

Nehemiah 3

God's Word, Our Story: learning from the book of Nehemiah (ed DA Carson & Kathleen B Nielson)

Ch 2 Laboring for a God who fights for us, Tim Keller

So as I said at the beginning, these are not my words. With a very few adaptations they are Tim Keller's words. It feels very different to the Sunday at the start of the year when I stood here and read to you the sermon that Alan had hoped to deliver, and of course the big difference is that Alan had prepared that sermon with us in mind, whereas Tim Keller clearly didn't write this chapter for Davidson's Mains, at least I don't think so. And I don't know how you feel about that. But when I came to work through this yesterday it seemed to me that if we approach this morning in the same way we always approach Scripture together – asking God, what is your word for me today, what is your word for us today – then he is every bit as able to speak to us through a chapter of a Tim Keller book this morning as he is through means we are more used to. He is the Living God and this is the Living Word. So let's pray together.

Lord, as we come to look at this passage and to reflect on it, we thank you for all the different ways you speak to us, all the different people you use, and we ask that through your Holy Spirit you would open our hearts and minds to hear what it is you have to say to us this morning. Amen.

.....

P51 A city full of ministers

* We've spent quite a lot of time thinking about this in the last couple of years. We've committed to team ministry at DMPC but I do wonder this morning if God isn't just emphasising this point to us today, with the fact that we come to this particular message today and our 'minister' is unable to be here. What is God saying? Have we really taken on board that ministry – and I don't just mean Sunday ministry – is the work of all the people?

.....

P56 finish

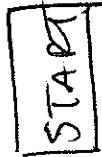
* Nehemiah 3 paints a beautiful picture of God's people fully engaged, working side by side to rebuild the Jerusalem wall. The task required all the people, with their various skills. Similarly, every Christian has a ministry and particular gifts needed for the building up of the church. So a couple of things for us to think about as we finish. What ministry has the Lord given you during this season of your life? How are you using the gifts he has given you? Ask God in the coming days, and give thanks to him too for the people that you are glad to have working alongside you.

Laboring for a God Who Fights for Us

Nehemiah 3-4

Intro

Tim Keller



We are studying Nehemiah not only to learn from the book itself but also to learn *how to learn* from the book. Some of the Old Testament books—such as Nehemiah and Esther—are difficult to study because they show the weakness in our approach to Scripture.

For example, when we read the book of Nehemiah as Christians today, this is what we see: the Jews came back from Babylon and had to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. They faced tremendous opposition. Nonetheless, they stayed with it. They organized well. They prayed. They asked God *not* to forgive their enemies (did I read that right?). In the end, they persevered and got the wall built.

Now, how do we apply that to our lives? The answer seems to have to do with leadership and organizational principles. The

third chapter, for example, is often said to teach delegation. If you have a big job to do, divide it into parts and delegate them to others. The fourth chapter then teaches how to solve problems—how to overcome opposition and so forth.

But this answer shows the shallowness of our approach to Scripture. It shows that we tend to come to the Bible the way we come to *Aesop's Fables*. We read a story and then identify the moral of that story. So, when we read about David and Goliath, we see that the moral of the story is “The bigger they come, the harder they fall.” When we read Nehemiah, we get leadership principles. Well, obviously, it is true that the bigger they come, the harder they fall. And it is true we can get leadership principles out of Nehemiah. Yet certainly neither “moral” gets to the heart of the matter.

Studying a book like Nehemiah forces us to go back to what we understand the Bible to be. I’d like to show you two basic parts to the doctrine of Scripture. The Bible, on the one hand, is a human book, which means we don’t believe—as did Joseph Smith about *The Book of Mormon*—that it was written on golden plates by angels or by God himself. It was written by human beings who used Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew words. Therefore, we need to understand what those words meant and how those languages worked, because human beings used them to give us the message.

On the other hand, the Bible is a divine book. It was written by God; every word on the page is there because God guided the human author to write that word. That means the Bible is ultimately one story. It is one large story comprised of many little stories. There’s one large narrative arc, and everything in the Bible is moving and pointing along that arc.

