

On Courage and Construction Crews

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[0 : 00] Courage and construction crews. So we find ourselves beginning in the rubble. But not first, for our purposes in Jerusalem, let me take you to some different rubble, the rubble of! War-torn Bangladesh. So the year is 1972, and there is a medical missionary there by the name of Dr.

Viggo Olson. And he is seeing war bring destruction to a community. And he takes responsibility personally for a team to rebuild 4,000 homes. He's a medical doctor. And his inspiration, the Bible reading that inspired him to do that, was the chapter we just read, Nehemiah chapter 3. Because he recognized there were no expert builders or architects in Nehemiah's day. They were concerned for God's glory, committed to his task. Let's go on and let's build. A man of faith, encouraged. And his team rebuilt 4,000 homes in just seven weeks. So here we are, Nehemiah's story, part two. And again, we're seeing aspects that we've seen before. We're going to see the courageous faith of this servant leader, Nehemiah. But I want us to recognize that the emphasis very much falls on the people of God, on this construction crew, on these people who are working shoulder to shoulder for God's kingdom and God's glory. And I think that's good news for us today. So we are here in Scotland. Most of us call Scotland home. Scotland, many of us will know, is being described as something of a spiritual wasteland. There are parts of our nation that are becoming de-churched.

We drove through the borders in Dumfries and Galloway, those remote farming communities, and many of them now no longer have active gospel churches. And what I want us to see is that what God is showing us today here in Scotland, here in Beccle, is that you and I, we share some of the same needs as we see in Nehemiah's day. We need spiritual, courageous, inspiring leaders to look to in our spiritual rebuilding project. And can I tell you that we have one, and his name is Jesus. He is the Lord we follow as we seek for his glory to see spiritual restoration. But we also need this sense. We really need the sense that God is pleased to use ordinary Christians, ordinary church members, ordinary churches like ours for his kingdom and his glory. As we're going to see in Jerusalem, there were lots of people within the city who had real gifts, but none of those gifts were actually relevant to the building project. But that was no barrier to God using and working through them, nor is it a barrier to God working through us. The prime need for God's construction crew is that we have a concern for God's glory, is that we have the courage to act with faith, is that we have a commitment to God's kingdom. That's what he's looking for. So let's dig in and see what lessons we can learn from Nehemiah and from the people. First of all, to think about courage. So this is back in chapter 2. Remember last time, if you were here last time, Nehemiah hears about the dreadful state of the city physically and spiritually in Jerusalem, and we find him praying and then making plans to come and lead a rebuilding project. And we see some of those same themes emerge, but we also see his courage. The first thing we see him doing in verses 11 to 16, if you see it there in your text, is he inspects the walls. When does he do it?

[4 : 15] Did you notice in verse 12, he set out during the night. Now, why is he doing it at night? Why is he not telling anybody what's going on? Well, it's probably in part because he knows that there is enemy opposition.

There are Sam Ballett and others. There is always the potential of spies in the camp. There is always the potential for discouragement. So he wants to personally get a sense of the size and the scope of the project before a public launch. He inspects the wall. Notice in verse 12, because God has put it on his heart. God has given him this great passion to rebuild fallen Jerusalem. And so we see the connection. He's been praying with a sense of grief, and there's a sense of passion that he is driven by a sense of God's glory. We have seen him planning, and here he's still planning, and now he's going to put into practice those plans. What do we find him doing? In verses 11 to 16, he's

largely examining the rubble.

So in verse 13, he went out, and he's examining the walls of Jerusalem, which have been broken down, and its gates, which have been destroyed by fire. So he wants to learn, where is their weakness?

Where is the potential for security breaches? Where is their danger for the city of God that represents the people of God? So he examines the rubble. I was in January at an in-service training event here in Edinburgh, and one of those sessions was led by a pastor of another church in Edinburgh who'd been doing ministry there for over 20 years. And he spoke very deliberately about when he arrived.

He spent the first few months, and he used this phrase, and it stuck with me, he spent the first few months examining the rubble. He was taking a good look at his church and thinking, where is there evidence of weakness? Or where is there growth and rebuilding that can be done? And he created a to-do list.

[6 : 27] And he said to us very honestly, that that list is still a work in progress, 20 years later. But he was committed to careful building, courageous, faithful building. It's like Nehemiah.

