

Rebuilding Together

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. There you go, the microphone. Good morning. Thank you. It's great to be with you this morning. It's great to be opening this part of Nehemiah with you, and it's exciting and a great privilege to be opening God's Word with you today on such an important anniversary.

So thank you, Steve, for those words, and thank you for the opportunity. Let me pray for us before we look at the next part of Nehemiah's journey together.

Our gracious Lord and Father, thank you that you are sovereign over all time, over history and people. Thank you for your faithfulness to your people, despite our repeated sin and disobedience. In your love for us, you give us your Word, in your mercy, your Son, so that we might know you. As we open your Word today, please show us more of your glory.

In Jesus' name, amen. So last week, Steve introduced us to Nehemiah, a man of integrity, of faith and conviction.

[1 : 10] He was enslaved in exile, but he was also a trusted and treasured confidant of the King. And yet we see a man whose heart yearned for his people, for the restoration of their place, the city of Jerusalem, as it represented for him the restoration of their relationship with their God.

And I've always been quite curious about this concept of place in Nehemiah. Why is it so important? Why is it so tied to a sense of who people are? And I say this because I'm a first-generation Australian.

The stories of my family are not from here. They are quite recent. Some years ago, I contemplated this because if you know anything about First Nations culture, about Aboriginal culture, place and personal narrative and cultural history is deeply connected.

The song lines of people is about their place. And in my work, I was trying to develop for myself an understanding of what this connection meant so that I could better do my job, better serve the community I was working with.

And at the time, a very wise Aboriginal woman said to me that the only way for me to understand culture more was to understand my own background, my own place.

[2 : 28] And so I embarked on that journey myself. If you've ever had a conversation with my mother, which I highly recommend, you'd realise that our history takes us to Scotland.

And so some years ago, I went to Edinburgh, visiting the war memorial that's kept within the walls of Edinburgh Castle. Inside Edinburgh Castle, if you've ever been there, there is a very large hall, you know, high ceilings, very ornate, very quiet.

There's books that line the walls of this great hall, and it lists all the Scottish people who have fought and died in war over many generations. And in one of those books, I found my great-grandfather, killed in France during World War I.

And it was a very small thing to read a name in a book, a name that I had known in conversation, whose photographs I'd seen, and took with me the letter that was sent to his family, telling them that he'd died in battle.

And it was at that moment that the narrative of my own family came to life, in a place that was now very foreign to us, in many ways, because we had been here. I was born here, my mum had been here for many years, but to feel the connection to that place had remained.

[3 : 42] And so we find this for Nehemiah. He had departed his own country, his own home in the King's Court, where he had been for so long, and now to journey back to Jerusalem.

In chapter one, we see there had been a lot of time for him in preparation. As Steve highlighted for us last week, the beginning of this book of Nehemiah really shows us the character of this man, a slave as a result of exile, and yet holding such high office, where his integrity, his trustworthiness were critical to his job, and I'd say to his survival.

But his heart was for his God, for his homeland, with a people that were scattered and a city in ruins. What we saw last week was Nehemiah's character, prayerfully planning, considering wise actions, and really these are the backdrop to where we find him today in his journey.

We see that these characteristics are evident in how he approaches the journey itself, how he thinks and plans for those initial interactions, and how he goes about the building work.

In the passage that Kel read to us this morning, Nehemiah has made his trip to Jerusalem, probably taking about two months to make that journey. Nehemiah, as a king's official, he was on government business, he travels with a military escort, so he doesn't come into town quietly at all, and we see that he quickly ruffles some feathers.

[5 : 11] What we also see is that the first thing he does is take a few days to rest, which I think after travelling for two months on a horse makes some good sense. He takes care of himself, he gets some perspective, and then he starts thinking about the job at hand.

We see in verse 12, Nehemiah's initial inspection of the city was at night. He didn't want to attract attention. He was gathering his own information, making his own assessment of the task.

But the words that we see in verse 12 speak more about what is on his heart than what is in his project management plan. This is first and foremost God's business.

