

Nehemiah the brave builder

Pre reading – Nehemiah needs to be read in advance of this bible study.

Groups – The sheet at the end of this pack could be given to smaller groups of 3-4 people.

Introduction

Jerusalem was in ruins, the city had been destroyed, dishonoured and abandoned. The destroyed walls were a picture of the spiritual state of Israel, broken down and deserted. The people did what they wanted, they didn't look to God. They needed someone to build them up spiritually.

Enter the Bible's best builder, Nehemiah. Nehemiah is allowed to return to the homeland by the King of Persia, who runs the world at that point. Nehemiah returns to build up the walls, but also has to build up the spiritual life of the community living there.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9-10

We are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care.

Like Nehemiah we are called to be builders. We are to build up God's Kingdom on earth. You are to make his Kingdom come on earth as in heaven. This book calls us all to action, to join in the great building project. As you approach this project you will face many challenges, much opposition, and will need Kingdom Courage like Nehemiah had.

Starter questions (5 mins)

- (1) What similarities do you see between the spiritual state of the nation then and us now?
- (2) What do we need to do to rebuild these broken spiritual walls?

Nehemiah's prayer

Before Nehemiah arrives, he hears about Jerusalem's broken state. Overcome with grief, he prays.

Read Nehemiah 1:5-11

"Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you.⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

⁸ "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

¹⁰ "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹ 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. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man."

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) What has caused the destruction of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's eyes?

- (2) Why is there hope for the destroyed Jerusalem?
(3) Is there any cause that fills you with Nehemiah's passion?

There is real passion in this prayer, praying day and night, Nehemiah brings his people to God. He praises God, admits the people's sins, and using scripture reminds God of his promises to restore them.

Nehemiah has a passion for the things of God. We all have passions but so often they revolve around ourselves, our relationships, our social activities, our hobbies, our music. We need to be asking God to place passion on our hearts, for things of his kingdom.

God will incite passions in all our lives for different parts of his Kingdom. These will differ depending on each of us, some will be big, some small, but the important thing is that we ask God to place these things on our hearts, and then we act, as Nehemiah does, as he marches off to Jerusalem.

Making a plan

Read Nehemiah 2:11-19

¹¹ I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few others. 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.

¹³ By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward 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. ¹⁴ Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; ¹⁵ so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the Valley Gate. ¹⁶ 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.

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." ¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) Who knew Nehemiah was conducting this survey?
(2) What did he find on his survey of the walls?
(3) When do you plan in such a careful way?

Nehemiah entered the city with the task of rebuilding the city, commissioned by the King of Persia. He was the man who was going to restore this once great city. He should have entered with trumpets and fanfares, showing the hope he brought. Why didn't he then? He arrived, he rested, and then at night went around to inspect the walls. He was careful not to tell anyone what he was doing.

Nehemiah doesn't come to receive praise for himself, he comes to do a job. When he does tell the people, he doesn't say 'I will rebuild', but 'let us rebuild'. Nehemiah has been given this task by God, and now he involves others.

It is so easy to promote ourselves without knowing it, even in church circles. We say 'I did this good work' to our friends, and quickly the story becomes that we did a good thing, not that God was at

work and that they can be involved too. God calls us to build his Kingdom by bringing others into the vision.

Getting on with the work

Read Nehemiah 3:1-5

Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. ² The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zakkur son of Imri built next to them.

³ The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. ⁴ Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired the next section. Next to him Meshullam son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs, and next to him Zadok son of Baana also made repairs. ⁵ The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) How many names joined in with the work in this passage?
- (2) Who didn't get involved in the work?
- (3) Where are you joining in with the building up of God's kingdom?

This is just a snippet of a larger passage where we go all around the city, being told exactly who is repairing each bit. This is very interesting from an archaeological and historical perspective, but does this have any theological point?

It shows that work is sometimes simple and matter of fact, relying on commitment and hard graft. It is not that glamorous working at the Sheep Gate, and we all want to skip forward to the exciting celebration of the wall being completed. But in the hard work God is working on us too, building us up, and we need to stick at it.

