

Working on God's Wall

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Thanks for reading that. You definitely deserved a clap for reading that!

Feel. What emotions is it stirring when you look at that picture? Does it make you want to do anything?

What actions would you like to happen or take place? So it's a picture of Hiroshima, or Hiroshima, I don't know how you pronounce it.

A city in Japan that had a nuclear bomb dropped on it at the end of World War 2, or towards the end of World War 2, obviously causing significant destruction.

Today we're not going to be thinking about Hiroshima, we're thinking about the walls of Jerusalem and the ruined walls of Jerusalem. A quick recap, we're in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

[1 : 18] Last week, Johan described some of the context and the background. Nehemiah was living in a foreign land to the east of Jerusalem in Persia, what we now think of being Iran.

He hears about the state of the walls of Jerusalem and his people, his kin. He is a trusted member of King Artaxerxes' household.

He's part of the king's inner circle. So he hears about this, he gets letters from the king, gets support. To go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls.

Now this is part of a story read with Ezra and Nehemiah. The temple's already been rebuilt. Ezra's come along and discovered the law of God and been reading that.

And there have also been other attempts to sort of rebuild the walls and those have been destroyed. But Nehemiah's come back again to rebuild the walls.

[2 : 16] Now we didn't read all of Chapters 2 and 3, which I'm sure Debbie was really grateful for. However, it would be useful if you do have it open, because I am going to refer to all bits of it.

We're going to think about three things this morning. The call to rebuild. Two responses that we read about. And then working on God's wall.

So the call to rebuild. Nehemiah arrives. And as we've said, let's rebuild the walls. Then we get two responses. Some people are eager and keen to get on with it.

And some people are in opposition. And then working on the wall. All sorts of people from all sorts of places get stuck in together and work on the wall.

Now the key thing for us as we work through this is obviously what does this mean for us today?

You may be surprised, this is a bit of a spoiler, that at the end I'm not going to advocate that we literally go and build a wall.

[3 : 15] That isn't where we're going to get to. Oh, I'm sorry about that. The parallels here are spiritual. That doesn't mean that doing God's work doesn't involve doing practical things, including on occasion building walls.

We've thought about Ukraine. Ukraine, we've raised money previously to build a church there. I know we have a guest here from Nepal as well. Welcome. And we've supported building of church there.

So sometimes God's work does involve literal building. But the main point of this is the spiritual aspect. So we've got Nehemiah. We're going to have a look at a bit of his character. And we can see there elements that teach us about pictures of Jesus.

We can see how as Christians we're called today to do God's work. And that this work is hard. We work in a world with opposition. But the work is heart work, as Johan reminded us last week.

Nehemiah had a real heart, a real burden to work in God's grace. And there are also some pointers towards the future. It wasn't perfect in Nehemiah's day, and it's not perfect today.

[4 : 19] But we look forward to a day when things will be perfect. So let's have a think about the core to rebuild. So just thinking now about chapter 2, verses 17 to 20.

Nehemiah had been around inspecting bits of the southern part of the wall at night on his horse. And then he moves on to foot. He'd been doing this in secret.

And then we get to verses 17 and 18 when he speaks. He goes public with why he's been there with his ideas. So verse 17. What a great speech that must have been to be there when Nehemiah was saying this.

I want to just take a little bit of a look at what he says in these two verses. So he starts with the context, doesn't he?

And he places value on it. The city is in ruins, and we are indeed in trouble. So he's using the present tense. There's a problem right here and now, and I've identified it.

[5 : 53] It's quite a sort of political style of language, saying this is the problem and thinking about values. He also uses we and not you.

So we are in trouble, not you are in trouble. He knows that. He's just been around and inspected the walls of himself, although he didn't make a show of it, did he? He did that at night. Perhaps in contrast to some leaders who like to make a big show about what they are doing.

Nehemiah, he was a good servant. He did his inspection at night. He wasn't just kissing babies for the cameras. He was a politician in the good sense of being that.

