

# Building Back: Respect

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Now, the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews.
- Some were saying, we and our sons and daughters are numerous. In order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain. Others were saying, we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.
- Still others were saying, we have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews, and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery.
- Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.
- Now, you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us. They kept quiet because they could find nothing to say. So I continued, what you are doing is not right.
- [ 1 : 4 3 ]     Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain.
- But let us stop charging interest. Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them, one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.
- We will give it back, they said, and we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say. Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised.
- I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise.
- So may such a person be shaken out and emptied. At this the whole assembly said, Amen and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.
- [ 2 : 5 4 ]     Moreover, from the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his 32nd year, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor.
- But the earlier governors, those preceding me, placed a heavy burden on the people and took 40 shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine.
- Their assistance also lauded it over the people. But out of reverence for God, I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work of this wall.
- All my men were assembled there for the work. We did not acquire any land. Furthermore, 150 Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations.
- Each day, one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every 10 days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds.

[ 4 : 07 ] In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. Remember me with favour, my God, for all I have done for these people.

We thank God for his word to us this morning. So, we're continuing our series looking at the book of Nehemiah, the building of the walls in Jerusalem.

And our theme this morning is respect. But as well as respecting each other, I think this chapter is about taking care of each other, how we treat each other well.

So, we left Nehemiah in chapter four, facing the threat from without. If you remember from last week, the enemy is outside the walls.

And despite the threat, chapter four finishes with a triumphant tone. The rebuilding of the walls is continuing. The people build all night with their spheres in one hand and their trowels in the other.

[ 5 : 18 ] And despite the opposition, the enemy is kept at bay. So, it feels a bit like something's gone badly wrong by the start of chapter five.

There is no building mentioned. No building work is mentioned in this chapter. Actually, the project hardly gets a mention at all. And we're told there is an external factor at play.

A famine is mentioned. But I think the focus in Nehemiah 5 is the enemy within. There is strife amongst the community, from among God's people.

So, what has gone wrong here? What is going on? In some ways, I thought Nehemiah 5 feels a bit like season five of your favorite Netflix drama.

There was a big finale at the end of season four. Your favorite character has left the show. There are new writers on board. You're not sure if season five is going to live up to expectations.

[ 6 : 21 ] And actually, Tim told me that Nehemiah 5 is rarely covered in sermon series. A few years ago, I bought the book at Spring Harvest on Nehemiah and I thought, great, I can get lots of good ideas for this sermon from that book.

Until I realized it finished at chapter three. It was still an excellent book by Chris Rogers. It gave me some good help. But we are including chapter five.

And that is a wise decision, I think, by our leadership team. This is an important chapter. Because Nehemiah is not grand designs. It is not just a story of a physical building project.

Nehemiah is primarily a story of spiritual repentance and renewal. And these things are vital if the kingdom of God is to be built.

It may seem that in Nehemiah, not much is happening. But this pause allows the Jewish people to get in a right place with God. And without that, the city walls are just a facade.

[ 7 : 24 ] And this chapter jumped out at me at being so applicable today. We are in our own hiatus as a church as we search for a new minister.

It can feel frustrating, but God is at work during this time. What is he doing? What do we need to hear?

And in our nation and the wider church, we want to see revival. And in its place, I see abuse scandals, poor leadership. I see corruption.

The walls are broken down. But that does not mean God isn't working. So what is the work? There's work of repentance here, of getting our hearts right with God so that we may be released to the work that is to come.

So let's look first at the problem that Nehemiah faces. There is a famine in verse 5. And some people are mortgaging their land to buy food.

- [ 8 : 29 ] And other people from the same community are lending their money to do so. And they're charging interest on it. Some families are selling their children into slavery to raise money. But Nehemiah has been buying people out of slavery in order to restore the Jewish community. Sometimes he is buying back the people who have just been sold.
- So we can understand, I think, why Nehemiah is frustrated. In fact, he's more than frustrated. We're told he is very angry. And it appears to me that what is going on is what we sometimes call a zero-sum game.
- A zero-sum game is a modern concept. It describes a competitive situation where someone only wins when someone else loses. For example, a game of tennis.
- Or a few weeks ago, Richard talked about a couple having an argument. Sometimes in an argument, if you want to be right, if you want to win, then the other person has to lose.
- [ 9 : 32 ] And the net gain to you as a couple is zero. So here, some people are winning, aren't they? Some people are winning. They're prospering from the famine. But only because other people are losing.
- Some people are being brought out of slavery. And some people are sold into it. But the overall benefit to the people of God is what? Big fat zero.
- Big fat zero. Big fat zero. Individuals may prosper in a zero-sum game. But the collective never prospers. And no great surprise here, but the building of the kingdom of God is never, should never be, a zero-sum game.
- The coming of the kingdom of God is good news to all people, not just some of the people. Jesus' mission, as he declares in Luke chapter 4, when he quotes the prophet Isaiah, The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
- He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
- [ 10 : 47 ] In the kingdom of God, vulnerable people do not get exploited, oppressed, or abused. So when that is happening, we need to know that the kingdom of God will not prosper.
- It sounds obvious, doesn't it? But unfortunately, Christian communities can fail in this area. I have been following some of the reports into abuse in the Church of England, and they are heartbreaking reading.
- Apart from the terrible action of the abusers, there are numerous other people who didn't speak up because they were frightened of damaging the reputation of the mission or the church or the kingdom.
- But the kingdom of God cannot prosper when people are abused and oppressed. People might think, we need to get on with the building. We ignore interference.
- Maybe sometimes we even label it a spiritual attack. But the walls that go up in this scenario are made of cardboard. They are a facade covering a sham version of kingdom work.
- [ 11 : 54 ] God spoke through the prophet Amos and said, I hate, I despise your religious festivals. Your assemblies are a stench to me.
- Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs.
- I will not listen to the music of your harps, but let justice roll on like a river. Righteousness like a never-failing stream.

