

# Nehemiah: The Unexpected Builder

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Preacher: Peter Swaffield

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Thank you so much. Thank you, Leslie. I'll be a good Baptist pastor and say I bring greetings from Orpington Baptist Church.

Yes, it seems a long time ago that I was a member here, and I remember very clearly Barry Marsh and Penny, Penny and Barry together.

And it wasn't many years ago that I was in Penny and Barry's house at the very first meeting of what is now Ebsfleet Baptist Church.

So for several years I was with Barry and Penny, and a number of months ago there was the launch officially of that work. They've done such a fantastic job through God's Spirit there, and I know that part of their hearts are here because of how they met and were blessed here, and I know you pray for them.

So I kind of feel linked to Barry and Penny as well, but we're delighted to be here. Ezra and Nehemiah, if you'd give me John 3.16, I'm a bit easier with that.

[ 1 : 1 9 ] So I had to go to Spurgeon's College, what better place, and use their library to get my head around this. Now, Spurgeon's charges me £10 a time for going to the library until I had a chat, and my church now gives money to them and I can go there for free, which is great.

But one time at Spurgeon's, I met the decorator there who was in the foyer emulsifying the entrance hall. And as a nice little chat, I said to him, Oh, that's a tough job.

You know, what's your work? Or something like that. And I can remember what he said to me. He said, I am restoring this building to its former glory.

I said, well, that is amazing. It reminded me of the NASA in America, a janitor, we would say a caretaker, at Kennedy Space Center.

And he was asked in the 1960s what his job was. And he said, as a sweeper of rubbish, he said, I am helping to put a man on the moon.

[ 2 : 3 8 ] So back in the day, if you want a lecture on Ezra and Nehemiah, they belong together, probably you need to pay your £10 and go to Spurgeon's and get the books in the simple section called Commentaries.

But when I read this verse that the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, I thought, well, how is that relevant to Herne Hill Baptist Church on this Sunday morning?

I mean, if you've got a building project planned, then Nehemiah's not a bad book to look to, how to organise things. But, I mean, what does Jerusalem stand for in the Bible?

And the fact that Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king, you know, so what? But if you trace Jerusalem in the Bible, then I believe it is relevant for you and me this morning.

Because all Scripture is God-breathed, is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness. So the man or woman of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

[ 4 : 0 4 ] Amen? Amen. So genealogies. That's God's Word. So we're known in heaven by, called by name. And there's a funny old list of Jesus' family, at least 50% of it.

Foreigners, adulterers, sex workers, women in Christ's genealogy. There's a place for all. So lists have a value. Strange rituals have a value about holiness.

So communion only makes sense if we really understand the rituals of the Old Testament. Thank God we don't have to bring a little friendly golden retriever and slaughter it in front of us this morning so that we might have our sins forgiven.

One more move and the puppy gets it. You know that. But we know that Christ sacrificed once and for all. But it only makes sense in the context of the Old Testament strange passages.

So Ezra and Nehemiah. If I was to preach a proper sermon, here are the three headings. The temple restored in Jerusalem. The law retaught. The walls rebuilt.

[ 5 : 15 ] That'll preach. I don't know if it would get top marks in a sermon class or a sermon being assessed. But that's a three-pointer, yeah? Restored, retaught, rebuilt.

But what does Jerusalem stand for in Scripture? In Matthew 12, 6, Jesus said, One greater than the temple is here.

So Jesus is talking about himself. The temple, the holy of holies as well. It's where God dwelt. So in Colossians we read, God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, in Jesus.

And 1 Corinthians 3, 16 says, You yourselves, let's say we, are God's temple. We're temples of the living God together.

And then we heard about the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven as a bride beautifully dressed. So really, if you look at that, that Jerusalem is about God's presence amongst his people.

[ 6 : 42 ] And the walls for Nehemiah broken down. Literally, physically broken down. After the trauma of exile, there were people back in Jerusalem.

But it's not what it was. The walls are broken. I was with some very needy and physically challenged people on Wednesday.

But that's a bit of a rude way of describing my cricket team. And during that day, people were on their phones.

And gradually, the news came through that a well-respected newsreader, Hugh Edwards, was the person who the son had named.

I'm sure, helpfully not. And there's a family there, isn't there? There's a wife, there's five kids. And there's a broken husband, presumably on suicide watch.

[ 7 : 51 ] In the equivalent of the Maudsley. And so we live in a world where the media is broken.

And we live in a world where politics is broken. And where there are lies. And thank God for the parliamentary prayer breakfast the other day. And Baptists were leading the worship there, which is great.