He also backs up his assessment of the current state of affairs with a fact. He talks about the gates, the symbols of a great city. Not only have they been destroyed, but they've been burned with fire.

It's a really emotive description of an event that some of them may have witnessed. The Babylonian destruction happened many years before, but other attempts have happened, and there have been other people destroying things.

[7 : 00] So some of the people there may have been witnesses to this being burned. So it was a really emotive way of getting them involved. It's evidence of what happened in the past, present tense with values, and then he moves to the future.

Again, he uses we, let's build. It wasn't you build or I build. We're in this together. And what he says is all about action. He doesn't say let's have a plan or have a meeting or let's discuss the terms of reference for our subcommittee.

It's come on, we need to get on and do this. It's very purposeful in the way he addresses it. And then he describes what's going to be the result of this action.

Yes, we're going to have a new wall and new gates, but also much more. Again, he uses we. We will no longer be in disgrace. It's back to values and beliefs.

The trouble we're in, it can be gone. We can sort this if we do this together. Now, I guess Nehemiah had probably seen or heard a speech or two when he was back in the palace with the king.

[8 : 11] He probably knew how to gain trust, heard speeches being given, probably had examples of good and bad speeches. Nehemiah wasn't a novice in this area of leadership.

He's not done there either. He makes a reference to a higher calling or cause. He says the hand of God, and he also makes reference to authority.

The king is on board. So Nehemiah, he was a man of integrity. He was a man of prayer, as we talked about last week, and action, as well as political skill, but real, genuine faith.

His faith was real. His prayer life was real. At his core, this was at his core where his heart lay. Have you ever thought about how Nehemiah represents a picture of Jesus?

Jesus, if you like, walked the walls in the sense that God became man. So God lived on earth.

Jesus came from heaven to earth. He saw the state of the world, just in the same way as Nehemiah walked around and saw the state of the walls.

[9 : 22] Jesus, if you remember, we've been thinking about Easter, haven't we, recently. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt or a donkey. I don't know, but I wonder whether Jesus was thinking about when Nehemiah rode around those walls previously on his horse.

We also read that Jesus, when he arrived in Jerusalem, he wept over the state of Jerusalem, in the same way that Nehemiah was moved by what he'd heard about the city.

And a few days after Jesus had wept, Jesus achieved his greatest act by defeating death and sin.

So what is, if Jesus wept over Jerusalem and he died and rose again, what was Jesus' call to rebuild in the same way as Nehemiah?

Well, right at the end of his life on earth, he gave us what is often referred to as a great commission in Matthew chapter 28. Right at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, this is what Jesus said.

Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

[10:42] There are interesting similarities there, aren't there, between what Jesus said and what Nehemiah was saying. And see, Jesus puts the authority bit first, Nehemiah puts it at the end. Jesus says, I have the authority on heaven and on earth.

The world needs you to go. Go and make disciples. Baptise them. Teach them. If you like, go and build. So that's the call that Nehemiah gives to the people as he's speaking to them.

Then what happens? We get two responses. The last verses of chapter 2 contain two responses and two quite different responses. If we look at the end of verse 18, the response of the people, they replied, let's start rebuilding.

So they began this good work. So I guess what Nehemiah had said was obviously really effective, wasn't it? He said, let's rebuild. And the people say, yep, we're going to put our back to it.

And they start rebuilding. We'll come to more of that in chapter 3 in a moment. However, that's not the only response. And let's briefly consider the second response, the response of the enemies.

[11:56] If we have a look at verse 19. But when Sambalot, the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab, sound quite scary, don't they?

I'm not sure I'd quite want to meet Sambalot, the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab. They heard about it. They mocked and ridiculed us. What is this you're doing? They asked. Are you rebelling against the king? So the people hadn't even started building. And the opposition starts.

And these are quite strong words. It's describing a battle of good versus evil. This isn't a sort of gentle bit of banter that's going on. They're bitter.

There's real animosity. These folk clearly do not want these walls to be rebuilt. They want the walls to stay broken. And it's the same today.