The Ultimate Nehemiah and the Ultimate City

It is in this context that we come to Nehemiah. We know that this Nehemiah is pointing to the ultimate Nehemiah—the ultimate One who was in the palace, completely safe, and left all of that

to go out into danger to identify with his people. Jesus Christ, the ultimate Nehemiah, identified with us—not at the *risk* of his life but at the *cost* of his life—to make us citizens of the ultimate city.

We see this trajectory throughout the Bible. In Isaiah 26:1–2, Isaiah is looking forward to the city of God and says, “We have a strong city.” Right away, we think of Jerusalem. But then he says: “[God] sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in.” Even in the Old Testament, Jerusalem is a sign of something bigger that is yet to come. Not literal walls, but walls of salvation are going to protect us from sin and death itself. Not a physical city, but a spiritual city will come down out of heaven at the end of time and turn the heavens and earth into the new heavens and earth. So it is only when we put Nehemiah—or whatever part of the Bible we are reading—into that larger story and begin to see it pointing along the greater narrative arc that Scripture really begins to open up.

There is a certain sense in which we can’t directly apply Nehemiah to ourselves today. Is it right for the people of God to build a wall around themselves to keep out all the unbelievers—to be physically and culturally isolated? Is it right to call down curses on our enemies or to say to God, “Please don’t forgive them”? No, it isn’t.

Nehemiah was operating at a different stage in redemptive history, a point when God was bringing his salvation through people who existed as a nation-state—and a nation-state could not exist without a capital city with a wall around it. The wall provided the security needed for urban life to develop, creating a place for jurisprudence, commerce, and stable social structures. So Nehemiah is not just following his passion. He’s not just practicing good leadership and organizational skills to create economic prosperity for his particular people group. He knows that if God is to continue to do his work as the covenant God, the people have to be faithful to him. They have to be covenant people—not just a nation-state

with a capital city, but God's chosen people, with Jerusalem as the city of God where they worship in the temple and trace the promises of a king in David's line. In that stage of redemptive history, this is how God worked.

We also have to build up the people of God, but we do it differently today. We also need a wall around us, in a sense, so that we are helping people be holy and separate, but we do that by sanctification through the means of grace. They were building a temporary city with a physical wall; we are building the ultimate eternal city through conversion. That is what the New Testament tells us. We are making people citizens of that city through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we are building that city when we do the work of the church. When we begin to see the larger narrative arc and where the particular story fits in that narrative, then things start to open up.

With that in mind, we now turn to the third (and fourth) chapters of the book of Nehemiah.

One Whole Holy City

It's interesting to me that probably the most popular best-selling Christian book on the book of Nehemiah in the last twenty to thirty years is Chuck Swindoll's *Hand Me Another Brick*. He does not even cover chapter 3 in that book. I think you will understand why as you look at the chapter; it's long and feels tedious in places. And yet, the whole thing is precious. I love this chapter now that I understand what it is pointing to and where it fits in redemptive history.

What is extraordinarily impressive in this chapter, especially if you read it carefully, is that both men and women are working. You have both clergy and laity working. You have groups from different towns. You have groups from different classes. You have groups from different trades. You have rulers and workers, goldsmiths and merchants and perfumers. You have representatives from virtually every part of society, and you have one phrase

repeated over and over throughout the text: "next to him" (or "them").

Most scholars have noticed that this inclusiveness is part of a progression in the Bible, from God's working primarily through prominent individuals, such as Moses and David, to his working instead through the whole people of God. When you read the story of Moses, for example, it feels as if he is carrying the entire nation of Israel on his back. Time after time, the people go astray. They quickly forget God's commands and even more quickly forget their own promises to obey. Time after time, God says: "Stand aside, Moses. I am going to take them out." And time after time, Moses puts himself between the people and God, as it were, and says: "No, don't do that. Take me out instead."

When we come to Nehemiah, we see something different. Here is a task that the clergy cannot do by themselves. The clergy are working right next to everybody else. Everyone is participating. Everyone is doing the work. There has been a movement away from the ministry being done by just one or two leaders to it being done by the whole people of God. Rebuilding the people of God is the work of the whole people of God. Everybody has to do it.