So we see Nehemiah, first of all, inspecting the walls, but then we hear him, don't we? We hear him inspiring the people in verses 17 to 20. Now I think we know this, that motivational leaders are a gift to any organization, to any society. A parent who inspires a child to do their very best, or the coach who creates a winning mentality, the kind of boss that you would gladly do overtime for, you want to be on their project team, because they motivate and they inspire. I think one such leader was Winston Churchill. Winston Churchill, during World War II, during the Blitz, when so many bombs were falling, especially on the East End of London, Winston Churchill, during the day, would often be found walking the streets of the East End. And as he walked through those piles of rubble, those smoking ruins, crowds would cheer, and they would gather, and they would shout, good old Winnie. And he became so important to morale, not just for the city of London, but for the whole nation. Nehemiah is a different leader, and Jerusalem is a different form of rubble. But what we hear in verses 17 to 20 is that Nehemiah is one of those leaders who will raise morale, who will inspire a spiritual rebuilding work. And remember, he does all this while he too is facing enemy opposition. We meet them in verse 19, some ballot to buy it in Geshe, mocking and ridiculing. So how is it that Nehemiah inspires the people of God towards the rebuilding project?

First of all, verse 17, he points to the ruins. You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. So it has now been, for Jerusalem, 140 years since Nebuchadnezzar came with his armies, destroyed the city, and took people captives. And it's also been 15 years or so since Ezra came back to begin a rebuilding project, but then that work was stopped by the edict of a Persian king. And so you can well imagine how easy it might be for someone living in Jerusalem to say, well, the city's not looking great, but I guess this is just the way it is.

But that's not the attitude of Nehemiah, and it's not the attitude he wants the people to have. And so he calls them for the sake of God's kingdom and God's glory to consider the ruins so they wouldn't settle, but rather they would strive in rebuilding. Because he moves from the ruins to secondly talk to them about rebuilding. Look at verse 17 again, come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace. Verse 20, the God of heaven will give us success. We, his servants, will start rebuilding. Nehemiah is concerned for the people. He doesn't want them to live in disgrace and dishonor. But beyond that, he's also concerned for God's honor. He knows what it means if the city of God lies in ruins. And so he calls the people to obey, to trust, to get involved in rebuilding. To help them to recognize that in God's strength, they can work together to do God's work for God's glory. And another way that he helps them towards that is by retelling his story. Look at verse 18.

[10 : 48] I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. Now, Nehemiah is not saying, check me out, I'm awesome. God has spoken to me. God's worked in my life.

No, what he's doing is he's saying, look at my story as an example of God's power and God's providence to take us to this point. And if he's taken us this far, and if he's committed to us, he will certainly enable us to complete this project. God has given the green light to this project. So ignore the opposition, ignore the previous command. He invites them to understand God's covenant commitment. His steadfast love is for his people. That promise stands firm and is real.

His commitment to his own glory stands firm and is real. Therefore, the people of God can get to work. And so we see his courage and he looks to instill courage in the people of God.

Billy Graham, the great evangelist of the 20th century, once said, courage is contagious. When one man takes a stand, the spines of others are stiffened. And we see it in what Nehemiah means for the city and the rebuilding project. We could rephrase that and say courage is contagious.

When one mouse takes a stand, the spines of others are often stiffened. And I say that because I've just finished reading, we've read as a family, C.S. Lewis, a great book of Prince Caspian. If you read the Chronicles of Narnia, you'll be familiar perhaps with Reepicheep, one of the greatest mice in all of literature. This tiny little mouse serves Aslan as true king. He fights with courage for his friends.

[12 : 49] He defends Lucy to the point where he loses his own tail. He's always ready for battle. He's always ready to stand up for what's true and good. He will go to kingdoms unknown, this tiny little mouse, for the sake of Aslan, his king. And in the story of Prince Caspian, he inspires his fellow mice to such a degree that they will get to the point where they are about to cut their own tails off so that Reepicheep will not face any dishonor. And Reepicheep, this tiny little mouse, he inspires others in Narnia to act for Aslan, the true king, giving us a picture of what courageous faith can do in the hearts and lives of others. Now let's think about how Nehemiah might inspire courage in us and in our story. Let me apply it first of all personally. Let me invite each one of us today and in the coming days to ask this question. As you examine the rubble of your own life, as it were, what walls and gates need mended and need attention? When you think about your relationships in your family or with your friendship group, are there patterns of behavior or ways of speaking that need our careful attention so that God is glorified in all we do?

When you think about your own life with God, are there things that need to change so that you would have a closer walk with Him, committing to time to read and to pray and to worship with others?

Examine the rubble. Ask yourself, with God's help, what do I need to change for the sake of God's glory in His kingdom? But we can apply it differently. Think about where you have positions of influence.

Think about your roles and responsibilities. Where do you exercise leadership? Where do you have an influence over other people? That might be in your home, that might be in a workplace, that might be in a particular team, that might be in a local community. What will it look like for each one of us to practice courageous faith, to do the right thing, to live with integrity, to lead others to a life of faithfulness in ways that would bring God glory? As we think about Nehemiah as a servant leader, let's think for a moment about our church and about our church elders. So church elders, we believe, are appointed by God to be under shepherds, under Jesus the great shepherd. Now we are aware of that task and the weight of it, we are also aware of our own weaknesses. And one of the tasks of a local church is to pray for its leaders, that they would be men of prayer and faith and courage and integrity, committed to God's kingdom and will and glory. And as we think about the idea of people of faith and courage, before we leave that, let's remind ourselves to look up, to look up to Jesus. Nehemiah was a great servant leader. Jesus is the great, the ultimate servant leader. He is the greatest example of courageous faith that we will ever see.

