

Let Us Start Building

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 25th of July 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled, Let Us Start Building, and is from Nehemiah, chapter 2, verses 9 to 20.

You may like to open your Bibles to page 375 as we look at Nehemiah, chapter 2, verses 9 to 20 this morning.

We're preaching over the next several weeks the book of Nehemiah, so if you're here for the first time today, we started with chapter 1 and part of chapter 2 last week, and we're continuing on today.

Well, let's pray. Lord, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that it teaches us on every page.

We pray, Lord, that you would open our hearts and our minds to what it has to say to us now, and may it bear much fruit in us for your glory's sake. Amen.

[1 : 23] How do we respond to a big challenge? Do we relish the opportunity? Do we feel daunted by the task? Or do we give in to the challenge before it begins?

Last night, the Swans took up the challenge and they won big time. Now, when Australia won the World Cup final this year as well, they had an uphill battle to get there, didn't they?

They had lost their first couple of matches. Doubts were raised about the Aussies' fitness and there were many armchair critics who wrote them off early in the piece, and I was one of them.

Well, they took on the challenge that lay ahead of them, didn't they? And despite the opposition of the media and even their supporters, they went on to win a comprehensive victory in that final match.

And we even got to go to bed early that night. It was such a comprehensive victory. It was inspiring cricket. In the same way that Steve Waugh's 11 had an uphill challenge to win the cricket, Nehemiah also had a challenge ahead of him to fulfil God's purposes.

[2 : 36] And in the passage that was read to us this morning by Cameron, we see that Nehemiah faces increasing opposition and antagonism from the authorities within and surrounding Jerusalem as he arrives to begin the task of rebuilding the city walls.

And that's part of his purpose, to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem. And we read a little bit later on in the verses, 11 through to 16, that after assessing the situation, going to look at Jerusalem and assessing it, it's apparent to us, the reader, that there is a lot of work to do.

He's got a major challenge ahead of him. And we also see in this whole process that there is going to be a need for great leadership to help this job come to its fruition.

And as we will see, the success and the citizens of Jerusalem success is assured in the whole process.

Now, why does Nehemiah take on the challenge? Why does he do it? People today take on challenges because they are there.

[3 : 54] That's the reason. I was telling some people last night I smoked a cigarette at 18,600 feet when I climbed a mountain towards Mount Everest in 1986.

I did it because it was a challenge. It was a challenge to be done. It was a stupid challenge. But I did it. But why does Nehemiah take on the challenge? Simply because God had laid it on its heart to do something about the situation, the terrible situation that was going on within Jerusalem.

And as we saw last week, that after much prayer and planning, Nehemiah is able to take on the challenge because, as verse 8 says of chapter 2, the gracious hand of God was upon me.

With that kind of certainty, any challenge can be taken on. And one of the striking things about Nehemiah is his confidence in the sovereignty of God.

This confidence is testified by his prayer life and willingness to step out in faith and then attribute everything that he does as being God's gracious hand upon him.

[5 : 11] He's prepared to say this is God's doing. And with this confidence of God's work in his own life, Nehemiah has the assurance that God will continue on and continue to be with him as long as he seeks to glorify his name and do his will.

Well, as we saw last week, Nehemiah has been granted permission from the Persian king, a guy called Artaxerxes, to head from the place where he's staying in Susa and to go off to Jerusalem, about a thousand miles journey, and rebuild the city walls.

So Nehemiah goes off and he's prepared. And in verse 9, we see that he has the king's letters as well as officers of the Persian army with him as he goes.

Now there was more than protection to be gained from the military escort that went with him. It meant an arrival in style. When he got to Jerusalem, he had this band of military around him.

And there was something extraordinary going on here. And those sorts of things, as he arrived in Jerusalem with this military force around him, would have reinforced his credentials to the neighbouring governors, as well as signalling a change in policy by King Artaxerxes.

[6 : 29] You see, a previous attempt to rebuild the Jerusalem walls in Ezra's time, which is the letter or the book just before Nehemiah, an attempt to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem then, was promptly crushed by force and power.

And it was crushed by force and power at the command of King Artaxerxes. The city walls then had been lying in ruins for years.

And deliberately, it seems, so that the Jewish people who were living within that city could not revolt against the surrounding nations. It was a deliberate policy of Artaxerxes that they didn't rebuild the city walls because they didn't want the people to revolt.

