

NEHEMIAH

pray plan build



Daily Worship Booklet

Week 4

God tells us that Ezra read from the book of the Law, day after day and the people of God were filled with joy!

Friday – Nehemiah 3:1-32 – Some introductory thoughts.

The Gates – The reconstruction work is structured around the nine gates in Jerusalem. The account proceeds anticlockwise, starting and finishing at the Sheep Gate on the city's northeastern corner. Although the primary purpose of the chapter is not to teach us the typography of ancient Jerusalem, it nonetheless provides a rich resource for it.

The People – The chapter names thirty-eight individuals and identifies thirty-two distinct groups regarding the people involved. This means many people who were heavily involved in rebuilding the walls and replacing the gates did not get a mention. Not everyone who labours diligently and quietly for the Lord in His church gets a mention, but that does not mean He does not know what they have done. Of course, He does and notes it for their eternal reward.

The word 'Built' is used six times in this chapter, and it means 'rebuilt.' Remember, Nehemiah had letters to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, so that he could get timber for the gates of the fortress of the temple, the city walls, and the house he was going to occupy. The rest of the materials that would be used, i.e., the stone, are pre-existing. It was what had been in the walls before they were knocked down. No new materials were required for the walls. We do not need any new materials today to do the work of the Kingdom; God has given us all we need in the means of grace – His Word, prayer, the sacraments, and church discipline.

'Repair' is used thirty-five times, meaning to make it solid and firm. There is nothing temporary about the work Nehemiah is leading these people to do. It is going to be thorough and well-grounded. These walls are to be repaired to stand for a purpose and not simply for a season for cosmetic or aesthetic purposes. The work of the Church is to be established on clear principles commanded in God's Word so that she will stand on the truth firm and secure; as Paul tells Timothy, she, as the church of the living God, is to be the "pillar and buttress of the truth." (I Timothy 3:15). We are not into short-term window dressing. We are to labour in the Church to lay a foundation and maintain a foundation that will last for centuries.

The words *'Doors, locks and bolts'* appear five times in the book. This is pre-emptive security from external intrusion. One of the tasks given to those called to rule in the church is to guard and protect the church from attacks (Acts 20:28-31). What that involves is much more than what is commonly understood.

- Q1. How many gates were there in Jerusalem? How many people are we told worked on the city? Were there more than these people who worked?
Q2. What is the church to use, and how must she work to see growth?

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The book of Nehemiah focuses on the work involved in labouring to see Christ build his church.

Thursday – Nehemiah 3:1-5 – People and God’s glory.

The challenge before Nehemiah was not insignificant. Efforts had been made before to reconstruct the walls, but they had failed. Yes, he had considerable gifts of planning and administration; they were proven gifts, and, as we have seen in our brief study thus far, he had phenomenal faith in and a sense of dependence upon God. However, he needed the people to do the work. It is not that God could not have done the work of restoring the walls and replacing the gates instantly; He could have, but that is not how God works. He chooses to use men and women in the restoration and work of His kingdom. He could save anyone He wished by regenerating their heart and renewing their mind through whatever means He would choose to use. However, He has wilfully chosen because it pleases Him to save those who believe through the folly of preaching through the lips of men (1 Corinthians 1:21). God has called and laid it on the heart of this man to undertake the tasks of rebuilding these walls and replacing the burnt gates to redress the shame and trouble that afflicted the city. However, He also placed it into Nehemiah's heart to know and appreciate that he was but one cog in the wheel. Many cogs would be needed to see this challenge faced and overcome. When it comes to labouring in the Bride, everyone has a role, without exception.

Before we see who is involved in rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls, let us remind ourselves of why they are doing it. The reason for all that will happen is God's glory. That is clear from what Nehemiah mourns over, fasts through, and prays for in Chapter 1. The Jews had been singing the songs of David for around five hundred years about Jerusalem, songs that included refrains like “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth” (Psalm 48:1,2a). Now, she was in ruins and needed to be restored to give them security – yes, but more importantly, to bring honour and glory to God. Nehemiah got this, and he could articulate that to the people of God in Jerusalem. All the work we are going to read about arises, for the most part, out of that desire.

All that Jesus did while he was on earth was to glorify His Father in Heaven, as he stated in what is commonly known as His high priestly prayer, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” (John 17:4). In all we do, we must work toward the same end—the glory of God, nothing less.

Q1. How does God choose to do His work?

Q2. What must always be our focus and goal in the church?

Monday – Nehemiah 2:17-20 – The officials say ‘yes,’ but others say ‘no.’

So, Nehemiah brought the challenge to the city leaders, who responded positively. This is not always the case. Often, the response can be either ‘we’re happy with the way things are’ either openly or through subsequent actions, or ‘we’ve tried it before, and it did not work!’ I suppose what helped Nehemiah was that although he was a Jew with relatives living in Jerusalem, he was still an outsider. That allowed him to see the situation through fresh eyes, unencumbered by the influence of the naysayers within the community – people who habitually say ‘no’ for no reason, other than they like saying ‘no’. Thankfully, although they exist, such people tend to be few and far between. The more common tendency can be to say ‘no’ just because we cannot be bothered with thinking about it, let alone actually engaging in change toward improvement. We must guard against that tendency when it concerns matters of the Kingdom of God.

However, it is not just character traits and lethargy that can lead people to say ‘no’ when faced with a good challenge – some people will say ‘no’ for considered reasons, which are ultimately grounded in reaction to God and what He is doing.

