



Look! The walls of protection lie in ruins.

**Main Point:** Have you ever looked at your life (both your inward or your outward life) and cried out to God in despair, 'my life lies in shambles?'

Then the book of Nehemiah is for you! We'll spend four weeks in the book of Nehemiah, during which we'll pass through four stages:

- (1) Disillusionment and despair leads to corporate action
- (2) Opposition and hostility strengthen determination so construction continues
- (3) Resilience despite opposition culminates in honouring God's law
- (4) Celebration is challenged by the grim reality of human failure

## Intro |

If you have been doing jigsaw puzzles and reading memoirs of inspiring people, then you are going to love the story of Nehemiah. Not only am I currently working on a jigsaw puzzle, I have just finished reading Corrie Ten Boon's book *The Hiding Place*.

Reading the personal memoirs of people who have behaved in an inspiring way, cannot help but inspires us. And I think you'll all agree, being inspired is especially important at the moment.

Whether it be the difficulty of leading a church towards growth when no-one is actually allowed to physically come to church!

Or, despair that we are unable to see our family and friends;

Or, discouragement that a family member has not yet reconciled or acknowledged the Lord;

Or, a sense of disillusionment that our world continually chooses to reject God's moral laws.

I am not alone in my struggle with a feeling of despair over how vulnerable we all are, not only as a church community, but in our personal lives.

And so, I find myself drawn to the characters in the Bible who experienced the same feelings.

A few weeks ago, we looked at Habakkuk.

Last week, we saw how Daniel applied the principles taught by God's prophets, to form a strategy for how he would conduct himself in his ungodly context.

Today, we'll step into the world of Nehemiah, and see that he too spent many days mourning the desolation and ruin of his beloved city, Jerusalem ... before being prompted to adopt a God-given strategy on how he must respond.

When we open our Bible and discover Nehemiah's story, it is like we are unlocking the cover of his personal diary.

We'll experience his anguish, almost seeing the tear stains on the page, and feel his passion and zeal as he works out God's assignment.

Yes! We are in for an emotional rollercoaster as we follow Nehemiah's story.

**Point 1 | Nehemiah's despair caused prayerful intercession, which inspired courageous risk and a call to action.**

So where are we in the story of God?

Even though the book of Nehemiah reads like excerpts from his personal diary, it is more likely that Ezra, the priest, stole Nehemiah's diary and inserted them into his book.

I say that because Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book.

The story is set after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and took many of the people into exile.

About 50 years later there was a return of some Israelites to Jerusalem, and this is the story of what happened when they rebuilt the city and their lives there.

Specifically, the book (both Ezra and Nehemiah) focuses on three key leaders who led the rebuilding efforts. There is Zerubbabel, then Ezra and then Nehemiah.

First Zerubbabel led a large group of people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

Then about 60 years later, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem to teach the Torah and rebuild the community, and then he's followed by Nehemiah who leads the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

We are going to pick up the story, and zero in on Nehemiah's efforts. But we need to keep in mind, that both Zerubbabel and Ezra had already started the effort many years earlier.

Nehemiah is not a priest. He is not a prophet. He is cup bearer (think butler) serving the Persian King.

When he hears about the ruined state of Jerusalem's walls, he is overwhelmed by the report that God's people are struggling. So, he sets his face towards praying, fasting and interceding for his nation.

His prayers are literally begging God to reveal, *'What can I do in this time, in this season, to hasten the return of God's people to the promised land, to pave the way for the Messiah to come?'*

Look at verse 6. Notice that he intercedes in the same manner that Daniel interceded – he confesses the sins of his people and reminds God of his promise for his people to return to Jerusalem.

**"... listen to my prayer! .... I confess that we have sinned against you. ... Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honouring you."** (1:6a, 11)

And God responds by granting favour to Nehemiah's earnest plea. King Artaxerxes permits him to return to rebuild the walls, even providing an escort and letters of protection (v9).

**Point 2 | With God's favour Nehemiah calls God's people to rebuild the walls of protection around Jerusalem.**

The first step that Nehemiah takes, after arriving in Jerusalem is to assess the damage (2:11-14).

He goes out in secret, surveying the wall, then returns to address the leadership,

**“You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace.”** (2:17).

Now, we have to keep in mind that the Jewish leaders had already been involved in building the temple and the wall for 72 years. So, you can imagine how they felt about this young butler from Persia coming along and telling them how the wall needed to be repaired.

That’s why, Nehemiah needed to tell them how God’s gracious hand had moved the King.

Rather than saying “What would you know about building walls?”, they discerned that God had anointed, or divinely appointed, Nehemiah for the job and threw their full support behind him.

