

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Nehemiah 3-7: The Reconstruction of the Walls

Chapters 1-2 introduce Nehemiah himself, and chapters 3 to 7 describe the activity for which he is most well-known: the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. We will look at the flow of what happens in this section under five movements.

1. Faithful construction (3:1-32)

Having agreed to start rebuilding (2:18), the people now do so (3:1-2), and the chapter describes who built what parts of the walls and gates. It's like a church fabric day, only on a much grander level! All the details remind us that it's about *real* people in a *real* situation, whose work together made a *real* difference. Apart from the miserable nobles of Tekoa who refuse to get involved (3:5), the whole community comes together and is mobilised to make an impact. Priests, levites, temple servants, goldsmiths, and perfume makers are mentioned; someone even gets his daughters to do some work (3:12)! No-one is too important; no-one is too holy. Everyone gets involved; everyone gets their hands dirty.

Of course, Christians are not called to build Jerusalem or its walls today. Our focus is not on an *earthly* city, but on the *heavenly* Jerusalem. But, if anything, that's *more* important – we're involved in building up the *community of God's people*. And here's a great reminder that it's not just the job of one or two people. Or special people. We build together. The church grows through the service of *all* of God's people (see Ephesians 4:12-13). So, what looks on the face of it like a long, boring list of names and descriptions of the city wall reminds us that we *all* need to do our bit in building up the church community. There is a part for *each of us* to play. We're a diverse people, but we're united in a *common purpose* – of hard work and enthusiastic service in faithful construction.

2. External opposition (4:1-23)

When the people started rebuilding the temple when they first came back to Jerusalem, they met opposition (Ezra 4:1-5). Now, again, God's people start building, and opposition comes (4:1-3). Nehemiah prays for justice, and for God to act (4:4-5). When the enemies see that *insults* don't have any effect, they move on to *intimidation* (4:6-8). Nehemiah responds by calling on the people to remember the Lord (4:14). And he places them with weapons along the walls, working with trowels in one hand, and swords in the other (4:17-18).

When C.H. Spurgeon began a magazine, he named it *The Sword and Trowel*, referring to these workers who kept their swords in one hand and their trowels in the other. One was to protect themselves against enemy attack, the other was to build. Spurgeon wanted to say that both are needed in Christian service. And, of course, he was right. Some Christians, who enjoy a good fight, trade in their trowel for an extra sword – so they can fight the enemy with both hands! Others, not so keen on fighting, want to emphasise the positive, but are never quite able to defend what they're building, because somewhere along the way they've put their sword down and are now not quite sure where it's gone! We need *both* the sword *and* the trowel, the one to build, the other to guard: 'Take... the sword of the Spirit', says Paul, 'which is the Word of God' (Ephesians 6:18).

3. Internal frustration (5:1-19)

In addition to *external opposition*, Nehemiah has to deal with *internal frustration*. Issues within the community itself threaten to derail the rebuilding programme (5:1-5). It appears the added pressure of rebuilding the walls has brought ongoing simmering problems up to the surface. Grain was

scarce, which was bad enough, but then there was economic hardship as well – taxes, inflation, and high-interest loans. The Persians were lenient with their subject peoples, but taxed the life out of them for the privilege. In order to pay tax to the Persians, they had to mortgage the land, but there was never any prospect of them being able to get it back. Some had borrowed money to buy food and pay taxes, and because of debt others had to sell sons and daughters as slaves.

But – here’s the real sting – those profiting were Jews (5:1, 7)! Some were exploiting the poor, and the rich were getting richer at the expense of the poor. Once more, Nehemiah meets it head on, without allowing it to fester. He’s angry at the injustice (5:6), and he confronts those responsible, calling a large meeting to make sure it’s dealt with in a public way (5:7).

The law forbid the people of God to charge interest on loans to each other (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36; Deuteronomy 23:19-20; 24:10-13). Social injustice was part of the reason they were taken to exile in Babylon in the first place, and now here they were doing the same thing again. Interest compounds the problem for poor people. It’s a familiar story in our society and world, and it applies at an international level too, as the recent *Make Poverty History* campaign brought to our attention, with its hope that the rich west would cancel the debt payments of poor nations who can’t afford to pay them.

