

BUILDING FOR GOD



*A series of studies in the Old
Testament book of Nehemiah
by Pastor David Legge*

Compiled and Transcribed by Andrew Watkins

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Building For God - Chapter 1

"The Man For The Hour"

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Now we're turning to the first chapter of Nehemiah, and if you're not aware where it is you find Ezra, Nehemiah - two prophets together on common subjects - Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, and then come the Psalms, as the little song says that help you remember where some of these difficult books are - Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, and then comes the Psalms. So if you can find the Psalms, which isn't too hard, and then work your way back a few books you will find the prophet Nehemiah. The title of our study, as I've said is: 'Building For God', and our first study in chapter 1 this morning is: 'The Man For The Hour'.

Verse 1 of chapter 1: "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, That Hanani, one of my brethren", literally his brother, "came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there. Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. O LORD, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man", that is the King, "For I was the king's cupbearer".

I'm sure you have heard it said: 'What this church needs is...', or in a national, political context: 'If I were running the country, if I were the Prime Minister or the President, I would do...A...B...C...' - or the common one that we heard of recently: 'If that were my child, I know what I would do with them!'. We are surrounded, whatever environment of society we may reside in, by people who we can class as gripers, complainers, self-proclaimed prophets, or back seat drivers who think they know everything, but they're not in the driving seat. I think all of us would acknowledge in our sinful fallen humanity that it's very easy to analyse, to scrutinise, and talk about all the problems of the world and even of the church worldwide, or the church locally - but what the hour in which Nehemiah lived needed, and what our hour needs are not people who will just discuss all the problems of the universe, but people who will get up and do something about them! That is the need of the hour.

Nehemiah was a man such as that. Nehemiah saw the problem that was in Jerusalem - and yes, he was distressed, he analysed it, he scrutinised it, and he felt the great burden of it in his heart - but he didn't stop there wallowing in self-pity, but he got up and in the midst of his grief he took action and he did something about it. Now let me lay down very early in this study that there is a spiritual principle here - there are many spiritual lessons that we can derive from the story of Nehemiah and his little book, and the building of the walls of Jerusalem - but here is one first elementary principle, and it's this: whenever God wants to get work done He goes to people who are willing to do some work. He lays hold of people who are willing to do something! So many complainers and critics and self-proclaimed prophets and back seat drivers in the world and in the church are able to point out all the problems, but very few are willing to do something about it.

In Nehemiah's day there was a work to be done for Jehovah - and although, as you may know in the history of this context of the little book, there was a small remnant who had already returned to Jerusalem, there was much work that still needed to be done. In 536 BC we know that Zerubbabel and Joshua brought about 50,000 Jews back to Jerusalem. In 516 BC they rebuilt the temple, and in 457 there was a small revival under the prophet Ezra whose book is before Nehemiah. But now we've reached the year 445, and it's a new day, it's a new hour, it's a new generation of the people of God, and God was looking for a man for that hour. Someone to go to the ruined city to restore the walls, which signified safety and order - and the man to which God turned to in that hour was Nehemiah.

Now you might say: 'Well, who was Nehemiah?'. Well, as we look through this book we find him in three characteristics. First of all in this chapter we find him as the King's cupbearer. Then when he hears the call of God to build the walls of Jerusalem he becomes Nehemiah the builder. By the end of this book we find him as Nehemiah the Governor of the city - actually overruling in all the affairs, religious and social, within the city. But here in chapter 1, before God calls him in verse one as such, we find him as the cupbearer of the King - King Artaxerxes. Now the cupbearer was not just somebody like a saucer that you set your cup on, neither was it like a butler to the aristocracy or to royalty that we have with us today - but to be the cupbearer was to have great authority and responsibility. In fact, some have said it was a position of great influence - Nehemiah would have been a confidant to the king. The King, in quiet hours, when he felt free and relaxed, would be able to bounce off Nehemiah some ideas; so he had to be qualified with great wisdom and political aptitude. Some have said that he would have been an official of the court, wielding much power, and would have travelled around with the King on his various outings and excursions, and given him advice on great matters of the kingdom.

