

January Teaching Theme: The Book of Nehemiah

讲员 Speaker: Pastor Will

题目 Topic: “Project Rebuild.”

经文 Scripture: Nehemiah 2-3

Monthly Theme: As we enter a new year, we will spend some time walking through the book of Nehemiah over the next nine weeks. Although Nehemiah is its own book in our English Bibles, the whole book is actually Ezra-Nehemiah together. So as we approach Nehemiah, we have to keep in mind that we are coming into the story 3/4th of the way through. If we go back to the beginning of the story in Ezra, we are told that God moved King Cyrus' heart to let the Israelites return to their land to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Jeremiah (Ezra 1). The hope that exile will not be forever should trigger the reader to pick up all the other prophetic hopes of return, including hope for the Messianic King, God's presence in the Temple, and God's Kingdom to be established. We must keep these hopes in mind as we read to the story to properly understand both the ups and downs. Most characters in the Biblical narrative, including Nehemiah, are deeply flawed individuals who have a mix of successes and failures - just like you and me. And this mix of success and failure we will keep confronting as we move through the story of Nehemiah. Let's see what we can learn from Nehemiah's story.

一月 **January:** 尼希米記 **Nehemiah**

January 2nd – 尼希米記: 尼希米的祈禱 The Prayer (尼希米記一章 Nehemiah 1)

January 9th - 尼希米記: 城牆工程 The Project (尼希米記二至三章 Nehemiah 2-3)

January 16th - 尼希米記: 敵黨擾阻 The Opposition (尼希米記四章 Nehemiah 4)

January 23rd – 尼希米記: 民生貧苦 The Poor (尼希米記五章 Nehemiah 5)

January 30th - 尼希米記: 敵黨陰謀 The Adversary (尼希米記六章 Nehemiah 6)

Resources:

[Sermon Video](#)

[Sermon Slides](#)

[Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah \(Bible Project\)](#) [English]

[Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah \(Bible Project\)](#) [Mandarin]

* If your group hasn't watched the overview video yet, please do so. *

Primary Claim: Any Kingdom building must be grounded in prayer, formed by God's grace, and done in community. From this place, we will know what “walls” to build and what “walls” not to build.

Discussion Questions (Pastor William R. Horne):

- (1) Read Nehemiah 2-3 together. What observations do you make, and what stands out to you? How would you summarize the passage?

How to Rebuild:

- (2) What are some strategies we see from Nehemiah for grounding our life and work in prayer?

(3) We see throughout Nehemiah 2 that Nehemiah rightly recognizes that his opportunity for action is only brought about by “God’s gracious hand.” How should this reality shape how we see and go about life and our opportunities?

(4) Nehemiah 3 makes clear that Nehemiah’s rebuilding effort took the whole community. What strategies can we use to live our lives plugged into community and pursue change together?

Walls to Rebuild:

(5) Pastor Will argued that there are three walls we need to rebuild (1) The Wall of King Jesus Reputation, (2) The Wall of Protection from “the Enemy,” and (3) The Wall of the Next Generation. Share any reflections you have on these “walls” and thoughts on how we can “rebuild” these “walls.”

Walls NOT to Rebuild:

(6) The movements and pattern of Ezra-Nehemiah show us that the wall we should NOT rebuild is the “wall” of excluding others. How can we prevent such a wall from being built? How can we build bridges of healing for those who have been excluded and hurt by the church (even to those who oppose the work of the church)?

Important Notes (Pastor William R. Horne):

Notes on Q1: As you read through this chapter, make sure you recall the context from both the [Monthly Theme](#) section and the [Bible Project video](#). Context is key to understanding the movements of the story. (Also, feel free in your reading to just read Nehemiah 2 and take note of the repetitive form of Nehemiah 3, listing names and roles).