Three men are mentioned here who fall into that category. (Here is a section from Stan K. Evers's commentary on Nehemiah. It is called ‘Doing a Great Work’ and is published by Evangelical Press.)

“The first of the men was *Sanballat* (2:10), the governor of Samaria who came from Beth-Horon (‘house of the god Horon’). He was a descendant of the mixed race that settled in Samaria after the Assyrian conquest (2 Kings 17:24,29-31). Secondly, there was *Tobiah* (2:10), an Ammoniate official who was from an old and famous family that ruled Ammon for years. The land of Ammon, on the east side of the Dead Sea, was inhabited by the descendants of Ben Ammi – the son of Lot, by his younger daughter (Genesis 19:30-38). Both *Sanballat* and *Tobiah* were related to the high priest in Jerusalem (13:4,5,28). The third man in this wicked trio was *Gesham the Arab* (2:19), who was even more influential and formidable than *Sanballat* and *Tobiah*.”

So, this is the opposition surrounding Judah. *Sanballat*’s Samaria is in the north, *Tobiah*’s Ammon is in the east, and Moab and Edom, also in the east and south, respectively, are ruled by *Geshem* and his league of Arabian tribes. The world surrounds the church with her opposition, but remember the promise of the Lord, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18).

Q1. Why do people say ‘no’ when asked to work in the church?

Q2. Who opposes the work of Christ and His Kingdom? Why?

Tuesday – Nehemiah 2:17-20 – “Sticks and stones.. words”

The first attack on Nehemiah’s plans was simple ridicule. I use the word ‘simple’ because that is how many folks see ridicule—but it is anything but simple. Ridicule is a sophisticated means of attacking someone. As Neurological diseases attack the nervous system, causing untold harm and ultimate paralysis, despising words and ridicule attack the emotional system to destabilize it and bring a halt to what is being done. The intentions of these men were not merely malignant. They were designed to be destructive. They wanted the work that Nehemiah was going to embark on to stop.

The nineteenth-century rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words shall never hurt me” (which incidentally made one of its first appearances in the Coleraine Chronicle and North of Ireland Advertiser on January 18, 1862, the local paper where I grew up), while sounding good is not true. Words do and can break. As Solomon writes, “A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.” (Proverbs 15:4) and “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.” (Proverbs 18:21). We need to remember this with care. It is not insignificant when folk use demeaning language and seek to ridicule someone or something good in the church. It shows their heart. Again, Solomon gives wisdom from on high: “Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.” (Proverbs 21:23).

There was also a political nuance to the words; the implication being that Nehemiah was in Jerusalem to incite a rebellion against the king. Attack by inference is a well-worn path. You will remember that the Jewish Sanhedrin used it against Jesus when they brought him before Pilate and said, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.” (Luke 23:2). It was also used in the attack against Paul in Phillipi when he and Silas were brought before the magistrates, and the allegation placed, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” (Acts 16:20,21). There may come a day when we will face such a charge in our nation, but, for now, let us be thankful that that is not the case. Until then, let us stay clear of playing the little political games that sometimes go on in the church, like saying, ‘Well, I have heard several people say this’ when it has only been ourselves in our own echo chamber that have thought it.

Q1. Are words harmless?

Q2. What must we avoid doing in the church?

Wednesday – Nehemiah 2:20 – Nehemiah’s rebuttal.

Nehemiah's rebuttal to the three protagonists is interesting and instructive.

He could have ignored it. Sometimes it is wisest to ignore ‘words’. Solomon writes, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself”, but he goes on in the following verse to say, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Proverbs 26:4 and 5). So, there are times to say nothing, and there are times to speak. Wisdom is knowing which one to pick in which circumstance. Nehemiah chooses the latter here. Why? Well, the jeering and despising was merely aimed at Nehemiah. He tells us in verse 19 that “they jeered at us and despised us and said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing?’” So, this was a public ridicule aimed at Nehemiah, yes, but directed at and incorporating all who would follow him. The principal goal was to get Nehemiah to ‘back off’; but if they could not achieve that, then they wanted to dilute any support he may have garnered. In saying what he does, Nehemiah places a marker on the ground for Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem and everyone else listening. Ignoring their taunts could, probably would, have sent the signal to everyone within earshot that Nehemiah was afraid of taking these men on, that their allegations cowed him. That would have spread like wildfire through the city, creating uncertainty and fear. It is not a good way to start addressing the challenge before them. Leadership does not merely involve thinking about oneself. While a leader can and must at times allow comments to flow over him like ‘water off a duck’s back’ when those comments are made in public, there has to be an appreciation for their potential impact, on not just those hearing them at the time but also the broader community as they are carried forward in the telling by others.

He could have engaged in a heated discussion with them. It is easy to get drawn into a heated discussion when you are being ridiculed or despised about something in which you are investing yourself wholly out of the best interest of others and, more importantly, the glory of God. Sometimes, it is necessary to go toe-to-toe, but often, it's not. What invariably happens is that the issue gets lost in the exchange because of a sinful need to try and defend one’s reputation or view.

He focuses on what needs to be said. Without allowing them to say anything more, Nehemiah focuses on three critical points: First, this was about God and His work. Second, the Jews are going to do it because they are God’s servants. Third, you men have no part to play. It is a clear, concise, definitive statement arising from his knowledge of the task before him and God’s people in Jerusalem.

Q1. What does Nehemiah not do in response to the three men?

Q2. What does Nehemiah do?