And it was a year ago that Reverend Les Isaacs preached in Parliament. And Sajid Javid said, because the Reverend Isaacs preached on integrity in public life, he went back to his office and wrote his resignation.

But politics, the walls are broken. Economics, the police force.

We're part of a nation where the walls are broken. But if we're being true to Scripture, going back to what I said, if Jerusalem represents God's presence with his people, what about the church today?

[ 9 : 13 ] The Daily Telegraph ran a story a few days ago about Matt Redmond. Beautiful songs written by Matt Redmond.

Matt and his wife, living in California now, have known difficulty. Some of their songs have come out of times of personal pain. And he said it's taking him years to get over the abuse of being part of Soul Survivor.

And so, yes, we pray for Canon Mike Pilavachi. But the impact of the stories there are worldwide.

I met a young person in the States a few weeks ago coming to terms with things not being all that she thought they were from the big stage.

Not just Soul Survivor in the United Kingdom, but Soul Survivor throughout the world. And hurt pastors hurt people.

[ 10 : 21 ] Hurt people hurt people. And whether numerically or whether with stories that make the front page, the walls are broken.

Not everywhere, in every place, but the walls are broken. John Newton said about himself, I'm not what I ought to be.

And as a former slave trader who wrote Amazing Grace, I'm not what I ought to be. I'm not what I want to be.

I'm not what I hope to be in another world. But still, I'm not what I used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am.

And God looks on us, named as we are by God. He knows us by name. And he knows Herne Hill Baptist Church.

[ 11 : 26 ] And Ephesians 5.25 says, Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. And God loves Herne Hill Baptist Church.

And you may feel some of our walls have been broken. We may look back as some of the returned exiles did and say, it isn't as I remember it to be.

But by the grace of God, we are who we are today. And we're loved by God. Yes, we may see the walls broken, but it's our task to be part of that restoring people now.

If you read all of Nehemiah, you know there was disappointment, discouragement. There were those from within and without who said, oh yeah, who were critical. And to be a leader of any kind is to invite some criticism.

But Nehemiah kept on keeping on. And we all have a part to play here at Herne Hill Baptist Church.

[ 12 : 48 ] So rather like that decorator at Spurgeons, whose identity shall remain anonymous, Reverend Simon Jones from Spurgeons. If I was to ask you, so what are you doing?

And you would say, well, I'm only, okay, I'm on the coffee rotor.

Yeah? Well, you're facilitating a time of conversation and fellowship building. I go out with the young people, and I have to listen to this on the recording.

I only look up. Tell you what, it's easier to do this than to do that. You're preparing those as we pray for the next generation to encounter God.

I only kind of clean. Yeah, but that's important to come into a clean church. I only make sure the windows are open so we're relaxed and friendly and we don't pass out.

[ 13 : 59 ] That's great. I only work in the office. I only do this. I only do that. I do a rotor. I prepare the little bits of bread for communion. I only do this.

I only go to the prayer meeting. I can only do it on Zoom. I don't pray out loud often, but I'm there. I'm only part of the worship team and we practice. I'm only this. I'm only that. God has called you as a team to build the walls of Jerusalem, to build Herne Hill Baptist Church, part of the kingdom of God, part of the kingdom of God, today.

Not to look back and say what it was like, but to say we're here and by God's grace we are who we are. One church I heard about, I think it was in the States, had a big sign outside, pastor, and there was a name pastor, you've still got Rob's name there, but then it had another heading, ministers dash the whole church.

Rebuilding the walls. We had a memorial service for one of your family members a year or two ago, and I like this. It was an Anglican church, and I didn't see it as I came in, but as we went out, there was a big sign over the door which said service begins here.

And it's not strictly true because we worship, we serve, we give God glory together corporately, but actually worship happens out there.

[ 15 : 45 ] What am I doing when I'm only working in a bank? Well, God is using you to bring something of His truth and integrity and His kingdom in that place. Oh, I don't get paid, I only do this, I only do this.

And God is building up those broken walls in your place of work. I went to casualty in Kings last week, not for me, but for a family member, and it was a Thursday night, so it wasn't Saturday night.

I tell you, there were more police in A&E; than NHS workers. Am I right? Has anybody been there?

More police than NHS workers. And I couldn't find my way in. So a police officer walked out the automatic door and he said, yes, Sarge, he fell through the skylight, he's not going to make it.