Let me say this to you, that the reason why God turned to Nehemiah was not his position. The reason why God turned to Nehemiah to be a man for the hour, were the characteristics that we see in chapter 1 that I want to bring before you this morning. What are they? Here they are, three of them: one, Nehemiah was a man of burden, he was a man upon whom the burden that weighed heavy on God's heart weighed heavy too. Two, he was a man of prayer, he put that burden in his heart into the articulation of the language of heaven, prayer before the throne of grace. Three, he was a man of action - he wasn't just a man who knew what to do, and knew to pray about what needed done, but he was a man willing to get onto his feet and do something about it! Because of those characteristics Nehemiah became the man for the hour.

How different this story might have been - the man and the story are inseparably wedded - how different it may have all turned out if the man that God turned to had not been a man like Nehemiah, of his great spiritual character and calibre. I think if ever a crisis hour matched a man for the hour, it is found in Nehemiah and the state of dereliction that is in the city of Jerusalem here. Let me say this: it's not only the man that makes the story, but as many of you will know in the circumstances in which you're living today, it is also the story that makes the man. The circumstances that we find ourselves in often betray our true character and show our true colours. Many things that come into our life that we think may be the breaking of us, happen to turn out to be the making of us.

Now Nehemiah gives us a graphic object lesson of the truths that lie behind the heart of all true service for God - and let me say to you this morning: if you heed these principles, you will be a successful builder in spiritual things for the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's deal with the first: he was a man of burden. Verses 1 to 3 show us that he lived in a state of dereliction around him. If we had time we could read you Psalm 79 that describes what the city was like after it had been taken into captivity and after the people had returned - this was the spirit of the situation: 'O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance; thy holy temple have they defiled; they have laid Jerusalem on heaps. The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be meat unto the fowls of the heaven, the flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth. Their blood have they shed like water round about Jerusalem; and there was none to bury them. We are become a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and derision to them that are round about us'. Such was the situation, and things hadn't got better - according to Nehemiah's hearing - since the people had come back into the land. From Jerusalem being a city of praise and glory, it has become a city of shame and reproach second to none even in the nation.

Now Nehemiah is the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. We must understand before we go on any further that ancient walls served many functions in old cities. If you would turn with me just for a moment to Deuteronomy 22, that I might read a verse from the law to you, to understand the principle of the wall around a house in the Old Testament, and also therefore it is reasonably concluded that this must be the principle around the wall of the city. Deuteronomy 22 and verse 8, and Moses gave the people from God the instruction: 'When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thine house, if any man fall from thence'. The idea of safety and protection so that no one on the top of the roof, your roof, would ever fall off and their blood wouldn't be upon your hands because you didn't build a fence or a wall around the roof. What we need to realise is that in ancient times, even in New Testament times, the roof was like a bachelor's pad - only not just for bachelors, but also for married people and families, and great generations of relatives. It was a place of communion, it was a place of retirement, we read in 1 Samuel 9 that Samuel communed with Saul upon the top of the house - a place of communion where people would get away from the family or from the affairs of business, and commune with one another about business matters or intimate details. It was a place of retirement, we read - quite humorously for some - in Proverbs 21:9: 'It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman in a wide house'. The idea of retirement, getting away from it all, whatever that 'all' may be.

A place of communion, a place of retirement, and then we go into the New Testament in Acts chapter 10 and verse 9 we read these words: 'Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour'. It was also a place of prayer, because you could get away from all the noise and you would probably be out under the sky and see the wonders of nature and feel nearer to God. You remember the Lord often went up into the mountain to pray - but in Matthew 10:27 we also read that the housetop was a place of testimony. I mean, Jesus said: 'What ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops'. It was a place to stand up to be heard and to herald some news, whether good or bad. So what I want you to see is the housetop that this wall was put around was a living area, or maybe a study area of meditation, an area of communion or retirement, of prayer, of testimony, but if you neglected the wall around that rooftop that special place could become a dangerous place, even a fatal place for those who are without, and even those who are young and careless within falling over the edge.

Now please retain that thought within your mind, because that same principle I believe was in the building of walls around cities, for protection and for security. It also primarily allowed the people in Jerusalem to cultivate their spiritual lives without any outside interference from other nations with pagan gods. I hope you understand: it was a place of safety not only physically, but spiritually. Now let me take the application like this to ourselves: we as believers, do we not, have walls of spiritual protection, spiritual security, that we put around ourselves in the disciplines that we're meant to exercise as God's children. I could name a whole lot:

baptism is one, the reading of God's word is another, prayer daily before God, witnessing, fellowship, the breaking of bread, the prayer meeting - we could go on and on and on and talk about the many exercises that are encouraged for our spiritual well-being in the New Testament. They are there for our protection and cultivating of our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now before we enter in this morning or in subsequent weeks to Nehemiah's struggle to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, maybe there are some of us here today that need to examine the state of our own spiritual walls. How are they? How is your communion with God? How are your quiet times of retirement with God? How is your prayer life with God? How is your testimony and witness with God? Are you being influenced by the world without? Are you careless and trying to go into the world from within? Are there are some gates that you have left open for the enemy to slip through? Has neglect of something loosened a brick or a stone, exposing a gap for the enemy to squeeze through? Have the roots of the weeds of compromise grown into the foundation walls, and are almost ready to tumble them down?

Now listen: if your spiritual walls, your spiritual disciplines are in need of repair - whether it's just one brick, or a whole section of the wall - now is the time to implement the spiritual principles that we find in God's man for the hour, Nehemiah. Here's the first: he was a man of burden. Now listen, if there were personal walls that I have been talking about, there also were national walls - and as we look out, and if you remember what I have read to you about some of the bishops of the Church of England and the House of Lords, you would have to say that not only are our own personal spiritual walls at times derelict, but nationally the walls of the so-called church of Jesus Christ are crumbling down and corroding! I want to ask you in the light of Nehemiah's great burden for his home city and the walls around it: do you have a burden for the church of Jesus Christ and the awful state that it finds itself in this very day?

The wall building didn't begin with the mixing of cement, do you know what it began with? It began with a burden in the heart of a man called Nehemiah. He was called to build the wall, yes, but it all started first and foremost where he had to weep, he had to mourn, he had to fast, he had to afflict himself because of the awful ruin that the people of God were in - and no other preparation for the work would do than that. Now I don't know whether there's anybody contemplating going into the work of God here - but I hope we're all in the work of God in some shape or form - do you have this burden for the dereliction in people's lives, whether they're not saved, or whether they are saved...or whether it's the church of Jesus Christ locally here in the Iron Hall, or corporately in this district, or right across the land - do you have a genuine burden for the state of dereliction?

Nehemiah was not a man to paper over the cracks - in fact, when Nehemiah met the people in Jerusalem he didn't attempt to gloss over their spiritual condition, the condition of the walls. If you turn to chapter 2 and verse 17 we read: 'Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach'. He saw things the way they really were, in contrast to Eli - you remember Eli in the Old Testament, he refused to recognise the need of restraint, walls of discipline, in the life of his own sons. Because of that he brought reproach, distress, and disaster on Israel for Samuel reads that 'His sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not'. He was unwilling to recognise the need of the hour - can you recognise it?

I believe there is a spiritual stupor upon the church of Jesus Christ, that when you start to mention subjects like this they think: 'Where's he living? What's he doing? Things aren't as bad as all that!'. Listen: Nehemiah was a man who was burdened because he saw things the way they really were, and when Hanani his brother came with the terrible news I'm sure that Hanani had a burden on his heart too. He had seen it all, but my question is: did Hanani allow his burden to make him do something about it? Oh, we don't know, but one thing is for sure: we can all shake our heads at times, maybe we can even see what's going on around us and

in us, and we can sigh over the state of the congregation of the people of God like Hanani did - but the question is this: it's quite another matter to do something about it, isn't it? There is such a long journey between knowledge and practice, but the fact that Nehemiah was perhaps 700 miles away from the situation in Jerusalem here in the palace in Shushan made no difference! He was burdened about it! You don't have to be in the midst of all the sin in the world to be burdened about it. You don't have to be in the Church of England to be burdened about it. My friends, in all of his luxury and his prestige in the palace, it didn't matter, it didn't deter him - and I'll tell you, there's no indication in verse one and two, before this news comes to him, that he had any intention of abandoning his privileged position. But by the means of what might not have been any more than a casual inquiry in verse 2, he asked concerning the Jews that had escaped - he's only asking about home - he hears the news of disaster, and it has overwhelming effects on his soul. In verse 4 it says: 'When I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven'.

He had a heart for the testimony of God's people. He was like Moses, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. Here's the next question, and I'm determined to finish this this morning: he was a burdened man, the state of dereliction, but what did that burden drive him to do? What was the first work that his burden made him do? What was it? Pray! He was a man of prayer and he made, in verses 4 to 9, a supplication for divine power. He had seen the state of dereliction, and now he makes a supplication for divine power - and instead of doing what we would maybe do, and rush to the King: 'King Artaxerxes I have served you for many years, and I have given you faithful advice all my days, can you give me a bit of advice and do something, maybe wield the arm of your power a little'. He didn't go to the King, he went to the King of kings.

If Nehemiah tells me anything, it tells me that Nehemiah was a man of prayer. There's about ten prayers in this book - it starts with prayer and it ends with prayer, and in verse 4 look what it says: he sat down, he wept, he mourned days, he fasted, prayed before the God of heaven. In verse 6, look at him as he cries: 'Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night'. He prayed day and night, have you ever done that? He prayed weeping - when was the last time I did that? He fasted - you'd know by looking at some of you the last time you did that! - but he was a man of prayer.

I'll tell you, if you look at the dates in this, it says that he prayed four months like this. I'm not saying he fasted, he might have fasted a meal or two for four months. But if you look at the date here, in verse one it says 'in the month of Chisleu', which is the month of December really for us - and you go to chapter 2 verse 1, and it says that in the month of Nisan his answer came - and that is the space between December and Nisan, April, of four months. Grief, fasting, praying, weeping for four months - and I'll tell you this: it so altered his appearance that King Artaxerxes asked: 'What's wrong with you?', we'll see this next week, 'What's wrong with your countenance?'. Do you know what was wrong? He had started the work already, because prayer is real work, and it is the only work in preparation for doing God's work! Before a finger had been lifted to rebuild these walls Nehemiah started 700 miles away on his knees! Now we're doing a work over here, but where are the prayers for it? Chuck Swindoll says, very revealingly: 'For many of us prayer is too often an afterthought, something rattled off at ribbon-cuttings when the work has already been done'.

Many great leaders of our time have philosophised about what true leadership really is - well, we have it in Nehemiah. President Harry Truman of the United States said: 'A leader is a person who has ability to get others to do what they don't want to do and like it'. Crossing over from the politics to the military realm, Field Marshal Montgomery said: 'The capacity and will to rally men and women to common purpose, is the character which inspires confidence' - to rally men, to influence them to do something. When you read great leaders of even our own century, you will find that they tell us that great leadership is found in the capacity to influence others to do something that needs to be done. Influence is the key to leadership. Now we ask in

the spiritual realm: how can we influence people? Do you know what the church is doing today? They're manipulating folk to get them - charismatics, they're making threats: 'God will curse you if you don't do it'. Some people are being bribed spiritually to do what religious leaders want them to do, other churches are more and more bringing in gimmicks to try and titillate people to do what they want them to do, but there is only one method to gain influence over God, over the people of God, and over people that don't belong to God, and Hudson Taylor put it into words by saying: 'It is possible to move men through God by prayer alone' - there it is.

The fulcrum that moves God and this world is prayer. Now I don't have time, but if you could analyse this prayer when you go home you find that it has, in verse 5, praise. He put out of his mind all the fears about doing this work, and praise did it for him. That's why I'm always on at you in the prayer meeting to remember to praise the Lord before you do anything else, because not only does it give Him His rightful place, it casts away the shadows of our doubts and fears that we've maybe come into the meeting with. Then in verses 6 and 7 he confesses to God, and notice his words - he puts himself in the equation: 'I', and he uses the plural 'we'. He's saying that it's not just all these people, he wasn't standing back saying: 'What are you doing? You've been there for years over there in Jerusalem, why don't you get the finger out?'. He put himself in the picture as part of the problem.

In verses 8 to 10 he then goes in faith, and we don't hear much of this today, and in verse 8 to 10 he claims the promises that God had given to Israel in Leviticus and Deuteronomy - all the blessings that God had promised them, and he goes to God! I'll tell you, if we prayed like this in the prayer meeting we'd be getting a tap on the shoulder! 'Lord, open Your eyes, open Your ears!' - we'd be getting told by the theologians that the Lord's eyes are open and His ears are open, you don't need to tell Him. That's not the point, it wasn't his intellectual theological mind that was speaking here, it was his heart! 'Lord, would You see our need? Look at the promises that You have given us!', and it all crescendos in this request, his petition, all leading up that God would remove the problem, and that God would move this man Artaxerxes to make Nehemiah do something about his problem in Jerusalem.