God doesn't think the walls are the most important thing. The worship style, the size of our festivals, our marketing reach. He cares about justice, how we treat each other, and particularly how we treat those who are most vulnerable.

So what does Nehemiah do when angered about injustice? I think we can learn a lot from his approach.

[ 12 : 58 ] We're going to go through five things. I think he acts with courage. He speaks up to accuse the wrongdoers. He is transparent. He holds a large public meeting.

Priorities. It appears that no building work happens in this chapter. Integrity. Nehemiah promises not to do this himself.

And culture. Nehemiah starts something different. Courage. Nehemiah is angry, but he doesn't act out of anger.

And we are told in verse 7, I pondered them in my mind. I think we can all learn from that, can't we? Think before acting. Nehemiah's response is considered, but it is firm.

He accuses the nobles and officials. And these are important people. Nehemiah needs them on side if he is going to, if his rebuilding project is going to be successful.

[ 14 : 04 ] But that doesn't mean that he's afraid to challenge them. He has courage. Transparency. After accusing the top officials, which I imagine takes place privately, although we're not explicitly told that, Nehemiah calls together this large public meeting.

Now, safeguarding is a sensitive area and sometimes requires confidentiality at different stages. So it's not necessarily a blueprint for how we should deal with issues.

But I think it does give us a principle. And that principle is transparency. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, and when all things are brought out into the light, their true nature is clearly revealed.

There's a difference between confidentiality and secrecy. Don't keep secrets, but let the light in. Priorities.

So as I said, there doesn't appear to be any building work in this chapter. The calling of the assembly and the response to injustice takes priority over the project.

[ 15 : 18 ] Do we have the right priorities? Do we seek to have the right hearts before God? Or do we focus too often on external factors? Are we quick to comment on what may be happening or not happening?

Evangelistic events, outreach programs, rather than addressing what work needs doing in our own hearts. Sometimes we can mistake the enemy from within for the enemy from without.

We blame factors that don't have anything to do with us. Societal changes. Leadership failure. Sometimes, as I've said, we can wrongly blame spiritual attack, but there is also an enemy within.

My daughter Kate was unwell the other week, and she spent her time embarking on a nostalgic re-watch of Disney films, starting with The Earliest Made.

I haven't seen some of those old films for years. I absolutely love the animation and the music, but sometimes I struggle with the portrayal of female characters who are split into pure, unimpeachable heroines and evil, wicked older women.

[ 16 : 36 ] Actually, the year Kate was born, Disney released the animated film Frozen. How many of you have seen Frozen? I've seen it multiple times. And I think it's fair to say that for a generation of young girls, they will always identify this film with their childhood.

It struck a chord. And the interesting thing for me about Frozen is the heroine and the villain are one person. Elsa is the heroine and the villain.

I find that much more realistic. I love that about Frozen. It reminds us to watch out for the enemy within. So let's examine our hearts.

Are they in the right place? Back in September, early Saturday morning September, I had to get out of bed to attend safeguarding training at church. And I must admit, I wasn't feeling very happy about it.

Safeguarding, though, isn't the enemy without. It's not designed to make the lives of Christians more difficult. Because safeguarding was God's idea before it was a government idea.

[ 17 : 44 ] Keeping people safe is a kingdom value. And I needed to understand that. Like Nehemiah, we sometimes need to stop our business, our priorities, to give the kingdom values the attention they deserve.

Integrity. Nehemiah acts with integrity. He has accused his officials of wrongdoing.

And he understands that he needs to be above reproach himself. In verse 9, there is a shift from a you to an us.

But let us stop charging interest. There's no evidence that Nehemiah causes the problem. But he takes responsibility for fixing it.

And then he talks towards the end of the chapter about his role as governor. Previous governors put financial burden on the people. But Nehemiah doesn't do this.

[ 18 : 45 ] He takes responsibility for doing things differently. He acts with integrity. I wish there was more integrity in government, in the corporate world, in the wider church.