And I just snuck in to find my stepson who'd been hit by a car at 30 miles an hour on his bike and he's okay, surgery tomorrow. But as I went through the corridors, such, such need in a broken world.

[ 17 : 00 ] And God bless all those in the NHS and chaplains and the police. I'm only... I'm only... Yeah, well, the security guy took me to where my stepson was.

He was serving. I'm only... The nurse, the triage nurse, God bless her job. Building the kingdom of God brick by brick, doing something to see more of God's kindness and justice and his kingdom come, even in casualty down the road at King's.

The walls are broken. In February, there was a formal service in a hall in a little university in a little town in Kentucky called Wilmore.

Never heard of it. Okay, the college was called Asbury. Never heard of it. Okay. The students have to attend three times a week, I think.

It's formal chapel. Now, I used to be a chaplain at a little private school. Can I tell you, public school chapel at 8.45 in the morning is not very promising material.

[ 18 : 39 ] The boys and girls have to be there. If they don't go, they get a detention. I once had to give a boy a little punishment. The hymn was to be a pilgrim.

I could tell he was singing to be a penguin. It was quite clear. So, look. And, bless him, Simon Jones, you kindly came and took some of those.

And I think, if I'm right, your approach would have been to try and engage the young people in some kind of Christian world view. but I don't think revival was on your agenda on a morning at Eltham College 8.45 a.m.

So, can you see, this is formal chapel for students at a Christian college who have to attend. February. February. The preacher who, when I met him, he's got more tattoos than most of us.

I didn't know whether to speak to him or to read him. You know, somebody says. So, he texted his wife and he said, I've just preached, in his words, a stinker.

- [ 19 : 56 ] I've just preached a stinker. A very bad sermon. I'll be home soon. What he didn't know was that a group of students had been praying for that service.
- They didn't even have a projector. Okay? And God's presence came without hype, without repeated choruses.
- God's presence came to such an extent that that service didn't stop for 16 days.
- No famous names. No hype, no overhead projector, let alone video projection.
- And thousands and thousands of people came. the whole of that little town was overtaken. And I had the privilege a couple of months ago of spending time there with those who had experienced the presence of God.
- [ 21 : 14 ] And as far as I can tell, the walls are being built in Asbury College, Wilmore, Kentucky.
- Because God's Holy Spirit was present in such power that the whole of the place was turned upside down.
- In fact, the administration of the university eventually had to say, this is great, but you've got to get back to your studies.
- And what happened? Young people got right with God. They handed in their vapes.
- They put things right with their colleagues. They said sorry. They were freed from addictions to alcohol, pornography.
- [ 22 : 33 ] They gave public testimony to God's goodness. And then there was critics.
- There were critics, immediately critics. This is hype. No. This isn't a true work of the spirit, because after three days, the whole of the military and financial system of America hasn't been turned upside down.
- This isn't real, because all the guns haven't been handed in from Wilmore. three or four days. This isn't really God, because there's no social transformation in Kentucky, in Cincinnati.
- Okay, so I asked a couple of months ago, what's happened since February? The student counseling service, I was told by a professor of psychology, hasn't had a lot to do.
- because people have put things right, because they've known God's Holy Spirit brings something of its healing.
- [ 23 : 50 ] That doesn't mean we don't still need skilled counseling. I'm just saying the professor told me that the counseling service was kind of slightly light on problems because people have got right with God.
- okay, has that gone out? Yes, there have been cross-cultural missions that have gone out already from Asbury because God's Holy Spirit came and the walls are being built up.
- Now, you need to ask again in a year what's happened and two years, but the walls of Jerusalem are broken down. America's about ten years behind us, I've been told, in terms of young people turning their backs on church once they leave the home.
- And this is the beginning of reversing that, some believe. How? Through prayer, through repentance, through worship, and through the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- Personally, my walls are broken, at times, publicly broken. repentance. How does restoration happen?
- [ 25 : 35 ] Repentance? Putting things right? Whenever I go like that as a preacher, the old saying, three fingers come back at you, I was asked to preach on unity at the church the other week.
- Elizabeth and I, we sat down together and we said, right, are there any relationships that we're aware of that we need to do more overall?

As far as it lies within our power, we went through that just because I can't stand up and say, we need to forgive if I'm not doing that myself.

So yes, I've known some brokenness and Simon, bless you, with our blessing of our marriage, you led us publicly in prayers of repentance that we hadn't been all that we would have wanted to be years ago.

And we needed to do that. We needed to do that. The walls are broken down, personally, in church, nationally.

[ 26 : 53 ] Come, Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit.