

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 2 verses 11- 20 and CHAPTER 3

This is our third week in the book of Nehemiah – today our focus will be on the second half of Chapter 2 and the whole of Chapter 3 – which will not be read in full because of its length and I will attempt to give an overview of it.

Here is a very quick summary as to where we are up to in the story.

Nehemiah is a Jew living in exile in Persia and he hears very bad news from his brother who has returned from Jerusalem.

He hears that the walls are in ruins and the gates to the city are burned.

We need to fully understand the magnitude of this news.

With its walls down, Jerusalem had no defence against raiders and invaders. This meant that no one wanted to live there.

This is highlighted later on in Chapter 7 verse 4 – listen:

“Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt”

Because so many of the citizens had moved out – temple worship could not be maintained. Without the rebuilding of the walls there could be no rebuilding and restabilising of the spiritual life in the city.

Nehemiah certainly understood this which is why the news moved his heart so deeply. We read he weeps, mourns, fasts and prays - such is his burden for God's honour to be restored in the city.

He pours out his heart to God – and we focused on his prayer last week. It is a great prayer – beginning with an acknowledgement of God in his majesty and His covenant keeping faithfulness – its frank admission and identification of Nehemiah of the peoples sins – its appeal to the covenant promise that those who repent will be forgiven and restored – and its passionate plea to God as Redeemer to take action on behalf of his people.

Nehemiah is prepared to offer himself for the task of rebuilding the walls of the city and the climax of his prayer in Chapter 1 is him asking that God would create an opportunity for him to be able to leave Susa, the capital city of Persia, where he lives and works in the court of the king.

For at least four months Nehemiah and his friends waited on God – asking each day that God would act on their behalf – but nothing happened. But they persevered in prayer and kept hoping and watching and waiting for an opportunity to share with the King about the situation in Jerusalem and for permission to return there.

The breakthrough – the answer to their prayers – came when one day the king notices Nehemiah looking sad and heavy of heart and asks him why that is. Nehemiah had been waiting for this moment – boldly he informs the King about the desperate state of his home city and how he wanted to go back. The King's response is remarkable – not only did he agree to release Nehemiah from working as his cupbearer – he also was prepared to supply materials and men – provision and protection – for Nehemiah to return with.

Nehemiah's prayer in the opening chapter is really foundational for the whole book. This prayer for the welfare of Jerusalem was the seed bed out of which the whole enterprise grew. Throughout the whole book, Nehemiah's rule of action seems to have been pray, then act – and then continue to pray. Prayer before making a move and taking action must surely be the right order.

Abraham Lincoln said on one occasion:

“ I have been driven many times to my knees by the over whelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. I had concluded that my own wisdom and that of those about me was insufficient”

There lies on of the reasons why he is regarded as one of the greatest of American presidents. But long before Lincoln said these words this was the path that Nehemiah trod – and the reason for the quality of his leadership of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem lay here.

The walls took 52 days to build – a remarkable achievement – and when they were completed

Nehemiah immediately declared:

“This work has been done with the help of our God”.

So indeed it was.

But it was very hard work – it was a real battle at points in every sense. It was God's work – but carried out by the dedication, commitment and sacrifice of God's people.

How do we get the right balance between those two?

Hopefully our focus today will help us with this question.

We pick the story up with Nehemiah arriving in Jerusalem – a city that he loved in his heart - but had never before visited.

We will read 11 – 20 in two sections – first 11 – 16 (Read it)

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and initially rested for three days – the trip from Susa would have taken at least three months.

He then took a tour of inspection at night time on horseback.

He went around the whole city, going out of the valley gate taking in the state of the walls before returning to the same entrance.

It was just as his brother had told him – the walls were in ruins and the gates were burned. In some places so great was the ruin and devastation that he had to dismount from his horse and stumble over the wreckage himself.

In the course of that night, while others slept, Nehemiah – wide awake, burdened, and conscious of the ruin and desperate need all around him – fully grasped the situation and contemplated the magnitude of the task to which God had called him to.

Nehemiah was courageous enough to face the facts – face the size of the task – calculate what needed to be done – and then rise to the task before him.

Nehemiah was realistic about the challenge – but once he had put his hand upon the plough – he would never look back – nor take his hand off the plough until he was able to say “It is finished”.

That was his vision and goal – and that night he committed himself wholeheartedly to it.

After the inspection of the walls on his own, his first task was to get those Jews still living in Jerusalem to realise that the current state of this great city was actually a reproach to the honour and the name of their God.

Nehemiah knew he had to challenge the people of God to snap out of their apathy and hopelessness – to get them to see that this great task of rebuilding the wall was their corporate calling and responsibility.

This is how it happened:

READ NEHEMIAH 2 verses 17 – 20.

What strikes you about how he addresses the people?

Is not Nehemiah honest, straightforward, and God focused.

As he did in his prayer in Chapter 1 – he immediately identifies with his people – and is prepared to lead from the front and not as one who pushes from behind.

He urges his people to join him in this great task:

“Come let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem” he declares.

He begins his speech by stating how bad the problem actually is – he is realistic – as we must always be when assessing a situation.

But alongside that he is also a man of vision and faith.

He sees not only what is – but also what can be.

How was he able to stir faith and enthusiasm among those listening?

The answer is that he gives a testimony – a testimony of how the gracious hand of God was upon him and how He had brought him to Jerusalem for the task of rebuilding the walls.

The depressed and demotivated population of Jerusalem had listened with wonder to the marvellous answers to prayer – the way in which a heathen king had not only released Nehemiah - this servant Jew - for the task - but had also supplied protection for the journey and, on arrival, provided all the timber needed for the rebuilding project.

They had no doubt that standing before them was a man who trusted deeply in God and also one who they could trust to lead them.

His confidence was infectious – his zeal for God and his love for the people meant there was now some hope among the people and it was suddenly rising. The result was that it led to them declaring together (verse 18) - “Let us start rebuilding”.

It then states something worth thinking on:

“So they began this good work”

What made this a “good work”.

What makes “work” – a particular activity and task done individually or corporately – “good” in God’s estimation?

Here are my thoughts – I would be interested in yours on this.

I believe it is good when God has shown that He wants it done – it is His will – it is in line with what he has revealed to us about his character and calling.

It is also good when the motive of those doing the work is out of “Love for God and of other people” –

when it is done primarily for the glory of God, for the honour of His name, for the welfare of others.

This was clearly a good work – it was desperately needed for the welfare of the city - and Nehemiah's heart was clearly to glorify God and to serve the people by doing it.

Before we move on to Chapter 3 and consider what this rebuilding meant in practice – we must note – for Nehemiah certainly tells us – that as God's people take that step to do His work and will – to engage in His good work - there will inevitably be opposition to it.

Did you see that following the declaration that the people are going to start rebuilding something significant happens.

In verse 10 of Chapter 2 we are told that even before Nehemiah arrived Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite and Gresham the Arab were clearly disturbed at the news that the King has sent somebody to help the Israelites. As soon as the news emerges that they have now come together and collectively they are going to start rebuilding the walls - they immediately make a response. They ridicule them – they laugh and mock the Jews – belittling both their plans and even accusing them (falsely) of rebelling against the king.

This was just the beginning – opposition to the building of the wall once it actually started was relentless – as we shall see over the coming weeks.

If we ask the question “how did the walls get finished” – the answer is this: with great difficulty, through hard work, perseverance and determination in the face of constant opposition. This will become clear over the next three weeks – but it is important to highlight now that one reason that working for the kingdom and honour of God is hard is that it is always opposed in some form.

Let us then consider how the work began and consider Chapter 3.

At first glance it is tempting to quickly skip this Chapter.

It gives us a list of unpronounceable names and places which we won't read out aloud. It gives the details of how every section of the wall was being rebuilt – at least 39 different groups of workers were involved.

The workers were of all kinds of people and professions – there were priests – including a high priest – temple servants, goldsmiths, merchants, officials, masters, servants, men and woman.

Why is this here in such detail, and can it say anything to encourage and challenge us now – given that we are not planning to embark on a corporate building project?

Let me try and answer that by asking a simple question:

What motivated Nehemiah to urge the people to rebuild?

Remember that in the Old Testament Jerusalem is the city of God.

By the time we get to Nehemiah it is the end of the Old Testament time line – and it is desperate that the city which had once been the centre of God's dealings with His people lay in ruins and disgrace.

This was not merely a reproach to the Jews who were living there – it was a reproach to the honour and the name and the glory of God.

So – it was this that brought the people together to work.

We are now New Testament believers under the new covenant through Jesus Christ. The temple and city of God have a different meaning for us now.

But we worship the same God as Nehemiah, and there should be a unity of vision and purpose in all we do now as there was then.