In verse 18 they responded, “Yes, let’s rebuild the wall” and together began the good work.

Even at this early stage, while the vision is still just a twinkle in everyone’s eyes, there are those who feel threatened by their new-found enthusiasm.

Three non-Jewish regional governors feel very threatened by the building campaign. Their names are: Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite and Geshem the Arab (1:10).

They do not hesitate to voice their opposition, by “scoffing contemptuously” against the proposed plans. We’ll get to know them more next week.

But let us notice Nehemiah’s response,

**“The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall.”** (v20)

OK, well lots of history ... what has all this got to do with us?

**Point 3 | It is our responsibility to ensure we are guarding our heart, protecting it from attacks of the enemy**

Let’s put this historical story and overlay it onto today’s world and in so doing, apply it into our lives.

Jerusalem, the City of God, was the site of the Temple of God, which for us is in our heart. The good news of the Gospel is that God is no longer confined to a building. Rather, He has sent His Spirit to dwell within us - in our heart.

Yet, we learn from the wisdom literature, that we are responsible to **“guard our heart with all diligence for out of it flow the issues of life.”** (Proverbs 4:23 and Proverbs 25:28)

When Nehemiah talks about walls and gates, he was talking about the barriers and boundaries of protection which stop the enemy from gaining access into their land – for at the heart of their land stood their most treasured possession – the Temple of God.

Our most precious possession also lies at the core of our being: our heart in which the Spirit of God dwells.

So, walls represent the boundaries which protect our heart from attacks of the enemy.

We learnt just last week, in Paul’s final words to the Ephesians, that our enemies are not people, but rather evil spirits who attack us, so we give up in our fight of faith.

Equipped with this understanding, let us pull out some important portions of Nehemiah’s story.

**Step 1: Accept the reality that there are areas of our lives which are exposed to the enemy**

Nehemiah received word that although Temple rebuilding campaign had been going on for 72 years, the wall was still in shambles.

He didn’t throw his hands up in despair and say, “Oh well, all hope is lost. I guess God will do it in his own time, in his own way. I’ll just keep serving wine to the king.”

## **Step 2: Humbled himself before the Lord, seeking God's wisdom and what his appropriate response should be**

No, he humbled himself, and asked God what his response should be.

He entered a season of mourning – which, thankfully, was mixed with intercession.

Although his prayer journey involved trudging through the valley of despair, he kept walking up the other side. And somewhere along the way, a seed of courageous hope was lodged in his heart, that God would use him to do something for his nation.

## **Step 3: Survey the damage and identify the points of vulnerability which need building and repair**

As soon as he arrived in Jerusalem, while it was still dark, he went out and assessed the damage.

We too need to ask the Spirit of God to identify the areas in our lives where our walls of protection have been damaged – for these are our areas of vulnerability.

One of the most effective strategies of the enemy is to attack us in the areas of lives where we are weak. Whether it be weakness in our thought life, weakness in the habits we have created in our routine, or weakness in our self-control, lack of patience or inability to control our anger ... God's enemies know the areas in which we are most vulnerable. Therefore, we need to work hard to reinforce these areas, so they are strong enough to withstand devil's onslaught.

### **Application | God chooses to work through faulty humans, because our times of testing build a stronger more resilient faith**

Over the course of the next four weeks, I hope to identify each of the four dominant themes highlighted in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

And the first theme is this:

While some stories in the Bible focus on God's sovereign hand guiding the course of events – that is not the emphasis in Nehemiah.

Rather, by detailing the very personal thoughts, motives and disappointments of this cupbearer come project manager, we are given a glimpse of God's preparedness to work through the desires and failures of His people – teaching them how to be actively involved in their faith-building work despite significant opposition and attack.

Even though we are still at the first portion of Nehemiah's story, we can already see his tenacity to face the overwhelming obstacle of building a wall (that had already been progressing for 72 years). This, in many ways, is a powerful graphical depiction of the opening verses of the book of James:

**"When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete needing nothing."** (James 1:2-4)

May this season of testing be an opportunity to resume construction of building strong walls of protection against all the attacks of the enemy.

### **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

1. Survey the wall: In prayer and meditation ask the Lord Jesus to reveal the areas of vulnerability are in your inward life.
2. Humble yourself before God: Ask the Lord to forgive you for these areas of weakness.
3. Begin construction: Go to the word of God and find Scriptural promises which remind you of God's promise and power to protect you in these areas.
4. Recognise construction takes time: Continually declare (both out aloud and in your heart) God's promises until these become a firm and strong barrier against the enemy's attacks.