

PM Nehemiah 2:11-20 Building a vision

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[0 : 00] Well, let us turn to the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament, chapter 2, and I want to read from chapter 11.

In chapter 1, Nehemiah learns of the broken down state of the city and the walls of Jerusalem. He is one of the Israelites that has been in exile in Babylon and has risen to a position of some importance.

I suppose in our terms he was a sort of senior civil servant. And he asks permission of the king to return to Jerusalem to find out exactly what's going on and to see if there's anything he could do about it.

And we pick up in chapter 2 at verse 11. I went to Jerusalem and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few men.

I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. By night I went out through the valley gate towards the jackal well and the dung gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.

[1 : 30] Then I moved on towards the fountain gate and the king's pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through, so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the valley gate.

The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

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 upon me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, let us start rebuilding. So they began this good work. But when Sinballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab, heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us.

[2 : 39] What is this you are doing, they asked. Are you rebelling against the king? I answered them by saying, the God of heaven will give us success. We, his servants, will start rebuilding.

But as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it. Amen. And may God add his blessing to the reading of his word.

And again we unite in prayer. Let us pray. Gracious Father God, we rejoice to come before you and to bring our thanksgiving for all your good gifts.

May we ever remember that you made us, that you give us physical life, and that in Jesus you died for us and give us eternal life.

You give us your spirit. You give us minds with which to inquire and hearts with which to love. You give us families for love and support.

- [3 : 43] And so also our church family. Help us to be truly thankful for all the ways in which you enrich our lives. And we give thanks for that great privilege of sins forgiven and of being adopted into your family.
- And being able to know you as our heavenly father. We give thanks for praise to sing, fellowship to share, and service to give.
- We would also, our father, give thanks for the heritage of faith that there is in our land. And yet we look around and we grieve at the godlessness of Scotland today.
- Scotland, once known around the world as the land of the book. And yet today a land where your word is ignored and your name is no longer honoured. Gracious God, we seek your mercy upon us as a nation.
- Restrain unrighteousness and strengthen those who stand for your truth. We seek renewal and reformation and revival.
- [4 : 54] The outpouring of your spirit convincing men and women of sin and righteousness and judgment. And we seek the fruit of the gospel. And people turning once again to you, the living God who is there.
- Father God, we live in troubled times and we pray for all those in the world today who suffer.
- May they know something of your presence and your comfort. And we continue to pray for the situation of the pandemic in our midst.
- For all those in the front line of healthcare. From doctors to nurses, indeed all who work in hospitals and GP surgeries. And we pray for wisdom for those who treat the sick and those who seek further cures.
- Our gracious Father, we come here from different situations, different backgrounds. And we pray for all those near and dear to us.
- [6 : 04] And we bring before you those that we know that are on our hearts with particular needs. Whether that need is physical or emotional or psychological or indeed spiritual. For those who struggle to find faith.
- For those who face the trials of grief and illness. For those stricken by fears and worries. We seek for them your grace and your peace. And our Father, we further pray for organisations that would seek to serve you.
- Scripture Union, the Bible Society, Steer Fund, Prison Fellowship and many more. Grant wisdom to leaders. Resources for the work.
- And may these organisations bring the touch of your grace into the lives of many today. Hear these are prayers, our Father. In Jesus' name.
- Amen. And a word of prayer. Our Heavenly Father, as we once again come into your presence. We ask that your word be our rule.
- [7 : 12] And your spirit our teacher. And that above all your greater glory be our supreme concern. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- I want to focus with you this evening on these verses that we read in Nehemiah chapter 2. Nehemiah had lived throughout his life in exile in Babylon.
- But he, although in exile, was obviously a man who cared deeply for the welfare of God's people. In the first chapter we learn something of the plight of Jerusalem.
- He's received news from fellow Jews of the plight of Jerusalem. And we also find there Nehemiah's prayer to God about this situation in Jerusalem.
- And his response to God's call for him to go and do something about it. And we see in that chapter that Nehemiah was someone who cared enough to weep and to pray and to volunteer to help to rebuild Jerusalem.

- [8 : 28] In chapter 2, the bit of the chapter before the bit we read, we find Nehemiah seeking the permission of the king of Babylon to return to Jerusalem.
- Now just to put this into historical context, you remember in 605-60 BC, Israel had been overrun by the Babylonians and the Jews had been taken off into captivity.
- Now it didn't all happen at once. There was a number of waves, if you like, of people being taken off into captivity over a number of years. And Daniel, you'll remember, was one of those who had been taken off early on into exile as a young man into Babylon.
- And the years have rolled by. And we read in Daniel chapter 9, I think it is, that Daniel has been reading the scriptures and he realises that God has said that this exile in Babylon is going to last 70 years.
- And so in chapter 9, we find Daniel praying for God to honour his promise and restore his people to Jerusalem. And that prayer of Daniel would be dated 539 BC.
- [9 : 57] And a couple of years after that, we find the first return of the Jews from Babylon to Israel under a man called Shezballah.
- He led that return.
- And he set about trying to get on with rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Again, without a great deal of success. And so we come 13 years later to the year 445 BC and Nehemiah receiving a report that the returning Jews haven't really gone forward in rebuilding Jerusalem.
- And problems abounded. And so we have him asking the king if he could return, see what the actual state of affairs was and set about the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.
- And I want to pick up the overall thrust of what's going on here in these verses that we read together. And there are five steps, I think, five clear steps in this passage.
- [11 : 38] And the first is that Nehemiah had a vision to do something. Nehemiah chapter 2 verse 12. I set out during the night with a few men.
- I had not told anyone what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. God had laid it upon Nehemiah to do something for Jerusalem.
- And likewise we in our day need a vision. We need God to put on our hearts what he would have us do for him today.
- If we're happy trundling along as we are, then we have little future. Today the church in Scotland faces countless problems.
- And there's no point being like the ostrich and sticking her head in the sands and pretend that the problems aren't there. There's the problem of declining numbers at worship. Perhaps especially amongst young people.
- [12 : 43] I mentioned this morning that the church I went to in East Kilbride back in the 70s, they had 1,500 children in the Sunday school.
- Which makes the minds boggle. Alright, it was a new town, a large and young community. But nevertheless. But today churches are notable for their lack of young people.
- The challenge of a rising godless secularism in our society. The problem of living in a society that sees Christianity as just one other religion and some sort of supermarket of faiths.
- And you can go in and take your pick and whatever suits you is fine. Very often there's a lack in the church of missionary zeal. And these problems are not peculiar to any one congregation or any one denomination.
- The problems of the church throughout the UK. But perhaps the greatest danger is of having no vision. Of being content to be as we are.

[13 : 55] May God put it in our heart. To do something for him. You do something for him in this place. Proverbs 29 and 18.

Where there is no vision, the people perish. Where there is no vision, the people perish. When John F. Kennedy ran for presidency of the USA.

He had a campaign slogan. Which he had actually borrowed from George Bernard Shaw. The playwright. And the words were these. And I had them in my desk for many years.

Some men see things as they are. And say, why? I dream of things that never were. And ask, why not?

And that to me sort of sums up Nehemiah. He didn't just look at Jerusalem and say, well, why is it in the state it's in? He dreamt of the walls being rebuilt.

[15 : 03] And then set about doing something to achieve that aim. God had put in Nehemiah's heart a burden to do something for Jerusalem. What does he put in your heart to do for Christ's church today?

Nehemiah was a man who had a vision. And the second step in this chapter, it seems to me, is that the vision was shared with others.

In the form of a challenge. Verse 17. 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. So Nehemiah had received a vision from God. And then at the appropriate moment, he set that vision before the people.

Well, what's the challenge facing you as a fellowship here in Dumfries? What are the walls that God would have you rebuild?

[16 : 10] And I'm not thinking about physical walls. Although it's all too often that churches can get trapped in to the physical parameters of their fellowship.

I always remember once being rebuked by a member of my church because we'd bought Mission Praise hymn books. And being told in no uncertain terms that the church should only spend money on the maintenance of the building.

Well, that's a trap I hope we are not going to fall into. But what are the walls, the spiritual walls that God would have you rebuild?

I'm putting that another way. What's the purpose of the church? If you were asked what is the purpose of the church, how would you answer that?

Well, the purpose of the church is fivefold. Five aspects to the purpose or the function of the church. There is mission.

[17 : 19] Reaching out into those around us and beyond us with the gospel. Seeking to bring the light of Christ into their lives. Mission.

There is education. Teaching. Whether it be young people or whether it be older people. We need teaching.

We need educating. We need to know God more. I always find it interesting when Paul prays for the Christians at Ephesus. What he prays for is that they might get to know God better.

And that involves education. So there is mission and there is education. There is a pastoral function. Where the church seeks to care for its own family.

But also seeks to care for the broader community. There is a prophetic function. Where the church, its members, apply the word of God to the world around them.

[18 : 24] Which is what the prophets in the Old Testament were doing. And finally there is worship. Seeking to bring glory to God.

Praising his name. And that, if you like, is the ultimate function of the church. Five functions. Mission, education, pastoral, prophetic and worship.

And if what we are doing doesn't fit into one of these categories in some way. Then we probably shouldn't be doing it. And worship is the ultimate function.

Because when you get to heaven. There is not going to be any need for mission or education or pastoral or prophecy. But worship is going to be still there. Nehemiah flung down a challenge.

Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. And God challenges us to build his church. He challenges you to build his church in this place.

[19 : 25] Not a physical building. But a spiritual building. To build the spiritual fibre of the church. To stand up and speak out for the moral values that we find in scripture.

To build and extend the mission of the church. Seeking to win others for Christ. To build a deeper worship. And indeed to transform society.

Remember how Jesus called us to be salt and light in society. So Nehemiah had a vision. God had put something in his heart. And he shared with people.

They need to build the walls. The challenge to us is not to build physical walls. But I've suggested there are these spiritual walls that need to be built up and strengthened.

And the third step we find in this passage is the vision embraced the response of the people. In verse 18. Nehemiah says, I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me.

[20 : 27] And what the king had said to me. And they replied, Let us start rebuilding. And so they began this good work. The people replied, Let us start rebuilding.

A vision. A challenge. A response. A response. And the people responded positively to the challenge. Now they could have been negative.

They could have looked at the task and said, Well, look, we've been at it for nearly a century. And the problems are too big. They're too insurmountable. And as you read the story carefully, there's some that sort of said that.

They could have looked at the task and said, Too many problems. They could have looked at the steady decline in the fortunes of Israel over many years and said, Well, that's just the way it is. There's little that we can really do.

But they weren't negative. They were positive. They seized hold of God's agenda. Their eyes on him. And not on the problems. Their eyes on the God of provision and promise.

[21 : 34] Not on their weakness and inadequacy. And that sort of reminds me of a story in the Gospel. Which you'll find in Matthew 14.

Do you remember that the disciples are out rowing on the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus comes to them walking in the water. And they're not sure if it is Jesus. And Peter says, You know, Lord, if it's really you, let me come out of the boat and walk in the water to you.

And if I pick up the passage, Matthew 14, verse 28, Peter says, Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you in the water.

And come, he said. Peter got down out of the boat, walked in the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and began to sink, and cried out, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

Due of little faith, he said, Why did you doubt? Peter's problem was, he took his eyes off the Lord. And looked at the ridiculous reality of him walking in the water.

[22 : 48] And he began to sink. The people responded to Nehemiah, but their eyes were clearly on the Lord. If you read through Nehemiah, it's a good dramatic story, and it doesn't take long to read the story in Nehemiah.

But if you read the story, you're tempted to skip chapter 3. Because chapter 3 just seems to be a list of names. You know, so-and-so built this bit of the wall, and so-and-so built that bit of the wall, and so-and-so built this other bit of the wall.

It's just a list of names. But there's a crucial refrain that runs through that chapter. And it's the phrase, next to him, or some equivalent of that, next to him.

Because the walls were only rebuilt because each did their part. With exceptions. Which is quite interesting.

The nobles of Tekoa opted out. Which meant that some folk had to do double shifts to make up for the bit that they wouldn't do. But the walls were only built because they built that bit, and next to them, another family built this bit, and next to them, another family built this bit, and next to them, and so on.

[24 : 14] In Ephesians 4 and 16 we read, From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The body grows, the church grows, as each part does its work. And as I say, that was more or less what happened in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Chapter 3, next to him, next to him, next to them, next to them, next to them, and so the walls were rebuilt. So there was Nehemiah's vision.

He set the vision before the people in the form of a challenge. Let us build the wall. And the people responding positively. And the fourth step is that of opposition.

Verse 19. When Zimbalat, the Horonite, Tobiah, the Ammonite, official in Geshem, the Arab, heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. What is this you are doing?

[25 : 19] They asked, Are you rebelling against the king? There was opposition. And it's probably fair to say that to follow the Lord always needs to opposition somewhere along the line, in some form or other.

And that opposition can come both from the world outside, but sadly sometimes from within the very people of God.

Those who will sit back and criticize. Those who will seek to undermine the work. Those who will not play their part, like the nobles of Tekoa in chapter 3.

Paul pointed out this very thing to the church at Ephesus. He warned them that if they would go on with the Lord, then they would face opposition. And that sadly some of that opposition would come from within the fellowship of the church.

In Acts 20, verse 29, Paul says, I know that after I leave, savage rules will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

[26 : 30] Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard. Be on your guard.

Which is why, of course, at the end of his letter to the Ephesians, we have that well-known passage about the armour of the Christian. Ephesians 6 and 10, finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. Why does the Christian need armour? Well, it's not so that there can be grand hymns to sing and it's actually surprising just how many hymns down through the years are based in this passage at the end of Ephesians.