Look at that verse, verse 11, at the end: 'I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man' - in the sight of this man. This man was the problem! But he knew what Hudson Taylor knew, that it is possible to move any man through God by prayer. Would your nickname be 'prayer warrior' or 'prayerless warrior'? That great literary genius, Tennyson, in his book 'The Idylls Of The King', and the poem 'The Passing Of Arthur' writes these words, and I want you to think about them very carefully:

If thou shouldst never see my face again,
 Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
 Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
 Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
 For what are men better than sheep or goats
 That nourish a blind life within the brain,
 If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
 Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
 For so the whole round earth is every way
 Bound by gold chains about the feet of God'.

Who could be saying that about you today? Who could be imploring you: 'If you never see my face again, pray for my soul, because more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice rise like a fountain for me night and day' - who's praying that? 'For what are men better than sheep or goats that nourish a blind life within the brain', and this is like a dagger into all our hearts, 'If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer both for themselves and those who call them friend?'

I know we can get discouraged when we pray for blessing and the prayer for revival, because we're expecting the answer in the next morning's mail - it doesn't work like that. Four months of fasting, and praying, and waiting upon God before Nehemiah got that first initial providential answer in the word of the King allowing him to go to Jerusalem. But I believe however long Nehemiah had to pray he would pray, because Nehemiah was a man exercised of God - he had a burden and he was a man of prayer.

Now thirdly and finally and very briefly: a man of burden, a man of prayer, a man of action. He didn't only see the state of the dereliction and make a supplication for divine power, but he made a sacrificial act of devotion: 'Here am I, send me'. Oh, he enjoyed security, he enjoyed comfort in the palace, he had the prestige of the King's cupbearer, but do you know something? His love for God was greater than for any of those things, and he was willing to pay the ultimate price and give himself to the task that he saw needed to be done.

There's not too many Nehemiah's about - oh yes, all of us are experts in seeing what needs to be done, but who of us is willing to give ourselves to the task? Now listen: he did more than weep, he did more than even pray, he made himself available to God to get the job done! You see, men like Nehemiah are not merely content to get answers to prayer, they want to be the answers to prayer. He had the faith not just to do it himself, but even to pray to God that other men would be moved and burden and prayed to do the same.

Where are we? God still needs a man or woman for the hour like that. Samuel Chadwick, who was a Methodist preacher, once used the following words in a prayer that he was conducting in a church in Manchester - and I can imagine him raising his hands heavenward and praying - listen to the components of this very very short prayer: 'Oh Lord, make us intensely spiritual'. That's all our prayers, isn't it? We want to be intensely spiritual. Here's the next few words: 'But keep us perfectly natural' - David talked about caricatures, there's a lot of caricatures of spirituality running about - are we intensely natural in our deep spirituality? But here's the last few words, not only make us intensely spiritual, and keep us perfectly natural, but: 'Make us thoroughly practical, then we will be builders for God'.

Today is a day of reproach for God's people, the great city of the church of the living God is no longer beautiful Zion, perfection of beauty. The Jews then, like the people of God today, are no longer powerful with God and with men like Jacob who wrestled with God and became a prince with both of them - but here in Nehemiah in such a situation in the hour, one man made the difference. And we'll see in the weeks that lie ahead that he took these Jewish people from great reproach in chapter 1 verse 3, to great rejoicing in chapter 12 and verse 43. God is still seeking men and women for this hour, willing to sacrifice for the work - are you available to receive a burden, to give yourself to prayer, to sacrifice your life for the work?

Our Father, we pray that all of us here today will be asking the question: 'Is it I Lord?'. May we have heard Thy voice in the darkness of our own personal state, or national state, or state of the church; and may we hear the nail-pierced hand of the Saviour at our heart's door; and may we open the door; and may He come in and sup with us; and may we know the freshwaters of revival in our own spirits, and here in the Iron Hall we pray, Amen.

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Building For God - Chapter 2

"Preparation For The Work - Part 1"

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Nehemiah chapter 2, it's our second study this morning in this series that I've entitled 'Building For God', and the title of this morning's message is 'Preparation For The Work', preparation for the work.

Beginning at verse 1: "And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence. Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid, And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire? Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it. And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah; And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me. Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days. And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon. And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire. Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass. Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned. And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work. Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? Will ye rebel against the king? Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem".