Notes on Q2: In Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah lamented both his sin and his communities sin, fasted, prayed, and repented. Nehemiah ends his prayer asking for God to bring about an opportunity for action, saying, “Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” You will notice that Nehemiah prays for “success today,” but we are informed at the beginning of chapter 2 that 4 months passed from when Nehemiah prayed in the month of Kislev to when he received an answer in the month of Nisan. **Prayer is not simply a transaction between the human and divine, but a journey with God.** As we seek to build Kingdom shaped lives, we pray for “success today,” trusting God to bear the fruit in his timing. At a minimum, Nehemiah’s story should encourage us to be people who continually and constantly pray, even when we have yet to see the answers. Nehemiah even prayed mid-conversation with the King in Nehemiah 2:4-5 “The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”” **Here, Nehemiah exemplifies what it looks like to stay in a posture of prayer, seeking God at every turn - even in the small moments in conversation.**

Notes on Q3: Any effort of building eternal Kingdom things must happen out of a posture of prayer and the move of God’s gracious hand. This opportunity did not come about on account of Nehemiah’s merit and hard work, but by God’s grace alone - and Nehemiah rightly recognizes this. We must operate from this same place, recognizing God’s grace as the soil from

which all fruitful action is birthed. We will inevitably fail when we act from our own will and power. But, when we act surrendered to God's guidance - we will bear much fruit. When we recognize God's grace as the foundation of our opportunities, we will be formed by grace and operate out of a posture of gratitude. From this place, we will be empowered to treat others with the same grace shown to us by God and act with confidence in God's walking with us. As the LORD told the prophet Zechariah concerning Zerubbabel rebuilding the temple 60 years before Nehemiah, 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty." And as with Nehemiah, God's grace flowing to us through prayer must lead to action. Now that God has answered his prayer, giving him the opportunity to return to Jerusalem, he returns, assesses what needs to be done, makes a plan, and calls the community together to rebuild. Nehemiah's prayers do not stay in the comforts of the King's palace in Babylon, but they move him to action in the streets of Jerusalem.

Notes on Q4: Everyone has a part to play in the work of the church and Kingdom action in the world. It is community work! This should encourage us to seek community and partnership in any effort of change or building we pursue. Even at the most basic level of individual change - we need people in our corner to encourage us and keep us accountable for lasting change. To do the work of the Church, we must come together, united in one purpose, to live out and act as witnesses to the beautiful news that Jesus is the King. The New Testament calls all of the body of believers to the role of "priest," - that we all together represent God to the world. Long-lasting, effective action must be done together in community. And we as the Church of Jesus the Christ must operate out of deep unity.

Some strategies:

- (1) Invest in deep friendship with a few people where you can be fully vulnerable and accountable.
- (2) Find a mentor and find some to mentor.
- (3) In any and everything you are doing, if there is a way to include others in the process, do so. Why do it alone if you can do it with others?
- (4) Give people the "benefit of the doubt," making your first instinct to seek understand of where the other is coming from or that if something was hurtful, it wasn't intentional. Maintain unity wherever possible. If unity isn't possible for the sake of truth, disagree with grace and care.
- (5) Always ask the questions, how can I love this person better? How can I give every person I encounter a deep sense of "belonging"?

Notes on Q5:

(1) *The Wall of King Jesus Reputation:*

As you read through the Psalms you will find multiple places where the walls of Jerusalem are tied to the reputation of Israel's God - Yaweh. For instance, Psalm 48:1-3 says "Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth, like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King. God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress." Here we see that Jerusalem's defense is tied closely with Yahweh's reputation as their fortress. If the walls of the citadel are destroyed the perception of Yaweh is diminished. For Israel, God's glory and fame

among the nations was tied to the security of Jerusalem from enemy attacks. So it is with the Church today, the health of the church reflects to the world what King Jesus is like. When there is a mismatch between the life of the Church and the character of God, then God's reputation in the world at large is diminished. Has God's character and action in the world changed? No. But, has his reputation been damage by our lack of living well as the people of God? Most certainly, yes.