How do we see it primarily? We see it in Jesus coming into this world, living by faith at all points, being willing to take upon himself your sin and mine, your guilt and mine, to carry that to the cross, to go under the sentence that that sin and guilt deserves, to take upon himself the just judgment of God, so that God's plan of salvation might be completed, that we might be saved. That's courageous faith that's for our good. We see it in Jesus, always committed to the Father's will, to the Father's glory, and to a great building project, to build the kingdom of God in hearts and in lives. And so we look to him with faith. He is the one who can rebuild what sin, what failure has ruined. Jesus is the evidence that God is still committed to his covenant love. Jesus is the one who calls his church under his rule to that great spiritual rebuilding project. I was reminding myself this week of the early decades of the Free Church of Scotland. You know, the first leaders of our church, they got this. And because they understood this, they planted churches everywhere. And there were Sunday schools set up in the tenements of Glasgow and Edinburgh. There was extensive global mission. Today, in our day, the need for people to hear the good news about Jesus is the same. And the God of the Bible, he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

[18 : 21] And he calls us to courageous faith and to be involved in his rebuilding work. And that takes us to think about the construction crew that we meet in Nehemiah chapter 3. Again, I was thinking about our refurbishment project. Nehemiah will always do that, I think. So three and a bit years ago, this church was refurbished on the inside. And what I remember with a great sense of thankfulness was the last couple of weeks as so many people were mucking in together to get things ready for our first service on Easter Sunday, three and a bit years ago. That sense of excitement and joy of being able to work side by side in a shared project. Not necessarily, I didn't certainly, didn't bring any gifts to the table. But to be able to do something together was a wonderful thing. And we're so thankful for what it's meant for the church. Come to Nehemiah chapter 3, and we don't instinctively, I suppose, come to what we think of this as one of the most exciting chapters in our Bibles. Probably not. But actually what we see is a beautiful picture of the church as it serves together. Very different people united in a common cause. Yes, for some walls, but ultimately for God's kingdom and for God's glory. It's a great chapter.

Now, we're not going to wade into the details, but we are going to notice a few trends. And just before we see the trends, this comment I was reading this week, and there's a guy called John Goldingay.

And this little comment really stood out in preparation. He said, in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, no one has a special gift. Or rather, people had special gifts, but their gifts were irrelevant to the project. People's regular work did not become a reason for not being involved in the building project. And what was true then is true now, and will always be true. Now, some trends that we see. First of all, we see the servant leaders, they set an example. So, the first person we're introduced to in chapter 3 is Eliashib, and he's the high priest. And with his fellow priests, they went to work and rebuilt the sheep gate. Now, why begin with the sheep gate? There's significance here because sacrifices came through here.

The high priest and the priest, they're concerned for the worship of God. They're concerned that sacrifices can be made so that they might seek forgiveness and restored relationship with God. So, the list of builders begins in verse 1 with a high priest and fellow priest. It ends, verse 17, you've got a list of some Levites. They helped the priests. And then, from verse 29, we get Zadok the priest and other priests involved as well. So, the servant leaders, the religious leaders, they're not above rolling up their sleeves. They understand that all God's work is spiritual work, so they get involved. Here's another thing we see as you go through the list. You see surprising builders get involved in the project. Two that stand out, you find in verse 8, you've got this chap called Uziel. He's a goldsmith. And Hanani, he's a perfume maker. So, their normal nine-to-five work, usually very refined, kind of artisan craftsmanship. Their work was usually the preserve of the elites.

[22 : 03] But now here we find them chopping, stacking, rebuilding, just like everybody else. And it was these guys who inspired Dr. Vigo in Bangladesh. If God can use a perfume maker, well, why can't He use a medical doctor? Another surprise that we see in verse 12, we meet Shalom, son of Halasheth.

So, he's ruler over a half district, and he repaired the next section with the help of his daughters. These are the only women in the list. So, we presume that he has no sons, but his daughters, they are eager to get involved in the work. And there are no barriers of gender that apply here, which is wonderful. And we see the diversity of workers in so many different ways. Look at verse 7 with me. We read of repairs being made by men from Gibeon and Mizpah. These are foreigners. They're not even part of ethnic Israel, but they want to identify with God's people and to be part of God's work. In verse 13, we find the valley gate repaired by Hanan and the residents of Zenoa. So, here is the local official, and here are the regular citizens, but they're pitching in together. The usual dividing lines in society, they don't apply in God's kingdom project. Look at the evidence of commitment that you see all through these verses. One example is the chap that we meet in verse 4. He's called Merrimoth.