And that makes sense, if you think about it. You don't want to revolt and you don't want to fight against opposing people if you haven't got a fort to protect yourselves.

Because if you don't have a fort, you can't protect yourselves and you really are at the mercy of those around you. And that's what was happening with Jerusalem. Well now, Artaxerxes has reversed his previous decision and he's now let the city walls be rebuilt.

[7 : 44] He's given Nehemiah open slather, really, to go and rebuild the walls. So the arrival of Nehemiah to Jerusalem marks the beginning of some antagonism by the officials that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

And we'll see how this antagonism of Sanballat, the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite, throws a long shadow over the whole book of Nehemiah, really.

And we'll see that over the next few weeks. And both of these men, Sanballat and Tobiah, were men of enormous influence and power within the people of Israel as well as outside.

They keep on, as I just said, they keep on coming in and out of the story of Nehemiah. And we'll see how that antagonism grows over the coming weeks.

But even their power, even their power and influence is not enough to curtail the task that God has passed on to Nehemiah.

[8 : 52] It goes without saying that if God has laid something on our heart to do, then nothing, nothing will thwart his plans, no matter how much opposition from within or outside there may be.

God is sovereign. He rules over everything. He rules over you and me. And the challenge then for us as Christians is to have a sense of the sovereignty of God in our own lives as well.

And that's what Nehemiah has here. And we see in verses 11 through to 16 that Nehemiah leaves the comfort of Artaxerxes' palace in Susa for the hardships of governing a people that have been downtrodden for many years.

And we'll see in these verses the picture of the state of Jerusalem. But he leaves the comfort of this palace to go to Jerusalem to fulfil God's will because he knows that what he's doing is God's will.

So his arrival in Jerusalem is not spent in idleness, but it is most likely used for devising a strategy or a plan, if you like, and praying to God for strength and wisdom to fulfil this role that is before him over the coming days, years, months.

[10 : 15] And as Christians, it's important for us to plan and more importantly to pray. I wonder how often our best intended plans are immersed in prayer to our great and awesome God.

Are they our plans or are they God's plans? Well, we read that in verse 11, I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. And on the fourth day, we read in verse 12, that Nehemiah gets up

during the night and goes with a few men, probably some of the people he'd brought with him to Jerusalem to assess for himself the devastation to the city walls and the gates. And he goes about it by night so that the others don't see what's going on. And his survey confirms all that his brother Hanani, way back in chapter 1, had reported to him while he was in Susa. And notice here in these verses that he assesses the situation before telling anyone what his purpose is in being in Jerusalem, albeit a couple of people that he might have brought with him. In the second part of verse 12, it says, I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. While he assesses the situation, he also anticipates the obvious objection that he, being a newcomer, can have no idea of the task that is ahead of him. [11:47] So what he does is he briefs himself thoroughly and chooses his moment to show his hand. So in verse 16, we read, to confirm all this, the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing.

I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. Now Nehemiah has not only kept the plans from the enemy, he has kept the initiative and the plans from the leaders that he has to convince about the plans to rebuild the city walls. He's not going to do it on his own. He's going to have others to help him. But you see, if he had gone into Jerusalem saying to the opposition that he had come here to rebuild the city walls, God has told me to go and rebuild the city walls, I think that they would have mocked him. They would have laughed at him. They would have ridiculed him. They probably would have chased him out of town. And if he had also gone to the people of Israel straight away saying the same thing, again, he would have ended up with being mocked and ridiculed and derided and possibly with more opposition and so on from his own brothers and sisters within the city walls of Jerusalem. Well, the devastation of the city walls is appalling and the destruction of the city gates is equally as bad. He would have had no credibility had he gone in straight away and said, we're going to build. [13:20] But his careful assessment of the situation prayer and planning now gives him the credibility to talk to the people whom he was going to use to be involved in the work.

Now, the situation before him looks daunting and even the most optimistic person would doubt how this rebuild is going to be pulled off. but Nehemiah is confident and he is confident because the gracious hand of God is upon him. As we discipline ourselves in the Christian faith through Bible study, through study of the Bible, through prayer, through fellowship with other Christians and sharing our faith, we too, I think, are in tune with God and we learn to discern God's will for us in all matters. And that's simply why Nehemiah is confident in God working through him because he has a close relationship with God and he maintains that relationship. That's the important thing. And no matter how daunting the task ahead of him is, his confidence in God is unshakable. Well, after his personal assessment of the situation, Nehemiah now goes before the people to tell them of the decision to restore the city walls.