What this means is pretty simple. It's pointing toward the fact that there is a progression in the history of redemption when it comes to holiness. The priests dedicated the wall—the Hebrew word is *qadash*—which means they pronounced it holy (Neh. 3:1). The priests pronounced it holy, but the whole people built it.

We see this progression in the history of redemption as we move through the Bible. In the earliest parts, God comes down temporarily. God appears to Jacob in his dream of the stairway, and when Jacob awakes, he names the place "Bethel," saying, "This is . . . the house of God" (Gen. 28:10–17). It is, and yet it isn't. God appeared there. His holy presence was there, but now it is gone. Bethel is not actually the house of God because it is not a place where God's presence resides in a sustained way.

Later, we see the tabernacle and the temple. Now God's holiness

dwells in a place. It dwells in the Holy of Holies, where the Shekinah glory cloud is over the ark of the covenant. God's actual presence, in a sense, resides in a fixed way in the midst of his people.

In the book of Isaiah, there is a fascinating prophecy about the future:

In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. The LORD will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain. (4:2–6 NIV)

This is astounding. We are told here about a time when the holiness of God—his Shekinah glory—will not be in a temple in the midst of the people, but rather over the *whole* people. It will be a day when all the people will be holy, a day when the glory of God will dwell in a group of people, not just in a building.

Then again, at the climax of the book of Zechariah, we read this:

On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty. (14:20–21 NIV)

In Zechariah's time, if a pot or utensil was to be used only for the Lord's work, it was inscribed "Holy to the Lord" and was put in the

tabernacle or the temple. But on "that day," even the bridles on the horses, even the pots in the kitchen, will say, "Holy to the Lord."

Someday, the holiness of God, the glory of God, will break out of the building, as it were, and all the people will be holy—a living temple. The whole city and everyone in it will be holy. It won't be just ethnic Jews, but every race in the city will be holy. There will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of God because they won't be called Canaanites anymore. Isaiah tells us that someday God will call Egypt "my people" and Assyria "my handiwork" (Isa. 19:25).

What are all these things looking toward? Most scholars believe that when, here in the book of Nehemiah, not just the temple but the whole city is called holy (11:1, 18)—with all the people working together—it is pointing in the direction of when Jesus Christ died on the cross and the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:50–51). Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter 2 say that we now are living stones being built together into a living temple. We have the Holy Spirit in us. The very thing that was once in the tabernacle is now somehow in us. Moses said, "Lord, show me Your glory," and God said, "No, it would destroy you" (see Ex. 33:18–20); yet the apostle John says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt [literally "tabernacled"] among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And again, 2 Corinthians talks about our "beholding the glory of the Lord . . . in the face of Jesus Christ" (3:18; 4:6).

Now, what does this mean? I do not exactly know what was literally happening in Nehemiah's day, but we do know that Nehemiah is pointing toward the future, when we are all prophets, priests, kings—a day when we all have the Holy Spirit—and this means two things. First, every Christian has a ministry, and, second, together we are one united whole.

A City Full of Ministers

First, we are all ministers, every single one of us. Just as Jerusalem could not be rebuilt with only the work of the clergy but required

the work of all the people, so Paul says over and over that every person has gifts. Everybody is different, and we need every person. We need every gift. We are the living stones being built into the temple of God, and there are no superfluous stones.

If God in his providence has drawn you together with a hundred people to be a church, then you are not there by accident. You have a gift that is needed. You have certain people whom you can speak to. You have certain hands you can hold because of your past experiences. You have certain hearts you can reach. There are certain people to whom you can be a prophet, a priest, and a king. There are certain ways you can build up the people of God, and you would not be there unless God wants to use your gift in that community. Unless all the gifts are used, the community cannot do the work God has given it to do.

The strength of this truth comes to me especially where Jesus says an amazing thing in Matthew 11:11: "Among those born of women"—which is pretty much everybody, isn't it?—"there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (NIV). I, and many commentators, have long wrestled with what this means, but it certainly seems to me to mean this: because the simplest Christian understands the gospel in a way that John the Baptist did not, because the simplest Christian has the Holy Spirit in a way that John the Baptist did not, because we live in a new stage of redemptive history when the veil has been ripped and we are the living temple—because of all these things, every single Christian today has capabilities of ministry that John the Baptist didn't have. Isn't that astounding?