[12:55] Doing God's work does polarise people and can polarise quickly. So we need to be prepared for opposition. Who are these characters that sound with really scary names?

Well, Sambalot was the governor of Samaria. That's to the north of Jerusalem. And he liked to think that Judah and Jerusalem were part of his sphere of influence.

The next name, Tobiah. So he was probably some sort of lackey or yes man of Sambalot. A kind of enthusiastic person that likes to do their bosses bidding.

And then thirdly, Geshem the Arab, who was probably the most powerful of all these three people. He was from Egypt, northern Arabia, southern Palestine.

So he occupied the bit from the south and was perhaps less committed to stop the rebuilding. So the opposition that we read about there came from all directions.

[13:56] It came in various guises and different degrees of opposition. And we see from verse 19 about how they did it. So they use ridicule, mocking.

And they also play the political card. At the end of verse 19, you are rebelling against the king. And again, this all happens today, doesn't it?

Faith gets mocked. There's also the suggestion that what Christians are doing are breaking laws, even if it's not the case. It's still real for today. Now, there's more in the later chapters of Nehemiah about these people and their efforts to thwart.

So I'm not going to dwell on it today. But it is just worth noting that just as people were roused into action, so there was opposition. It happened right at the same time.

Although there's a real encouragement because the chapter ends with Nehemiah stepping in and responding. This is what Nehemiah says.

[14:55] The God of heaven will give us success. We, his servants, will start rebuilding. What an emphatic response to the opposition.

God is in charge. He is in heaven. You aren't. We are going to do this work. I think there's also a difference for us today. At the end of verse 20, that's sort of an exclusion.

The gospel today is not exclusive. The gospel today is for everyone. It's really inclusive. All are welcome to hear the news. But it does illustrate that working on God's wall is a battle of heavenly power versus earthly power.

And when we may struggle about doing God's work, it's really important to hold on to that fact. That it is a battle, but we have heaven on our side. The message of Jesus and the advance of the gospel

brings opposition.

In a similar way, if we go forward again to the end of Matthew, the last words of Jesus at the end of chapter 28, he gives an encouragement.

[16:06] He says, surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. In the same way that Nehemiah gives that response, that claim that he is with us.

And that should bring us encouragement that Jesus has promised to be with us. So we thought about Nehemiah, his call to action, his rousing speech, and then the two responses, people keen to get on with it, and people who are in opposition.

And then we get a whole chapter about ordinary people. Now, we didn't read it. And I was wondering, did you read it all before you came? Did you do your homework? Be honest.

You know, it's one of those chapters you think, oh, do I really need to bother to read all this? It's just a list. One name after another. It's like sort of genealogy. Is it just a list of dry data in the Bible?

Or, let me challenge that way of thinking. Is it a wonderful record of ordinary people doing some really special things? I'm going to try and persuade you.

[17:09] It's the latter. Just a little take a look at a map. So I don't know whether you can see that. There are a few things just to point out. First is the scale in the top left there.

So that has got 0, 50, and 100 metres. So 100 metres, that's the kind of length of a running track. So you imagine a running track gives you an idea of how big these walls were. Or a football pitch is just slightly longer than 100 metres.

So imagine how many football pitches it takes to go around there. That's the size of the walls that they were working on. Secondly, we read about Nehemiah, and he was on his horse.

So that green arrow there, that's where he starts his nighttime walk. And he goes south in the dashed line. And he goes round underneath the dung gate, which is the bottom one there.

There aren't many chances we get to say dung from the front here. So I may say it more often than it's strictly necessary. So he goes underneath, round the dung gate, and then he walks up the eastern side. But because the walls are so destroyed and broken down, he has to get off his horse.

[18:13] And then the dotted line is the bit where he walks. So that's the little nighttime walk that Nehemiah did. And then finally, in the chapter, when we read chapter three, and I'm sure you're all going to go home and read the rest of it because you're so excited to see what happens.