[14:51] His years of experience in the palace has equipped him for this situation. He knows how to deal with people and so on. And so he knows what it is he's going to say and he knows how to enter into the conversations.

And his words are realistic, God-honoring, and wise. Let's read verse 17. Then I said to them, this is Nehemiah, you see the troubles we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we may no longer suffer disgrace. I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me and also the words of the king that the king had spoken to me.

Nehemiah's words to the citizens of Jerusalem are very wise words indeed. Firstly, notice here how he identifies with the people. Last week we saw his identification with the people in his prayer of confession.

At the beginning of Nehemiah he says, we, not they, we, have sinned against you in his prayer of confession. now he speaks as one of the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

[16:08] He doesn't, he doesn't, pardon me, he doesn't play the visiting official from Susa saying, you people are in a mess and I have come to you. Rather, he says, rather he says words like, you see the bad situation that we are in.

He identifies with them, he is one of them. He also reveals his own intention to act. There is no, if you people decide to build, we will help you.

Rather, it is, come, let us rebuild. He is a leader, Nehemiah is a leader here, who leads, not one who pushes from behind.

He not only identifies with the people, but he leads by example. And he calls them, he calls on them to join in with him. Let us.

So he identifies with the people. The second thing to notice here is that he acknowledges the seriousness of their plight. He is realistic about the task ahead of him, no doubt.

[17 : 13] And he is prepared to face the difficulties up front. Any leader who fails to reveal the dangers and difficulties that lie ahead are not only foolish, but I think unethical.

Followers deserve to know more. And more importantly, they need to know that the leader knows. It's not seeing the difficulties that prevents action, but failing to see the resources.

And the most immediate resource is a leader willing to go ahead in spite of the difficulties that lie ahead. One person writes in this passage, honestly facing the facts has a remarkable effect on people's confidence.

As World War II was beginning and Winston Churchill leapt into power in Britain at the lowest ebb in the nation's fortunes, he promised Britain's nothing but blood, toil, tears and sweat.

No speech has ever united a nation more. Like Churchill, Nehemiah begins by stating how bad the problem is, looking not only at the wall, but at their vulnerability without it.

[18 : 29] But Nehemiah is a man of vision. He sees not only what is, but what can be. You see, leadership is an interpersonal matter. People do not follow programs, but leaders who inspire them.

They act when a vision stirs in them, a reckless hope of something greater than themselves, hope of fulfilment they had never before dared to aspire to. And hope is passed from person to person.

God-given visions of hope are shared, shared by leaders who see the vision with people who don't. But sharing is more than talk. Hope bursts into flame when leaders begin to act.

As they follow their vision, clearly and openly facing the difficulties, God mobilises the many by challenging actions of the few. Nehemiah acknowledges the seriousness of their plight.

And this inspiring speech of hope and vision is something new for the gathered people. They haven't seen anything like that before. And the caring attitude of Nehemiah was in stark contrast to the selfishness, perhaps, of previous governors within the walls of Jerusalem in times gone by.

[19 : 48] And Nehemiah's genuine concern for these people inspires confidence in his leadership.

And Nehemiah then turns the thoughts away from the trouble and disgrace that's talked about in verse 17 to the gracious hand of God upon him.

And it was God's hand on Nehemiah which led to the words that Cennat Azerxes had spoken to me as well. He attributes everything that has happened as God's gracious hand upon him.

The people's response to Nehemiah's summons was enthusiasm. They were keen to get on with the job. They said in verse 18, let us start rebuilding.

Their words are matched here with their performance. So they committed themselves to the common good as we're told at the end of the verse. He said similarly, our good resolutions, our decisions and so on, must be followed by actual deeds.

So for example, prayer invariably requires our action, just as Nehemiah acted upon his prayers.

And as I said earlier a few minutes ago, to grow as a Christian requires that we take action about our spiritual growth and discipline.

[21 : 13] And so often, I hear people tell me that their prayer is that they would be more disciplined as a Christian. Well, if that is your prayer, then you need to decide to act upon that prayer, that you will grow as a Christian, that you will be more spiritually formed and so on.