Years ago, in seminary, I read a book by Michael Green called *Evangelism in the Early Church*. It was a tremendous paradigm-buster for me because he brought out a pretty simple fact that I should have already considered. He pointed out that the earliest church grew through evangelism, but he asked how that evangelism happened. It would be tempting to say that there were great

preachers in those days, and, if you were a Christian, you brought your non-Christian friends to hear the great preachers. Now there is no doubt that preaching was important, especially the kind of itinerant preaching Paul did, for example. But Green points out that it was dangerous to bring non-Christians to church because in many places you might all be dead the next day if someone brought the wrong non-Christian to church. So, how did you evangelize people? *Everybody evangelized people*. You did not rely on the great preachers. You did it yourself. Every single person in the body of Christ was necessary to do the work of ministry. The ministry of the people of God required all the people of God.

A City with One People

The second thing to notice here is the unity of the people. "Next to him . . . next to him . . ." The commentators go into all the names and explain who they are. There are men and women, ruling class and working class, merchants and clergy, all working together. This is a foretaste and a pointer to the fact that because we are holy, we are one. We are all one in Christ.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his exposition of Ephesians, looks at the place where Paul says, "For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you" (1:15–16a). In his exposition of this passage, Lloyd-Jones notes that Paul gives two evidences that the Ephesians are real Christians—they have faith in Christ and they love all the saints.¹

One of the things that is interesting about Lloyd-Jones's testimony is that he was a royal physician when he became a Christian; he worked for Lord Horder, the physician to the royal family. If he had stayed in that prominent role, he likely would have taken Lord Horder's position, which means he would have been in the House of Lords. Here is a young, brilliant Welshman who went to

¹ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, "The Tests of Christian Profession," in *God's Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1 to 2:3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 312–25.

medical school, became a doctor, and was on his way to the top. As a non-aristocrat, you could not have had a better career path than Lloyd-Jones did in the mid-1920s.

However, when Lloyd-Jones became a Christian, he decided he was called to the ministry. He left his incredibly promising medical career and took a little church in a poor fishing village in Wales. He was still a fairly young Christian, and he wrestled with doubts about his faith, saying that Satan would accuse him: "Very often Satan would come and suggest, 'How do you know you're a Christian?'" He didn't know what to say. But one day, after he had spent some time in Wales as a pastor in his little village, he turned around and said: "I want to know, Satan, why would I rather talk about Jesus with the humblest fisher woman in Wales? Why would I love doing that more than I love talking about medicine with my peers and other men who have gone to the same schools as me and are of the same social class?" Once he began saying that to Satan, the Devil didn't know what to reply and left him alone.²

Those who are not British must remember that Britain is a class-driven society compared to America, even today. In those days, it was very class-stratified, and when he went to that small Welsh village, Lloyd-Jones was hanging out with people five or six rungs below him on the social and educational ladder. But he suddenly realized that he had more in common with the humblest fisherwoman in his church in Wales than he did with people of his own status and education. He felt a bond with her, a bond with people very unlike him, that he did not feel with people who were like him racially, emotionally, socially, or educationally.

Identity has layers. My maternal grandfather was an Italian immigrant. I never met him. He died before I was born, but I understand that he was quite proud of being Italian. He loved being Italian. It was a major part of his identity. He did a lot of things—he was a butcher, a mushroom farmer, a pipefitter—but

² Ibid., 322–23.

his job just wasn't that important to him. It wasn't as foundational to his identity as his national background. However, his children were very different. My mother, for example, grew up in America and went to nursing school, and she was, in a very warranted way, quite proud of being a nurse, of being a professional. For her, being a professionally trained nurse was much more important to her identity than her Italian heritage. In other words, the layers of their identities were ordered differently.

For all of us, some things are closer to the foundation of our identity and some things are just a part of it. You might say, "Yes, of course, I'm Italian, but it's not as important as the fact that I'm a lawyer or a doctor or something like that." At the bottom of every person's heart there is an uttermost foundation. At the beginning of *The Two Towers*, the second *Lord of the Rings* movie, Gandalf battles the Balrog while they plummet down an incredible chasm—down, down, down, into the depths of the earth. The name of that place, in J. R. R. Tolkien's terminology, is "the uttermost foundations of stone." The uttermost foundations of stone is the bedrock, the bottom. You can't go any farther down. Everybody's heart, everybody's identity, has an uttermost foundation.