Come alive in Nehemiah's heart to do for God's people. And so that vision remains his very sharp focus. He is clear in his mind that this is God-inspired work, a calling that has taken him from a comfortable job, sitting in a palace, to the unknown.

But he also doesn't want that vision to create unrealistic expectations. So getting an honest assessment of the situation is really critical to enable him to plan and deliver.

[6 : 27] Nehemiah sees for himself in verse 13 that the walls are broken, the gates have been destroyed by fire. It's not until Nehemiah has made that assessment that he goes and speaks to the priests, the nobles and the officials of Jerusalem.

And I really think Nehemiah carefully chooses the words that he says in verse 17. The city has been ruined and desolate for 18 years.

People have been living amongst this brokenness without any attempt to restore it. But Nehemiah doesn't chastise them. He acknowledges the state of the city and he calls them to get on with the work of building.

And he includes himself in that. You see the trouble we are in. It's as much his problem as is theirs. He's not special or different. He suffers from Israel being as broken as much as they do.

Now that's a pretty smart move as a leader. He makes it very clear that he's alongside them. He's moved there to work with them. He's not there to supervise and he's not there to do the work for them.

[7 : 32] But we also know that this is not just rhetoric. What we know from Nehemiah's prayer that's recorded in chapter 1 where he confesses the sins of we Israelites, including me and my father's house, that we have committed against you.

Nehemiah identifies with their sin and their brokenness as a nation. And he can see the hand of God with them to be restored. When we think about the mission we're called to, Jesus' life and ministry models a similar posture for us.

We see in Hebrews 2, 17 and 18, Jesus shows us a ministry anchored around glorifying God, lived out alongside all sorts of people in deep humanity, sharing in their suffering.

Nehemiah gives us an example of the value of that in any ministry, of walking closely alongside others and understanding with empathy the challenges people and communities face. When anchored in a relationship with God, we have an ongoing awareness of our own sin, but we're called to a desire to serve and help others.

Not looking down, not talking about those people, a shared humanity with an unfair mercy. Now, we also don't see Nehemiah coming in and offering to do the work for them.

[9 : 12] He says, let us build. So this is about, for him, unifying people, not letting them be passive observers. When Nehemiah puts the prospect of rebuilding to the Jewish nobles, they quickly reply, let's start building.

They hadn't assumed their situation couldn't be changed and they didn't say to him, look, we've tried that before. It didn't work. We're not going to bother. What God sent them was a leader from the outside, but with a fresh perspective and a clear vision for the work.

He motivates people to get on with it. Nehemiah was never going to be able to do this work without the Jews, both practically speaking, but also if the purpose of rebuilding God's people was to be fulfilled.

All the Jews needed to hear was that God was with them. It strengthened and encouraged them and so their enthusiasm and hope welled. Early in chapter two, Nehemiah has a conversation with the king, asking for leave to go and rebuild.

Now this is a bold enough request in and of itself, a servant asking the king for something. But as we know, Nehemiah has been preparing for months, praying and seeking God's timing for his plans.

[10:28] And it's certainly the case that Nehemiah would have needed the king's approval to leave his job and go to Jerusalem. We know from Ezra 4 that the local officials had already put a stop to rebuilding Jerusalem once before, and so Nehemiah knew he needed authority.

But Nehemiah also anticipated that he would have opposition. Travelling to Jerusalem with military prepared him for that, but he also knew that the governors and the rulers in the surrounding areas would be threatened, and so he needs the king's authority to combat that.

And he knew his arrival quickly would attract attention, and we see quickly those opposed to change coming out of the woodwork. When we get to verse 19, we see the three opponents that start to come forward to oppose Nehemiah.

Firstly, we see Sanballat. He was from Beth Horan. That's about 12 miles from Jerusalem. He was the main opposition that Nehemiah first encounters, and that continues.

We see later in Nehemiah in chapter 4 that he has an official position in Samaria, and so he is particularly dangerous for Nehemiah. Tobiah is an Ammonite, an enemy of the Jews.

[11:45] He's related to and had friends among those who were in the rebuilding work for the city. He's the one who was going to be gathering information from the inside, finding people within those rebuilding who would seek to undermine.