It starts off at the sheep gate, and it goes round anti-clockwise. So round past where Nehemiah started, source, round the dung gate, say that again. And then round the side. It goes round in that anti-clockwise direction.

The other thing to say is that when there's a description of them building the wall, there are two different sort of things that are going on.

Sometimes the word build is used because it was completely destroyed, and they need to literally rebuild the whole thing. Or sometimes it's the word that's used to kind of repair. So kind of make good, or making firm, or making strong, rather than a sort of complete restoration.

You know those kind of paintings that you sometimes see restored, and someone picks off each individual bit of dust. That's not the kind of image here. It's about kind of making good, and strong, and secure.

[19:21] So that's hopefully to give you an idea of what was going on. Let's have a look at some of the people that are mentioned in chapter three. First up, there are the leaders. If you have a look at verse one of chapter three.

So I'm going to pronounce all these names as well with difficulty. Debbie, don't worry. Elishib, the high priest and his fellow priests, went to work and rebuilt the sheep gate. That's the bit right at the top there. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel.

So the people that listed first are the spiritual leaders. I think this is important. So there's servants' leadership. The priests are there getting their hands dirty.

They're not immune to doing some hard work. They're not avoiding the call to work, which I think is a good example for leaders today. Leaders need to muck in. However, not all leaders took that view.

If you look at verse five, the next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa. But their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.

[20 : 34] So Tekoa was a town about ten miles south from Jerusalem. And the sort of meaning here is they didn't put their shoulders into it. It's a bit like an ox pulling a cart. Their work was physically demanding.

Now, we don't know why these leaders decided not to do it. Maybe they didn't like hard work. Didn't want to get their hands dirty. Maybe they objected to it politically. Or maybe pride was part of it. However, there's something there that we have to be careful of, don't we? If we ever think we're too proud to get our hands dirty or to do God's work or to put our shoulders into it. However, interesting bit about Tekoa.

Although their leaders didn't seem to want to lift a finger, the other people from Tekoa did. And in fact, they did a double duty. So verse five, we see that they did something. And then verse 27, if you skip to the end of the chapter.

Verse 27 says, next to them, the men of Tekoa repaired another section from the great projecting tower to the wall of Ophel. So there's a challenge, isn't there?

[21 : 35] Even if leaders are not pulling their weight, it's still important that other people step up. And they stepped up double, these people of Tekoa. The leaders from Tekoa, however, they seem to be an outlier because lots of other leaders did seem to step up.

And you don't have to look at them all. But verses 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 all contain rulers or half-district administrators who got on with it. So the rulers were really taking part.

Again, I think that's a lovely picture of Jesus. We looked at Philippians earlier on this year. There's a really well-known passage in Philippians, chapter 2, which says that Jesus, who was God, made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

Being found in appearance of a man, he humbled himself. So just as the leaders here were getting involved, Jesus was the greatest example of servant leadership. What else can we learn from this chapter?

Well, it wasn't just a male activity. If you look at verse 12, which says, Shalom got his daughters involved. Shalom, son of Haloehesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.

[22 : 53] I mentioned before about the people from Tekoa. They did double duty. The others did some double duties. It's Merrimoth, son of Uriah, and Meshulam, son of Berechiah. If you want references, that's 4 and 21 and 30 as well.

So overall, there were 42 sections of the wall. It was a real team effort. Lots of people involved. Doing God's work is a team effort.

If you like, it's a picture of the church in unity working as one. And there were old and young, male and female, different characters, all walks of life.

Some were city dwellers, some were country dwellers. And in the same way that the church is made up of all types. And I think that's one of the great things about Bethel is the variety of people that we have here.

I'm also not sure if you noticed, but some people fixed sections that really mattered to them. Areas near their house or their property.

[23 : 54] If you look at verse 28, the priests fixed bits near their own houses. Above the horse gate, the priests made repairs, each in front of his own house.

So this is a reality of motivation. It's not wrong to be involved in things that matter to us, things that are close to our heart. And the priests did that. They fixed the wall near their own house.