So, he repairs the section next to the fish gate. And then, flick over with me to verse 21, and we discover Merrimoth again. Merrimoth, he repaired another section from the entrance of Eliashib's house to the end of it. So, he finishes building one section over here. He's like, dusts himself off. He's like, oh, hold on, there's more work to be done. So, he commits to another section. And we, so we see in this building project, there's sacrifice, there's energy, there's zeal, and there's commitment to the task. From all of these really diverse, different people, no particular skills, but a real desire to get involved. Each of these builders, largely unknown beyond this chapter of the

Bible. These are not big characters in the Bible storyline.

[24 : 29] You're not going to hear many sermons on each of these. But isn't it wonderful that God honors them each by name, that their efforts and their shared efforts, they matter profoundly to God.

These willing servants are honored. Now, I don't know about you, but I find that really encouraging. Because in a sense, it moves the question that we typically ask from, am I gifted, when we think about getting involved in God's kingdom work, to, will I be committed?

So, I think we come to a character in the Bible like Nehemiah, and it's super easy to say, I'm no Nehemiah. I could never be Nehemiah. I could never do what he does.

We're not asked to. But each and every Christian, we can be a Hashabiah. We can be a Shalom. We can be one of his daughters, committed to God's glory, to God's kingdom-building work.

And, you know, this is very much the story of the early church. So, the first kind of 400 years, especially after the generation of the apostles, how did Christianity spread? How did it grow in influence around the empire such that the Roman Empire himself would become a convert to the Christian faith? Well, scholars tell us the main influence in that, they were ordinary Christians.

[26 : 03] ordinary Christians who met in ordinary homes, worshiping Jesus with real faith and with real love. Ordinary Christians who practiced a positive Christianity. They cared for the poor. They showed dignity to women. They offered help for the hurting. Ordinary Christians who, wherever they went, they were gossiping the gospel. So, they're washing their clothes and they're talking to their neighbor about Jesus. They're sharing food with others and they're bringing people in to teach the Bible, to teach them about Jesus. They're on a journey. They're talking with the person beside them all about Jesus and His good news. And most of those figures that were so influential in the spread of the gospel. We don't know their names. But God knows and God honors them. But it sets up a principle, Nehemiah sets up a principle, that God is pleased to use very ordinary construction crew members in the kingdom of God. What He's looking for are men, women, young people utterly committed to the cause of Christ and to the glory of God. We'll be willing to be led by Him for His glory. So, as we leave this construction crew chapter, let's let it do a few things for us. First of all, let's let it challenge us.

You know, have we said to Jesus, sign me up? Have we heard Jesus say, come to me, believe in me, have your sins forgiven, come into my kingdom?

And how, if we've responded in faith to Jesus, how are we expressing our commitment to His kingdom and to Christ? And that will work itself out in lots of different ways, but it will certainly work itself out in the local church. We need to pray for the work of the church and to pray together for the work of the church. It involves us worshiping together as the church, because then it puts the glory of God and the power of the gospel on display in bringing people together. It involves us being ready to sacrifice and to serve in the cause of the gospel.

So, as we read Nehemiah 3, ask God by His Spirit to challenge your heart, to think about your own commitment. But also use Nehemiah chapter 3 to encourage us as we recognize that church history is full of the Lord's people doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way, and the Lord's way is so often through the ordinary. God honors that. And let's remind ourselves that we don't need to settle for a low spiritual state in our nation, in our city, or in our church, that God can renew and revive in an instant. And so, there is that call to expectant faith. As we recognize that we matter to Jesus, this church matters to Jesus, we're part of His body. He's given us His Spirit. And so, God can use me, God can use you to put His glory on display. And finally, let's use this chapter again to remind ourselves of the Lord Jesus. Not only is He our great servant leader, He is also the one who is committed to building His church. There's the Lord Jesus, the risen Lord Jesus, who spoke the Great Commission to His followers. All authority has been given to me, Jesus said, so go and make disciples. And know that I am with you. And so, we continue the work of Jesus with the power and the authority that He has. We look to Jesus, the one who entered the world to bring beauty, where there was brokenness.

[30 : 11] The one who came to restore what sin had ruined. The one who came to live and to die for God's glory, to secure our salvation. The one who is committed to the unstoppable, ongoing church-building project in His world. And He calls His people, He calls His church to continue His mission, to work shoulder to shoulder and side by side in a wonderful picture of unity and diversity, where every member matters to seek His kingdom, to seek His glory, to seek His will. Well, let's pray together. Lord, our God, we thank You for these chapters of Your Word. Thank You.