And then we see Geshem and Arabian. These three protagonists are quick into the conversation when the commitment's made to start the rebuilding work. We don't see them favourably depicted. They aren't described as providing particularly coherent arguments against the work. They mocked and ridiculed, sometimes described as the weapon of those who have no other.

They belittled the Jews for their lack of resources, and in verse 19, they accused the Jews of rebellion, of being deceitful and faithless. Nehemiah's response to this barrage of accusation isn't to wave the king's letter in front of them, even though he has it at his hand.

He doesn't actually argue at all. Instead, he says in verse 20, the God of heaven will give us success. He doesn't get drawn into petty argument.

[12:59] He doesn't give them a lecture on the law, nor does he ignore them. He just directs them to God, the king and ruler of all. Now, there's a number of reasons why that's important for Nehemiah to take that stand.

Firstly, it speaks very loudly to the Jews about his purpose and affirms to them that this is God's work in them. Ignoring the critics would have created doubt in their mind about his intent.

Secondly, he avoids engaging in what is a redundant debate with people whose position is clearly informed, has different agendas, and is just false.

Debate would give their position voice that wasn't warranted. But it also tells us something about Nehemiah. Anticipating this situation, drawing on his diplomacy and other skills learned in a king's court to disarm and defuse.

This aids in pointing the Jews to God and not to him. Nehemiah has a clear burden on his heart for the work God has called him to do. It's deeply held and an immovable mission that gives him the clarity and the courage to stand against this kind of opposition.

[14:14] I like that Nehemiah seems to have expected it. He's calm and he's measured in how he handles this men. And I wonder for us how we think and plan for opposition.

Is this, when we think about the mission that God has put on our heart, an immovable, deeply held mission to bring God's glory, God glory? Is it a burden we have?

Does it cause us to sacrifice? Does it cause us to speak the truth and point people to God who would seek to discredit him? God called the Jews to rebuild, as has been seen in Nehemiah's journey so far.

And we see the determination of his faith. He's only at the beginning of his rebuilding work and yet his determination is evident. We are similarly called.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, 58, Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

[15 : 20] While there is nothing new under the sun, we're certainly living in a time where Christians are openly mocked, criticised and derided. We're no longer able to rely on the passive indifference, perhaps that might have characterised society's view of Christians in times gone by.

Increasingly, being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus, is more likely to attract the kind of commentary we see in Nehemiah, in our workplaces, at uni, in our families, and certainly in the court of public opinion.

And so it would be naive of us to not prepare and be wise about opposition. Much like Nehemiah, being careful about our own personal mission, having time with God in his word to sharpen us, meeting with God's people together, all our steps that we can take to equip us for the hard work ahead.

Nehemiah found a city without any stability, socially, economically, spiritually. When we look at Ezra 4, we see that they were oppressed by their foreign neighbours.

They were clearly unprotected. They were heavily taxed. They were enmeshed with foreign nations who had warded them down spiritually. They were defeated. And so they were content to live with things as they were, rather than risk further defeat.

[16 : 43] The Jews had long been mocked for the state of the city. It was supposed to be the joy of the whole earth, from Psalm 48. It was the place that God loved.

God loved the gates of Zion, from Psalm 87. But if God loved this city so much, why was it in ruins? Why were its gates burned? Why hadn't the Jews done something about it?

Without the ability to galvanise the people for the work, Nehemiah would not be able to restore anything. Finding a way to bring back their sense of being a people, of being God's people, was his real challenge.

As we look at Nehemiah 3 and the work that takes place, we don't see God mentioned at all. But we know that he is woven into every brick.

It's a great demonstration of God at work through his people. And we know that Nehemiah had one thing at the forefront of his mind, the glory of God. And so let's take a look. We already know that Nehemiah had planned this work.

[17 : 43] And the effort in rebuilding is another example of this. When we look at chapter 3, there are 38 individual people mentioned and 42 different groups named. Of course, there would have been many, many others not mentioned.

People who carried things, people who healed wounds, people who made cups of tea, if they did that then. But the way that he kept so many people on track was through a common goal, working together for God's glory.