However, this was also balanced with the need to get the whole wall fixed. Paul describes in the New Testament, we all have our individual gifts, but we're all working together, united in one body. If you like, I think of the building on the wall as a picture of that. People working together, doing different things, but united in one task. And it wasn't just people who lived in Jerusalem who were working on the wall.

People came from neighbouring towns in all directions, mentioned Tekoa. But I found this encouraging. Remember that the opposition came from all directions, from the north and from the south. But God also provided help from all directions.

[24 : 57] And I think that's really encouraging that God provides the support that's needed. Now I'd like to go back to the picture I showed you at the beginning.

So I'd like to think this time not as a picture of Hiroshima, but perhaps think about this as a picture of a desperate, fallen world that needs to understand the gospel of the good news about Jesus, that

requires Christians to be doing God's work so that others believe and belong and grow. So if that's what that represents, what's that now making you think? What's in your mind? What does it make you feel?

What emotions does it stir? And if that's a picture of a world in need of Jesus, what does that make us want to do?

So perhaps just take a moment, just pray or reflect. Think about what's on your mind, what's on your heart, and what you might be called to do.

[26 : 14] if you're wondering what this looks like today it's not a wall but the people of Hiroshima go to action so you can see just in the middle there I'll just go back one see that kind of tower that sits in the middle it's not a wall but people got to work so you may say ah but doing this God's work is not for me you may say I don't have the skills necessary to be doing God's work today well here's a question for you when we read chapter 3 how many builders did we see listed?

I couldn't find any maybe you'll be able to find them it was primarily a non-professional activity they were ordinary people doing God's work yes there were trades people so there were goldsmiths the perfumer was at work I think I'd have got them to Dungate but no that job went to Malkajar who was a district ruler so when we talk about leaders mucking in we really mean it or mucking out I suppose if it was Dungate but working on God's wall today doesn't require specially trained workers it needs us and perhaps there's a temptation today that when we think about working God's wall we see it just as physical stuff sure we need to do stuff that's not wrong however what was primarily a physical structure then is a spiritual building today it needs people like us but then the next thing I guess we may say is oh yes but I can't do very much and it might seem that the things that we do for God are small however a wall is built of each brick each stone each piece of wood each metal bolt it's the sum of its parts and each tiny part was put there by someone working on God's wall and that someone today is us the smallest things count even the smallest conversation even in passing is still just that working on God's wall all the gifts of the church working together as one chapter 3 is a great catalogue of I guess largely forgotten names however let's not forget people were working really enthusiastically for their faith have a look at verse 20 next to him

Barak son of Zabii zealously repaired another section from the angle to the entrance to the house of Elishib the high priest so lots of people doing ordinary things but with a real passion for building God's wall so I've got some questions who do you relate to when you read this story what is God calling you to do which bit of the wall are you working on are we chatting to and encouraging our fellow workers who are working on the wall and are we ourselves doing it enthusiastically are you a leader that's getting stuck in are you working on something that's close to your heart are you perhaps doing the job that others don't want to do maybe the dung gate can you see a need for things that need to be done do you perhaps have the capacity to fix two sections like the people of Tekoa if you do that's great but remember most people didn't fix two sections they just worked on the bit on one bit are we taking comfort that God is on the side of those who are doing his work despite what any opposition may say as a church we're going to be reviewing our activities the things that we do we're going to be thinking about what needs building but also maybe what needs fixing and where we put our efforts perhaps you might want to think about what you're doing and as we as a church think about that that would help us as we do that

I wonder what would chapter 3 read like if it was a list of people at Bethel what would it say after your name if we wrote a chapter 3 Bethel style today two final thoughts one is who are we working for Jesus said in Matthew 16 that I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it and I want to finish by just reading the two things that Nehemiah said in the end of chapter 20 and then what Jesus said at the end of Matthew 28 because they can put it far better than I can then I said to them you see the trouble we are in Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me the God of heaven will give us success we his servants will start rebuilding then Jesus came to them and said all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything

I have commanded you and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age