When you become a Christian, your conviction of sin and your experience of grace go all the way to the bottom—all the way to that uttermost foundation. Christ goes there, and no matter what happens, that foundation doesn't change. If you're Chinese and you become a Christian, you don't become an African Christian. You don't become a European Christian. You're a Chinese Christian. But your Christianity goes underneath your Chineseness. Likewise, it goes underneath your Italianness. It goes underneath your being a nurse or a lawyer. It goes underneath being an abused child. It goes underneath anything. It goes to the uttermost foundations.

Then, when you meet someone who has that same foundation—even though he or she is of a different race, a different class, a different education—you feel the bond. You say: "As different as

See H-5
etc

you are, you are more my brother. You are more my sister. I feel a bond with you, a bond that I don't have with people who don't have Christ, even though they are of my same ethnicity, same class, or same education."

"Next to him . . . next to him . . ." All these different people—people who otherwise wouldn't have worked together on anything—now are all together. In Christ, we are holy. In Christ, we all have gifts. In Christ, we are being built together into the temple.

FINISH * Pull together - what next?

A City Full of Prayer and Guards

Now, as we move on to Nehemiah 4, there are two other things to tell you about. First, this is an interesting and important instance of one of the main themes of the Bible that, again, comes to a conclusion on the cross—the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Notice that verse 9 says, "We prayed to our God and posted a guard" (NIV). Similarly, in Isaiah, there is an interesting place where Hezekiah the king knows he is about to die. He prays to the Lord to save him. God says to Hezekiah through Isaiah, "I have heard your prayer . . . I will add fifteen years to your life" (38:5 NIV). Then Isaiah adds this, "Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover" (v. 21). It is the same thing in both cases. I prayed to God, and God said: "I will heal you. Here, take your medicine." I prayed to God, and God said: "I will deliver you. Here, take your weapon and post a guard."

Over and over again in the Bible, we see this emphasis on God's sovereignty and human responsibility as two things that go together. We have a tendency to say that if God is really protecting you, you don't have to post a guard. And if you post a guard, then you don't really believe God is protecting you. But that's not right. My favorite example of this is in Acts 27. Paul is in a boat as a prisoner on his way to Rome, so both the sailors manning the boat and the soldiers escorting him are there with him. A terrible

storm comes up and rages for days. At one point, an angel of the Lord appears to Paul and tells him that no one sailing with him will die. So Paul tells everyone about it, saying, "There will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship" (v. 22).

Now, considering how well Paul knows his Bible, this means that he is absolutely certain that nobody is going to die. Deuteronomy 18:20 says that if a prophet gives a prediction that doesn't come true, he is to be killed. He is not speaking from the Lord. First Samuel 15:29 says God "is not a man, that he should change his mind" (NIV 1984). So if God tells a prophet something is going to happen, it is going to happen. And yet, just a few verses later, despite Paul's prophecy, the sailors get worried, sneak over to the lifeboat, and start to lower it into the water. Paul finds out about it, runs to the soldiers, and says, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31). Wait a minute. Why doesn't Paul say: "Hey, you know, God has promised that nobody is going to die, so it doesn't matter what you do. Take the lifeboat. Don't take the lifeboat. Go snorkeling if you want. Who cares?" No. He says, "We've all got to stay in the ship." What's going on here?

Both J. I. Packer, in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, and Don Carson, in his book *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, tackle this question. If you read those books, you get a grip on something that comes together in the cross. After the crucifixion, when Peter is preaching his very first sermon, he looks at the people around him in Jerusalem and says, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). On the one hand, it was absolutely certain that Jesus Christ was going to die, and at the same time, those who crucified him are utterly responsible for what they did. What you do matters, and you are responsible for it.

What this really means, on the one hand, is that God is completely in charge, no matter how bad things get, and, on the other hand, what you do matters. I know that intellectually we say: