, the High Priest, the religious rulers, were all deeply disturbed by the news that God had come to save his people. They weren’t about that. They were about tying up heavy burdens for the people and not lifting a finger to help them. They were about devouring widows’ houses and for a show making lengthy prayers. They were not about blessing, and the people groaned under their weight. And there are echoes of that same misery around the world today, aren’t there: Christians in Muslim nations or China or North Korea groaning under rulers who hate them; Christians in prosperity gospel churches in Africa, groaning under preachers who make glittering promises in order to bleed them dry. It is a miserable thing to be under a ruler who hates you.

But this isn’t just the state of God’s church at some times and places. To really see the scope of this, we need to go all the way back to Eden. Adam and Eve were free, rulers of the world, knowing and loving a good God. But when they listened to that serpent, the devil in disguise, they didn’t just lose their relationship with God – they gained a relationship with the devil. By following his word not God’s word, they put themselves under his authority. That is why the Bible speaks of the devil as the ruler of this world, the prince of the power of the air. He is the dark power brooding unseen over this sad world, delighting in all the misery, treachery and death he works in it. In this world, without Christ, we groan under a ruler who hates us.

And so it’s no surprise that the city is in a bit of a state. That’s what we see next, what Nehemiah found when he went to look. Verse 12: “Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.” The walls broken down, the gates burned by fire: defenceless and humiliated. How far it had fallen. Remember Solomon’s day, when they didn’t bother weighing the silver they brought in because silver was counted of little value, when it felt like the whole city was lined with gold, when the Queen of Sheba was so overwhelmed by the glory that it said “there was no breath left in her.” And now this: broken stones and burnt wood. As Lamentations put it, “What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For your ruin is as vast as the sea; who can heal you?”



Brothers and sisters, do you ever reflect on how far we fell? We were made kings and queens of creation! God makes light, sea, land, sky, sun and moon and blazing stars, green trees and swift brooks and proud lions, and then he makes humanity to crown the whole creation. We are his image, the thing angels and aardvarks look to for a glimpse of the goodness of God; we have the privilege of pouring out his blessing everywhere. We rule, and all things submit to us: the child could have led the lion like a lamb, and the baby could have played with the copperhead. We were made to walk with God in the garden. And we threw it all away! We threw it all away! And now we bicker and beg and fear and die. Broken stones and burnt wood. What a disgrace.

Does it hurt you that there are beggars in this world, and morgues? Does it hurt that there are arguments in your house and anxieties in your heart? It should. We weren't made for this.

So let's turn now to consider not the ruin of the church but the glory of Christ. The glory of Christ.

## 2. The Glory of Christ

Listen again to verse 17. Nehemiah has taken his night time tour, and now during the day he gathers the people together. Verse 17: "Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.'"

What's so significant about that? Obviously the call to rebuild is a big deal, and that's exactly what we're going to see the people doing over the next few weeks. But I don't want us to miss a little detail, that little two-letter word *we*. Did you catch it? You see the trouble *we* are in. And that really is remarkable. Because their trouble really wasn't Nehemiah's trouble. Nehemiah could have lived out his days as the king's cupbearer, important and celebrated in the palace of the king. And even when he decided to come and help out Jerusalem, he still didn't need to say *we*. He could have come with lots of pomp and circumstance and said, I've heard *you* are in a right old mess, but don't worry, *I'm* here to fix it. But instead he says *we*. He knows and he identifies. You see the trouble *we* are in – you and me together. Come, let *us* build – you and me together. Your pain is my pain; your situation is my situation; my building will be your building.

These are precious words, aren't they? As the inhabitants of Jerusalem looked at the ruined walls that morning, they hadn't gotten any less ruined overnight. But now Nehemiah was there, with authority from the emperor, and he was *with them*. In the middle of their ruin and misery, the great man had come and looked at their ruin and gone, that's mine. That's not just your problem: it's our problem. And that made all the difference.

Well, how about us? We face the real rebuilding project, the one theirs was just a picture of. And as we look at the state of the church, that can seem pretty daunting and discouraging, can't it? But just as we have a much bigger rebuilding project than they did, so we also have a much, much better man than they did. We have a man who, first of all, decided to be a man. All of us were just born human, weren't we, born into the human race, inheriting the mess and guilt. None of us chose that; existence was given to us. But there is one man who chose it, who looked down from heaven at the weakness and woe, the sickness and sadness, disaster and

death, and chose to join us. We have a man who in his life radically identified with us. Remember John the baptist, baptising in the Jordan? How it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Of all the people in the world, only this one man didn't need that baptism! Only this one man could have truly said, "sin - that's *their* problem." But instead, despite John's protests, he identifies. He comes and he receives the water, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He doesn't have any sins. But he's saying to us, this is *our* problem. You see the trouble *we* are in. And we have a man who didn't just identify us in his birth, and didn't just identify with us in his life, but identified with us in his death. He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. But – and here's the great thing – his identification with us doesn't end there. When this man rises from the dead, he bring us with him. This man has taken our human nature into heaven. His identification with us didn't stop 2000 years ago. That's why, after he'd returned to heaven, this man appeared to Saul, who's been persecuting Christians, and say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Because if you persecute Christians you persecute Christ; he has joined himself with us. "You see the trouble *we* are in."