You need to make a decision to go ahead and do something about that. commitment. And likewise, for any marriage to grow, it requires commitment from both parties. Failure to commit to the marriage relationship will mean marriage breakdown somewhere along the way.

And whatever our good resolutions are, they need to be followed up by actual deeds. It's okay to say we'll pray, but follow it up with action.

That's what Nehemiah did. And that's what the people have done here. They committed themselves to start rebuilding and they commenced the work straight away.

And Nehemiah had everything ready so that they could begin the work at once. Now for 90 years or thereabouts, the people of Jerusalem had been too discouraged and downtrodden to attempt anything.

[22 : 28] But now we see here that they were eager to get started without any delay on the building of the walls of Jerusalem. And this total response by the people to Nehemiah's speech was as miraculous if you like to Artaxerxes allowing Nehemiah to come to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls after he had given a decree to not let the walls be rebuilt.

So there can be no doubt that God's gracious hand is upon these people. people. So confident are the people of God's hand on the rebuilding process that not even the ridicule of Sambalat, Tobiah and Geshem will thwart the process.

Now without going into too much detail about these three guys Tobiah, Sambalat and Geshem came from surrounding nations to Judah or Israel that were hostile towards them.

And Israel was only a small nation compared to the surrounding nations. So you could imagine that their situation was a bit tense, was a bit fragile. Now in verse 19 the insinuation that Israel is rebelling against the king which in years gone past previously halted wall reconstruction doesn't affect the Jews anymore because this time Artaxerxes has approved the project.

But it's more than that. It is their confidence in God, in the Lord. They say the God of heaven is the one who will give us success.

[24 : 20] And that is what spurs them on. That's why they commit themselves to the task of rebuilding. The same God who rescued their brothers and their ancestors from the hands of slavery in Egypt is now the same God who is acting here.

And they had a big challenge ahead of them. But they were guaranteed success. Because God had sanctioned the challenge that was ahead of them.

Well that's a lot of stuff about Jerusalem and about some of the history and so on. But why should the God of heaven be so concerned about these crumbling walls of Jerusalem?

Doesn't he have more important things to do? Doesn't he have other priorities and so on? Our job is not to question the mind of God but rather to look for the purposes of God I think.

And this side of the cross as we are living, we can clearly see God's purposes. You see, the safety of Jerusalem was bound up with the future, I think, of the Jewish race and the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

[25 : 44] Jerusalem was instrumental in that process, wasn't it? It was there that the price for our sin was paid by God's own Son on a Roman cross.

Now God could have chosen anywhere for that to happen but his choice was Jerusalem and God's plan was to offer salvation to all people through Christ's death and resurrection.

And you know, that's freely available now to all who respond in faith and obedience to that promise.

Well let me conclude by saying that we like Nehemiah and the citizens of Jerusalem are called to take on the challenge and build.

rebuild. Maybe you could say today that we're called to take on the challenge and rebuild. We live in an age where church is largely irrelevant.

[26 : 49] Someone told me last night in England church attendance there's more Muslims that attend church than Christians. That's an astounding figure.

Now we're not erecting a physical city we're not rebuilding the city walls and stuff like that but we are involved in the work of building up God's church the city of God as the psalmist calls it.

We don't build with bricks and with cement but with the tools of fervent prayer of faithful biblical preaching and Christian witness to those who don't know Jesus.

And just like Nehemiah and the people encountered ridicule along the way we will too. The Bible tells us quite clearly that we will receive opposition as we seek to reach out.

But that doesn't mean we should shirk the job. We need to be involved in the process of reaching out. Ridicule will come our way. It's to be expected and I guess that's our challenge.

[27 : 53] But friends the God of heaven who gave Nehemiah success to Nehemiah is our God. It's the same God.

And when you look at what's happening here for Nehemiah we have the same God on our side for those who seek to follow him. And what a glorious hope we have as we seek to follow him.

Let's pray. our loving God it's hard sometimes as a Christian to know how to serve you.

Challenges come our way and we feel daunted and wonder where you are in the situation. Yet Lord we are reminded here this morning that you are with us.

We pray Father that we would recognize your spirit's presence in our life. We pray that like Nehemiah had great confidence that we too would have great confidence and assurance in your

presence in our lives.

[28 : 59] Help us to do the work that you have called us to do and to be faithful in the process.
Amen. Thank you.