Now, I'm not going to go through every gate and every group this morning. And shout out to Kel for even doing half that chapter. Well done, Kel. Thanks. We did it in Bible study on Tuesday night.

I thought, oh, I can't do that to someone else. But I will want to... I do want to just draw out some themes that we see across this chapter. Firstly, that God uses many different kinds of people.

The chapter tells us that there were rulers, which we see in verses 12 to 17. There are men and women. There are perfume makers. There are goldsmiths, merchants, people from outside the city.

[18 : 54] There was a job for everyone, and they all willingly worked alongside one another. It seems that any of their differences were irrelevant when it came to the task at hand. They just stood shoulder to shoulder and did the work.

This reminds me a lot of church today. God's people are made up of many ages, cultures, jobs, backgrounds, all of us turning our hearts and minds to glorifying God together.

We also see the importance of the example of leaders. In verse 1, we see that the tone is set from the top with the high priest going to work to rebuild the sheep gate.

That the high priest used his consecrated hands on manual labour shows that he considered this to be work that was important. Elashib enlists the other priests for the work as well.

However, just a bit of a spoiler for later on, he turns out to be an ally of the enemy and creates a lot of problems for Nehemiah, so don't get too attached to him. The sheep gate was at the north-east

corner of the city.

[19 : 59] This was the gate through which the sacrifices came to the city. So it was right that the priests worked on the sheep gate. And it symbolically says that they're putting God first, which was important for people who'd been stuck.

We also see that there is unity among the people as they work. For example, from the example of the priests to the variety of people we see putting their shoulder to the hard work of building. They do it selflessly. We don't get a sense of there being any individual effort. It's a combined effort. Some do the work on the areas of the wall near their home, which we see in verse 10, in verse 23, and in verses 28 and 30.

They took responsibility for their own neighbourhood so that their own homes could be restored and liveable again. Others came from many other nations. We see people from Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Bethser, and many others.

Now, it's not clear what benefit they might have from Jerusalem's walls being repaired, but still they left their homes and jobs and came to help. It's this kind of selflessness that marks the people of God in many ways through history.

[21 : 12] Many people who've prayed for missionaries, going to countries, praying for people in countries and giving money that they never visit, working with people and praying for people, sowing seeds that we might never see the fruit of, not for personal benefit, but because it's a privilege to glorify God.

We see that the places were built, as outlined in this chapter, in a bit of a methodical style, next to him, next to him, and so the language goes.

And so what the language gives us is a strong visual of a city, brick by brick, being rebuilt. Nehemiah records these in the various gates. The narrative moves counterclockwise around the city.

There are 10 gates, several towers, as well as the work on the north wall, the eastern wall, the southern point of the city, and finally the eastern wall. Each gate had a particular purpose for the functioning of the city, as you will see if you read the rest of the chapter, especially for the functioning of the temple, for the purposes of defence, for sanitation, you can guess which one that is, for food and water, and for the troops to enter and depart.

It's also an important chapter for the historical detail that gives us about the layout of Jerusalem, and quite purposely records the names of people who went to work rebuilding on it. Recounting the building of this city in this way is a reminder again of how broken Jerusalem was.

[22 : 47] There had been no temple. There was no means of sacrifice. But as we know, no person could achieve this work, and it took, had been able to achieve this work, it took the leadership of Nehemiah and the cooperation of all these people.

And both were important. And so it is for us today, working together to finish the work to the glory of God. The rebuilding of Jerusalem really shows a practical mission of the heart for God's glory.

The status of Jerusalem, as we know, as a city was a symbol of God's people, and Nehemiah knew this deeply. His part was to do the work of restoration and give the people of Jerusalem hope once more, reassuring them of God's promises to them fulfilled, lifting them out of rubble, from broken dependency.

Jerusalem and its people were designed to be a city on a hill, a light that proclaimed God's glory, not hidden away, cowering in rubble, defeated. If its citizens obeyed God, Jerusalem was to bear witness to him.

Its community life was to be a pointer to the peace and justice in the new Jerusalem, the city on the hill that would come at the end of time, which we see in Revelation 21 and 22.