Friends, does the world ever seem overwhelming? Does the task seem too big? Are you tempted to discouragement? When you are, remember that *Christ is with us*. He came and took on our human nature. He shared our sufferings. He knows our sorrows. He bore our sins. He was raised up. He is ruling for our good now. And he is not far from us, because he has shared with us his own Spirit, making each of us individually and all of us together his dwelling place. He is with us now, in this room, for he's promised that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, there he is. He is right now proclaiming his gospel and working away at us, building his church. What would be the point of me preaching if he wasn't speaking? If Christ doesn't build the house, the builders labour in vain. But Christ is in fact building his house.

To get the full joy and strength that's there for us in this, we need to go on to verse 18.

Verse 18: "And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me."

Isn't that interesting? Verse 17, it's we, us, Nehemiah identifies. And then v18, it's me, me. God's hand is upon *me*, the king speaks blessing to *me*. What's happening? Is Nehemiah walking back that identification? Not at all: he's telling them why the identification is good news. V17, I'm with you; v18, and God is with me. I'm with you, and I'm all you need. And when they hear it they're overjoyed, and they rise up and build.

Well, how much more so for us! Christ is with us! Why is that good? Because God is with Christ! All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *me*, he says, and behold I am *with you* to the very end of the age. This is so important. We don't have direct access to God, any more than those guys in Jerusalem had direct access to the emperor. How could a sinner like you or me just waltz into God's presence? But we have something far better: we have Christ. In him we can approach the throne with confidence. In him we can pray, because he takes our prayers and presents them to God. In him we can sing, and know are songs are heard with pleasure, because he is our choirmaster. And in him we can build, and know that God will establish the work of our hands, because Christ is the master builder.

And if you want to know what kind of builder he is, just think with me about the church he's building. That's Nehemiah's glory: he swaps the king's palace for the walls of Jerusalem. That's his legacy; when he prays later in the book, Remember me, God, it's his work building the walls. And in a funny way, Christ is the same. He has put his glory in the church; it is in the church that his true power and beauty is being shown to the world. So think about the church.

From those first scared disciples, huddled in a room in Jerusalem with the doors locked, all the way to today. Christians in every continent, in every country – hundreds of millions, if not billions. Certainly it seems like in the West we're in something of a retreat, we face God's stern discipline and we need to humble ourselves under it and beg for mercy. But don't be discouraged for the church as a whole! She's just fine. Christ is reaping great harvests in Africa and China; the Muslim world, for thirteen centuries as hard as rock to Christ, is seeing movements to him all over the place. Think, even if Christ returned this morning and gathered his people, and this was it, the end of history: think how many there'd be in those white robes, washed by the blood of the lamb. Too many to count, too many to even see in one place, an endless sea of the redeemed.

But it's not just the size of the church, it's the beauty. Think of the simple beauty of changed lives, washed souls. One of our pastors in the IPC is from a Muslim background, working in a country in North Africa, and his story is that big part of his coming to faith from a Muslim background was being welcomed by a Christian family that he stayed with for a while. Seeing the love they had for one another, the way the husband treated his wife, and going: I've never seen anything like this. The way they honoured him during Ramadan, waiting for him to eat before they ate: I've never been honoured that way. My friends, sometimes we get so used to this. We see all the flaws in the church, and my goodness there are some big flaws. But there really is nothing like this in the whole world. When a person confesses their sins with real repentance and then does not *work* to atone but rather receives the peace of God's forgiveness – there's nothing like that. When a family grows up in joy, singing hymns to their Lord, praising him with a glad heart for his blessings – there's nothing like that. When the lady who just had a miscarriage puts away envy and rejoices over her friend's baby, and her friend in turn puts away pride and weeps over her friend's loss – there's nothing like that. When young and old, rich and poor, black and white, man and woman, gather together without fear or favouritism and sing the Lord's praise and eat from one table – there's nothing like that! There's nothing like Christ's church in this whole wide woeful world. Here is the glory of resurrection life. We get so used to it. But the angels see it and it takes their breath away.

But all this will pale next to the glory of the church when Christ is finished with her. When we finally see the New Jerusalem, all the saints from all the world and all through history, every one bought by Christ's blood, a bride beautifully dressed for her husband, without spot or wrinkle – what a joy that will be! Then we will be glorified beyond imagining, and yet none of us will pay any attention to our own glory, for it won't be our own but Christ's. He saw the need, he paid the price, he defeated the enemy, he built the house.

Verse 18 – “And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for the good work.”

Brothers and sisters, Christ is with us. God’s blessing is on him. And the glory of Christ is displayed in the rebuilding of his church. So let us rise up and build. Whatever the Lord has given you to do, do it with a whole heart. Honour God by your resolute justice, your gentle patience, your enduring faithfulness. Raise your children with joy and careful instruction. Give with a cheerful spirit. Let God’s word dwell in you richly. Pray at all times. Sing loudly, whether you’re good at singing or not. All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Christ, so strengthen your hands for the good work, and may Christ bless you.