Just to name a couple, soldiers of Christ, arise, or stand up, stand up for Jesus, you soldiers of the cross. We need the armour because God calls us to a spiritual battle, to face up to the opposition and in his strength to overcome it.

And it's worth reminding ourselves that in the list of Christian armour, there is only one offensive weapon, which is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

[27 : 48] All the other aspects of the armour are defensive. But in Ephesians 6 and 17, we're told, take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, which sort of takes us back to where we were thinking this morning.

How well do we know our Bibles? If we would answer God's call, if we would follow God's agenda, then we must steep ourselves in Scripture.

And it needs to be sort of put into our being, as it were, so that we can recall it without, when temptation comes along, we think to ourselves, nah, I think there might be something in the Bible with that.

We've got to be able to draw the Scriptures out as we put it in. So Nehemiah was a man with a vision. What God has put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.

He shares the vision in verse 17, come let us rebuild. In verse 18, the positive response of the people, let us start rebuilding. In verse 19, the work opposed.

[28 : 59] And the last step, in verse 20, the vision in perspective. Nehemiah answers the opposition by saying, the God of heaven will give us success.

We, his servants, will start rebuilding. But as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it. A vision? A challenge?

A positive response? Opposition? Nehemiah knew the secret of the Christian life. Keep your eyes on the Lord. Sometimes said of someone that they are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use.

and that is just simple rubbish because it's saying that Jesus is wrong. Again and again and again, Christ calls men and women to fix their eyes on God. Paul says, Colossians 3 and 1, since then you have been raised with Christ.

Set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Psalm 25 verse 15, the psalmist says, My eyes are ever on the Lord, for only he will release my feet from the snare.

[30 : 12] Where are your eyes fixed? What's the focus of your life? My eyes are ever on the Lord, says the psalmist.

And so it is here with Nehemiah. He answers the opposition by looking to God. God would give them success. And it's important to note that.

Success came from God, not from Nehemiah. Actually, we were talking, just before we came into the service of Mary Slessor. And a reminder is coming to my mind.

Mary Slessor used to write notes in the margin of her Bible. And at one part of her Bible, she writes, and it's a time when we know she was going through great difficulties in West Africa.

And she didn't seem to be making any progress. Everything seemed negative. And she writes in the margin of her Bible, God plus one is a majority.

[31 : 12] God plus one is a majority. And she laboured on. And in time became known as the White Queen of Africa. success comes from God.

Not from Mary Slessor, not from Nehemiah. Ultimately, the building of the church is the work of God. And it doesn't result so much from our achievement as our faithfulness.

Remember, Jesus said, I will build my church. My church. It is his church, not ours. The church doesn't belong to you.

It doesn't belong to a denomination. The church of Jesus Christ belongs to Christ. And so it is his building programme, not ours.

But we need to seek with our eyes on him what that building programme is for us here in our day and in our circumstances. So to sum up, Nehemiah, a man with a vision, God had put something in his heart.

[32 : 26] The vision shared with the people in verse 17. Come on, let's stop sitting in our backsides and go on with doing something to rebuild the walls. In verse 18, the vision embraced by the people.

Verse 19, that vision opposed. And it was opposed in many ways. As you read on through the stories, we find the folk building the walls had a towel in one hand and a sword metaphorically in the other because they needed to be ready to fend off mercenaries that were hired to try and bring a halt to the end of the work.

The vision opposed. But then, lastly, that vision in perspective. It's the God of heaven who will give us success. Are we prepared to seek the vision?

Accept the challenge? Face the opposition? Always looking to God and seeking to follow his agenda. And one last thought, the final concern of Nehemiah, I believe, was not so much for the rebuilding of Jerusalem as for the glory of God.

Back in chapter 1 in verse 11, when Nehemiah learns of the broken state of Jerusalem, he prays and says this, O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.

[33 : 54] Who delight in revering your name. His concern was for the name of God and that the rebuilding of the walls would bring honour to God and exalt him.

may we in our day seek to honour God and delight in revering his name. Let us pray. Father God, we thank you for Nehemiah, we thank you for his courage and his wisdom and his leadership as he rallied the people and the building of the walls was accomplished.

and we pray that in our days you would put it upon our hearts to do something for you that your name may be honoured in this place.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, we conclude by singing the hymn on the reverse of the intubation sheet.

Crown him with many crowns lest it Come on with many crowns and King and King will never ■■■ping it Lord, God will never win and he'll come on with many crowns and he'll come on with many crowns died with many crowns and he'll return with many crowns