[24 : 07] We know this isn't an Old Testament idea only, about place and its walls. Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 5, 14, let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

It's the same call that was on Nehemiah's heart and the same call that was made on the people of Jerusalem that's made on us today. There is also joy and enthusiasm that comes through the narrative.

It's clearly hard work. It's messy. It's dirty. They would be blistered, cut and bruised. And some people completed more than one section, did much more than they needed to.

But what this chapter gives us is a sense of energy and hope in the words as the people work together. There is a sense of enthusiastic unity. The 38 people who were named and the many who aren't who did the jobs of cleaning up and helping lug stuff around, repairing the blisters, making the food, all mattered.

And it was a joy that they shared in serving. Nehemiah uses the recurring phrase in Next to Him and it's a very clear testimony, I think, about their interdependence, about lives that were lived doing hard work alongside one another in building God's city.

[25 : 32] So it isn't a city, it isn't a collection of individuals, but a society that's interacting. We see something like this when we look at how Paul invites us as God's people in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 to consider ourselves part of the human body.

I've always liked this part of the Bible in terms of its significance for how I view mission, that we all have a unique but interconnected part to play.

Perhaps as a former nurse, I connect with the detail of the miracle that the human body is.

Fascinating small structures, tiny bones in our ears, tiny vessels that all work day and night so that I can process the world around me.

But each part is also unique, made for a particular purpose and that's what we see here in Chapter 3, that people may have the same name but they're distinguished from each other by their family background.

unity is important but individuality is also valued. It strikes me that they never needed their brothers and sisters in Christ, we never needed our brothers and sisters in Christ more than we do today.

[26 : 48] As was the case for Nehemiah, anyone looking at God's people today might see that our city is looking a bit run down, the walls crumbling and the fires lit at our gates. We don't need to be the same as each other, we don't have to do the same thing.

Throughout the Bible, we see many different people all used by God in his time for his purpose. But our confidence must be in God. In unity, we amplify the hope we have in Jesus.

We help each other carry the load of living faithfully when we are under siege. We spur one another on when the work of mission is hard. Our unity is in the spirit, galvanising, comforting, assuring.

Let's hold on to that, defend it, prioritise it and for one another and serve one another with our time and talent and treasure. Nehemiah's vision, the desire of his heart infused in the work of the people of Jerusalem was that God would be glorified once again through his people.

His confidence is in his promises of God fulfilled in Israel's history. His hope was that in restoring the city, that relationship would be restored.

[28 : 02] What Nehemiah didn't know was that the only way that this reconciliation could happen was through the temple being torn apart and restored after three days. The only perfect, final, life-giving hope is found in God giving his son over to death, raised from the dead so that we might live eternally.

Our personal hope is in a resurrected Jesus. Ephesians 2 tells us, God, who is rich in mercy, has made us alive in Christ even when we're dead in transgressions.

It's by grace you've been saved. God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

And so for us, it's a personal hope that we can be restored from our brokenness in the face of fear and defeat. Fears that, similar to the people of Israel, can cause us to live amongst the rubble of our own lives, inert against the measure of sin and failure.

And yet God gives us hope. He offers you hope and a way to get it. We were dead, but the overwhelming, conquering love of God in Jesus raises us up and restores us.

[29 : 30] And if that isn't a hope that you have today, don't leave this morning without talking to someone about the hope they have and how you can know the richness of God's mercy for yourself.

This is also the vision God has before the church today. We experience times of unrest, upheaval. Life doesn't go smoothly. But we can have hope that God is turning us into the kind of people who can handle whatever comes.

In Nehemiah, we see the historical reality of God's promises at work. In Jesus, we are joined in the resurrection to the fulfilment of those promises in eternity.

Let me pray for us. Lord, I pray that our hearts would be open to know the hope that you have called us to, the riches of our inheritance as your people and the incomparably great power for those who believe.

Thank you that in raising Jesus from the dead, you have restored us to yourself. Thank you that your continued work in us restores your people, your church, to shine a light in this dark world.

[30 : 36] May we have hearts that are keenly focused on glorifying you in every way. Amen. Amen.