For those who persevere, the book of Nehemiah shows that you will be honoured. These people working hard on a wall 2500 years ago wouldn't have expected their names to be remembered now, but they are. Nehemiah honoured them for their hard work, and God will honour us when the wall is completed.

Problems inside and out

Read Nehemiah 4:10-18

¹⁰ Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."

¹¹ Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."

¹² Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."

¹³ Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. ¹⁴ After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

¹⁵ *When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.*

¹⁶ *From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah 17 who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, ¹⁸ and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.*

Questions (5 minutes)

- (1) What are the problems Nehemiah needs to deal with?
- (2) How does Nehemiah change his plans to deal with these problems?
- (3) How do you deal with setbacks?

Nehemiah has lots of problems here. It seems the plan is not working, the workers are tired and grumbling, and there are the enemies who are looking to attack. At this point it would seem very normal for him to quit and fold. He could even grab everything by the scruff of the neck and try to force things to work. Instead we see a very different response.

Nehemiah gathers the leaders together, not just for mutual support, but for a prayer meeting. He refocuses them on the task in hand, and calls them to turn back to the Lord even in this time of trouble.

These people, scared for their lives, would have found it hard to ‘remember the Lord who is great and awesome’. Their troubles were so present and God would seem so far away. But Nehemiah trusted in God to save them, as he has done in years past.

In the same way, in our troubles, when our efforts to build God’s Kingdom hits a dead end, we don’t just give in. We get together with Christian friends and pray, trusting in God even though we can’t see the good, and ask Him to act in the situation. We also act practically, as Nehemiah did, to adapt to the problems we face, acting with the wisdom we get from God.

Completion of the wall

After the walls had been restored the people joined together to celebrate, by reading the Law of God. In the way they celebrated you can see that both their spiritual state and the physical walls had been restored.

Read Nehemiah 8:13-18

¹³ *On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”—as it is written.*

¹⁶ *So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.*

¹⁸ Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

Group questions (5 minutes)

- (1) What caused the people to celebrate this festival?
- (2) Where did they build their shelters?
- (3) In what ways has God provided for you in the last year?

This was called the festival of tabernacles. It was started in the time of Moses, and it is recorded in John 7 that Jesus also attended the festival. Farmers started the festival, setting up shelters by their fields during the harvest. The festival reminded them how God had provided for them through the harvest and through their history.

The people read the Law and saw how they had forgotten to remember how God provided for them. First they were filled with grief, but as they remembered the way God had provided for them they were filled with joy. They celebrated because God had provided and the walls were built, they celebrated because God had brought his people out of captivity, and they celebrated a restored relationship with their God.

After we have been working to build the Kingdom, we must remember to celebrate all God is doing. We also look to the ultimate builder Jesus Christ. He is the cornerstone, and the one building up his church, something we are asked to join Him in. Jesus was the one who won the ultimate victory on the cross, meaning the hard work has been done for us. Now we can celebrate like the Jews did, since Jesus has saved us and provided for us.

This joy is the start and end point of our work. We should allow this joy to sustain us in all the work God has for us. Like Nehemiah we should be proactive, searching out the task God has set for us, building our part, while drawing others into the project. But we must always end with praise for the God who has ultimately saved, restored, rebuild, and commissioned us for the work.

Response (15 minutes)

Pray for each member of the group.

You may consider praying into:

- To ignite a passion in their life.
- About a task God has called them too.
- Thank God for all the good things he has accomplished in their lives.
- Pray for the joy of the Lord.

Nehemiah the brave builder – Group Handout

Questions

Introduction (5 minutes)

- (1) What similarities do you see between the spiritual state of the nation then and us now?
- (2) What do we need to do to rebuild these broken spiritual walls?

Nehemiah's prayer (5 minutes)

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Getting on with the work (5 minutes)

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Problems inside and out (5 minutes)

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Bible passages

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