God’s verdict on exploitation is given in 5:9. Notice the two motivations for doing what is right: fear of God, and being a good witness to the nations. The passage goes on to show how Nehemiah turns prosecutor (5:8-10), orders them to restore the property of the poor, (5:11), which they do (5:12).

Nehemiah also talks about his own example (5:14-19). He was a governor and would have been allowed to tax people to support his governor lifestyle, but he didn’t do so for the sake of the people. He lent money and grain without charging interest (5:10),

and didn’t take the food given to him as governor (5:14). Previous governors had taxed the people and been a burden to them. But not Nehemiah. Why? The final sentence of 5:15 tells us – ‘out of reverence for God’. His motivation and character flow out of his reverence for God. How can we claim to be dependent on God’s grace and not act in grace towards others? How can we claim to serve the God who gets angry at injustice and not be angry at injustice ourselves?

Knowing and serving God has implications for our whole life: the way we relate to other people in the family of God, the community, and the wider world. In Nehemiah’s day, of course, the problem was greed which led to exploitation. But we can exploit people in other ways: by taking advantage of their kindness, maybe, or making unrealistic demands of them, or in all kinds of ways being self-promoting at the expense of others.

So, as well as organising the rebuilding, Nehemiah helps with financial problems, and sorts out social, legal and economic issues.

4. Continual intimidation (6:1-14)

This chapter begins by telling how four times the enemies try to get a meeting with Nehemiah, and he refuses (6:1-4). On the fifth time, they send him an open letter – making sure everyone would know what was in it – containing the charge that Nehemiah was leading a rebellion (6:5-7). But Nehemiah won’t let himself be distracted (6:2, 8), and he throws himself on God’s strength (6:9).

They also try to discredit Nehemiah by tricking him into fleeing into the temple (6:10). But Nehemiah sees through the plot. He will not give in to his fears (6:11), and risk being discredited (6:12-13). Fleeing into the temple would have discredited him as a coward; and because he wasn’t a priest, he couldn’t have gone into the temple anyway.

It’s clear from almost the very first page of Scripture that God has an enemy – the

serpent, the devil, Satan, the accuser of God's people, who is completely opposed to God's purpose. And his strategies are always the same: deceiving, distracting, discrediting, and destroying. God's people will need discernment, will need to be careful not to be distracted from the work God has called them to do, not to be discredited, and – like Nehemiah – to stay in touch with God through prayer (6:9, 14), to ask God to 'strengthen our hands'.

5. Successful completion (6:15-7:73)

Through it all, the wall is completed (6:15). In 52 days! Archeologists are reasonably certain they've found parts of Nehemiah's wall: it's about 9 to 10 feet thick, and it's fairly clear it was a rushed job. Remember – they were DIY enthusiasts, not expert builders! But it was done, and it was effective enough for their enemies to notice (6:16).

The rest of the passage shows how Nehemiah makes sure the city is defended (7:1-3). There's still a problem because the capital is sparsely inhabited (7:4-5). Nehemiah puts in motion a plan, takes a survey, and discovers a list of those who had returned initially – detailed for us in chapter 7 – which is similar to the list in Ezra 2, showing continuity of purpose in the larger programme of restoration outlined in the two books.

Summary

What do we learn for ourselves from this long section?

- *Faithful construction* – we are each of us called to build, and to build together.
- *External opposition* – there will always be opposition to God's work; it takes different forms, but it is real, and we'll need to watch out for it.
- *Internal frustration* – we will need to be wise, as Nehemiah was, and act with integrity in relationships with others, and in issues of lifestyle and justice.
- *Continual intimidation* – we have an enemy, but he's a defeated enemy; we know what his strategies are, and we can respond with prayer and courage, confident of God's strength.
- *Successful completion* – success, when it comes, will be with the help of God (6:16b). We work, and he works. We give him the glory, and he gets the glory. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 19 November 2006