And instead, sometimes we see people scrambling to cover their own backs. I wasn't responsible, rather than owning responsibility and acting differently.

But integrity is difficult. I've always cared about social justice. And as a young person, I used to go and protest against companies who I believed were guilty of exploitation.

As an older person, I have tried to examine my own part in the exploitation of others. One of the things I've been really challenged about is having nothing in my house which was produced through the exploitation of other people.

I've been trying this for about 10 years, and I have failed. It's really tough. With our long production lines, it is difficult to untangle ourselves from exploitation.

[ 19 : 57 ] But like Nehemiah, I believe we need to keep trying. Having integrity is hard, and it is always costly. But if we can't demonstrate kingdom values of justice in our small shopping decisions, how can we expect God to trust us with bigger kingdom work?

Christians are accused of hypocrisy probably more than any other sin. Nehemiah, I think, would have understood this. In verse 9, he says, Shouldn't you walk in fear of our God to avoid the approach of our Gentile enemies?

We are called to higher standards. Will people see God's ways in our ways? And finally, culture. Culture is not particularly a biblical word.

But I think it's a biblical concept. And for me, it describes what happens in verse 17 onwards. So I'm not talking about culture in terms of the identifying characteristics of a group.

I'm talking about what we create. Culture is what we cultivate with what God has given us. God gave Adam and Eve the job of cultivation.

[ 21 : 16 ] Eden is a garden and not a wilderness. Mary meets Jesus in another garden, the resurrection garden. And she mistakes him for the gardener.

The kingdom requires cultivation. So what does Nehemiah create? One of verse 17 onwards. Furthermore, 150 Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations.

Each day, one ox, six choice sheep, and some poultry were prepared for me. And every 10 days, an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of this, I never demanded the food allocated to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

In the place of exploitation and abuse, Nehemiah builds a different culture. It's not a zero-sum game. Nehemiah creates a culture of generosity.

It's abundant, more than could be expected. He creates a culture of grace. He doesn't expect any payment in return. I think it was management guru Peter Drucker who said, culture eats strategy for breakfast.

[ 22 : 35 ] I think that means that what you do doesn't matter if how you are doing it is wrong. Your values, how you treat others, your integrity, how you conduct yourself, matters because it builds kingdom culture.

God works in our lives by his spirit, and his transformation work comes from the inside out. I just want to pick up on something else around these themes of integrity and culture and the idea of public assembly.

There is no evidence that Nehemiah is responsible for the wrongdoing, that he takes responsibility for resolving it. In Western culture, I think it isn't normal to take corporate responsibility.

We may think that wrongdoing, abuse, racism, exploitation don't have anything to do with us. I was reminded of this on Monday on Holocaust Memorial Day, and this is King Charles attending a Holocaust Memorial Day event.

King Charles was born three years after Auschwitz was liberated. But on these days, it reminds us about how we can examine our own prejudice.

[ 23 : 52 ] What is our corporate responsibility? How can we ensure that something like this never happens again? Nehemiah understands the importance of taking collective responsibility for systemic sin.

We see this back in chapter one as he prays for forgiveness. And by systemic sin, I mean spiritual wrongdoing that has been protected by a system, a group, or a way of doing things.

The public assembly is important because it allows for corporate repentance. We find this elsewhere in the story of the Jewish people in exile.

Daniel 9, Ezra 9 are examples of prayers for corporate repentance. Sometimes we must repent and seek God for the brokenness we see around us, even if it feels like it's not our fault and it's outside our control.

Rebuilding sometimes requires a taking down of existing structures, and it's essential if those structures have led to abuse and exploitation. I think that process starts with repentance, personal and corporate.

[ 25 : 10 ] So sometimes pauses are frustrating. Sometimes it feels like God is not working when he is. What work is God doing at the moment in our hearts, in Herne Hill Baptist Church, in our national church, and how may we be part of that?

Where does God want to bring transformation? What do we need to repent of, both personally and corporately? I'm going to finish with some good news.

In Chris Rogers' book on Nehemiah, he says, the kingdom of God always looks forward. It doesn't look back. We often look back, don't we, with nostalgia to a time when we were maybe younger and think that church or society was better.

Nehemiah is guilty of that too. He looks back to a time when the walls were intact. But God asks us to look forward with hope, because he is ultimately building a new heaven and a new earth, not an old one.

We need to get ready when we don't know what we are getting ready for. And we need to trust God in this because we don't always understand the end game.

[ 26 : 26 ] And I was reminded of that other great biblical builder, Noah. However, we may be asked to build an ark when we don't see any water around us.

I've also comforted to know that all the setbacks we face, all the issues we see around us, are not a surprise to God, because he has a plan to deal with them.

So, no spoilers, but there's good news to come for Nehemiah, and there's good news to come for us. Nehemiah 5 isn't the end of this story.

And of course, Nehemiah probably didn't know that at this stage. He had to trust God. He had to be patient. And so must we. Thank you.