We are to work, individually and collectively, for the glory of God. We should share the same vision of seeing God's kingdom and glory come here on earth – and the desire of that must always be above our own glory and the building of our own little kingdoms.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray – how did that prayer begin?

“Our Father in heaven - may your name be honoured – may your kingdom come – may your will be done – here – on earth – including right where we are – as it is in heaven”

We don't ask God to join and bless our particular cause – do we?

No, rather we should join with His cause.

The moment you surrender to Jesus He enrolls you to His cause.

It is not:

“The primary outcome of this relationship is that my life will get better” – but rather it should be:
“The primary outcome of this relationship is that I am dedicated to the cause of God’s kingdom and the glorifying of Jesus Christ”

This then should determine the nature and purpose of our vision and work and touches all that we do individually and corporately.

Paul the apostle summed up this New Testament perspective when he declared:

“Whatever you do – whether in word or deed – do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3 v 17)

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10 v 31)

Eugene Peterson said this:

“ The Biblical text is not a word to be studied in the library but a voice to be believed , loved and adored in the workplace and the playground, on the streets and in the kitchen”.

Which is why all we do should be for the glory of God. That is why we must not divide what we call the secular and the sacred. Everything we do is from the perspective of “your kingdom come , your will be done”.

Let us look at Nehemiah Chapter 3 then from this New Testament perspective – let us make the connections between the “how they worked then” and the “how we should work now.”

There were 42 groups united in determination to finish the particular task allotted to them. They were all conscious of their next door neighbours – thankful for their co operation.

There was no division or competitiveness – no independent spirit – there was a united vision that they were clear about and working towards together.

Is this not relevant for us?

The book of Nehemiah is not only about a great leader – or about the work of God in the face of difficulty and opposition.

It is also a story about the restoration of God’s people and His kingdom here on earth.

It worth recalling as we read this book that the exile had been a devastating blow for God’s people. The destruction of the temple – the collapse of the City – the evacuation and exile of the people – all this had a crushing affect on the peoples faith.

They even questioned their status as God’s people.

So the book of Nehemiah is more about walls getting rebuilt – it is more significantly about the rebuilding of the shattered community who belonged to God.

So chapter 3 is significant because – for the first time for many tears - there is a renewed sense of solidarity and a shared purpose.

It is not just about clearing rubble and carting rocks around – there was something much bigger and significant happening.

It is like the story of a group of workers who were smashing up rocks.

Three were asked “What are you doing”

The first said “I am breaking up rocks”

The second said “I am earning money to feed my family”

The third said “I am helping to build a Cathedral”

The focus and motive of your work radically affects the way that you see what you are doing.

The people worked with a renewed vision that this work was for God’s glory. This was their inspiration – their motivation – it energised them and pushed them forward.

The wall then – against the odds – did get built in 52 days.

A question to finish:

Did the wall get built because of Nehemiah’s great leadership and the commitment and hard work of God’s people?

How would you answer that?

I would answer “yes” and “no”.

Nehemiah was a great leader – the people did work hard – but someone else is at work throughout the whole process.

Gods hand was on that wall right from the outset with Nehemiah’s heart being stirred back in Persia and that continues right through to the last brick being laid.

It is God’s work – through the hard work of His people.

We need to keep this balance in our thinking and actions and avoid two extremes.

One extreme is thinking that it is all God’s work.

This is summed up in the expression “Let go and Let God” – a phrase seen on many a Christian poster usually with a bird soaring through the air. There is a truth there for us and its strength is to encourage

us to depend upon God. But its weakness is that we could miss that God does want to work through us for his purposes.

The other extreme is the thinking – even if it is not said – that actually it is all down to us and our hard work. This easily leads to self confidence and self reliance and overwork. What can then happen is that what we do becomes – subtly - about our own little kingdom rather than God's.

We must avoid both extremes.

We need to look and learn at how the wall did get finished.

It was Gods work – without Him the rebuilding work would not have even started. Nehemiah acknowledges as much at the completion when he declares:
“Surely this work has been done with the help of our God”.
And it was also through the hard work and united effort of God's people.

Let us keep reflecting and learning from this as we continue to work out what it means to say “Your will be done”

Let us be encouraged by the Sovereign hand of God upon the hard work, sacrifice and unity of His people as work hard together.

Let us pray and play our part in seeing God's kingdom come on earth now – where we live and work and in all that we do.