(2) The Wall of Protection from the Enemy:

Protection from enemies might be the most obvious reason one builds a wall in times past, but it's important we note what enemy it is we want protection from. Too often we fall to the logic of the world and build walls to keep out people we perceive as enemies, instead of protecting ourselves from the actual enemy. Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:12 "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Paul understood that there was a spiritual battle going on, behind the evil we see in the world. Thus, to take a stand against the devil's schemes, one must not look to the physical person doing the action, but see the dark spiritual forces behind the action. This is the type of wall we need to rebuild, not one that excludes people, but one that recognizes the schemes of the Satan and refuses to be deceived. One of the key ways Satan attacks the Church of Jesus Christ is to influence the ways in which we think about and see the world, ourselves, and others.

(3) The Wall of the Next Generation:

Continuing to look at Psalm 48, we see that the walls of Jerusalem stand as a symbol to the next generation. Psalm 48:12-14 "Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end." Jerusalem's walls stood as a symbol of the faithfulness and protection of God to the next generation. We too, as the church, must rebuild the right walls that we might tell them to the next generation. One of the key ways to begin this work is to take a posture of listening.

Notes on Q6: To see this failure clearly in Nehemiah's story, we have to look at the whole story of Ezra-Nehemiah to see the patterns develop. In the first movement of the story back in Ezra 4, we encounter a group of grandchildren Israelites who were left in the land, that want to help Zerubbabel rebuild the temple. Ezra 4:2 says, "they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." And how does Zerubbabel respond? Ezra 4:3 "But Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us." Now, recall the prophets spoke about a day when all the tribes of Israel and all the nations of the world would come together in Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. If this is going to be the great hoped for arrival of the Kingdom - Zerubbabel missed the mark acting against these prophetic visions. Zerubbabel's rejection of these people lead them to oppose the rebuilding efforts - which sounds a lot like those who have been hurt by the church doesn't it? Fast-forward 60 years to second movement of the story and we encounter Ezra the Priest, also rejecting those he see's as "outsiders" or "enemies" from participating in the community of God's people.

In Ezra 9-10, we see Ezra and the leaders make a decree that any Israelite who married a foreign wife must divorce her and send his wife and children away. And though Ezra had good intentions, his actions did not match God's heart and the book of Ezra ends in a mess. God never commanded Ezra to do any of this, but it was the leaders of Jerusalem own decision to make the decree and use Scripture to bolster it up. We know throughout the Scriptures, including the contemporary prophet Malachi that God was opposed to divorce. Ezra's good intentions of rebuilding the community ended in rejection of the "outsiders" in the a way God did not intend. Now, return to our story in Nehemiah 2-3, another decade later we see Nehemiah speaking the same way to 'outsiders.' Neh 2:19-20 "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it." Now, on first glance, Nehemiah's rejection seems legit as these people are mocking and ridiculing the people rebuilding, but you have to remember the pattern of rejection in the story. These people are part of the people in and round Israel who have been rejected and excluded from the rebuilding efforts for the past 70 years. Again, this is very similar to those hurt by the church whose children will now oppose the church as well - the opposition is rooted in a history of failure to include people in what God is doing. And Nehemiah's response further provokes these people's opposition.

And again, it is telling to hear the words of the contemporary prophets next to this story, like Zechariah who tells us the New Jerusalem will be a city without walls. Zech 2:1-5 "Then I looked up, and there before me was a man with a measuring line in his hand. I asked, "Where are you going?" He answered me, "To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is." While the angel who was speaking to me was leaving, another angel came to meet him and said to him: "Run, tell that young man, 'Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of people and animals in it. And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,' declares the Lord, 'and I will be its glory within.'" Here we see Jerusalem will have no walls because of the "great number of people" included in God's city and that God himself will be it's protection. Again, if this story is to trigger the hopes of the Messianic King and Kingdom, it continues to fall short of it's vision. Knowing this history and the pattern of rejection in the book - how could Nehemiah gone about this differently? Now, maybe at this point Nehemiah couldn't have stopped the opposition he will face in chapter 4, but how could he have built bridges of healing? How could open the door for his adversaries to repent?