Since chapter 1, and since Nehemiah's prayer where he asked God for help with regards to the awful news that he heard from his homeland, brought by his brother, that Jerusalem was in an awful desolation; and since the time that many of the Jews had returned, there had not been a great deal of work taken place to

restore the temple and also to restore the city and the walls. Four months had passed, four months were by - we read in chapter 1, without going over old ground - where Nehemiah had wept, cried, fasted, sought his God day and night in prayer that God would hear him, and that God would grant him relief to leave the king's side as his cupbearer and go back to Judah, Jerusalem, and be the builder of the city walls. Four months he waited for God's answer that would allow him to approach the king.

Now this is interesting, because we saw that there is a great lesson here in prayer and we'll see it again this morning - that prayer and patience come together. If you think that God's way of working in prayer is like a slot machine, where you put the prayer in and you pull the arm, and God's requests just come flying out at will - you've another thing coming, and you will be gravely disappointed in your life of prayer. Those who have gone through the school of prayer will know that prayer and patience for prayer's answers always are inextricably linked together. In fact, there's one very interesting verse - we don't have time to look at it this morning - found in Isaiah 28:16, which goes like this: 'Whoever believes will not act hastily'. Whoever believes will not act hastily, and one thing you will learn if you are a man of prayer is that God works within your heart a supernatural patience to wait with assurance for God's answer that you believe in faith He will give you. In fact, in Hebrews 6 verse 12 we also read: 'Be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises'. All the men and women of God in the past did not just have faith, and did not just exercise prayer, but they had patience in faith and prayer to wait and to pray through God's answer.

Now, leaving chapter 1 we come to Nehemiah's preparation for the work. There are several things I want you to see in Nehemiah's life, and especially perhaps if you're here today and you're preparing to do some great work for God. Maybe you're thinking about going overseas and serving the Lord on the mission field, long-term or short-term, it matters not. Maybe you feel that God's calling you to preach the Gospel as an evangelist, or feed God's people in a pastoral ministry. Maybe it's the work in the Hall among the children, or the young people, or your fellowship wherever you frequent - but you feel that God is putting His hand on your life, and He's asking you to do some work for Him. Really by right all of us should feel like that, for He calls us all to go into the world and preach the Gospel in one way or another.

But how should you, or I, prepare for the work that God is calling us to? Well, there are three scenes in this chapter where we see Nehemiah being prepared - two really, and one where he's preparing other people. The first is at the Royal Palace in verses 1 through to 8, 9, or ten perhaps. Then we look at the preparation where Nehemiah crosses over the river, and there he is at the ruined walls in Jerusalem. So there's preparation first of all at the Royal Palace, and then we find there is further preparation for the work before he lays a finger on the wall, at the actual ruins in Jerusalem. Then thirdly and finally, if time permits us, then that allowed Nehemiah to make a preparation for the remnant people; and he began to speak to them in verse 17 to the end of the chapter, how they ought to prepare together for the work that God had called them to.

So let's look at the first, and I just sat down this week with a pen and paper before God and before God's word, and asked Him to reveal to me the various lesson here, and there are many many points that I believe God has given to me - so bear with me as I give them to you, and I pray that you'll note them in your mind and in your heart for the betterment of the work that you do for the Lord. Look at the second part of verse 1 - here's the first preparation that Nehemiah was given at the Royal Palace. It says that the king was before a cup of wine that the cupbearer, Nehemiah, was holding. Then Nehemiah says: 'I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king', after tasting it of course, to make sure it was drinkable, 'Now I had not been beforetime sad in the king's presence. Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart'.

Now we saw last week that Nehemiah was a man of burden, he was a man of prayer, and he was a man of action. That is what made him a man for the hour. But here we still see that this burden that Nehemiah had, it

didn't just miraculously lift off him after he did something for God, but he is continually receiving God's burden in his life. Now, if you are preparing to do a work for God you need to also be prepared to receive a burden from the Lord. You need also to be prepared for the implications of that burden that the Lord puts on you. Now there's no greater example that I can give to you than our Lord Jesus Christ of this very thing, for we read prophetically that the Lord Jesus would be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We all know, if we're saved today, what it meant for the Lord Jesus Christ to leave the realms of heaven, and say: 'Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written, to do thy will O God' - and to leave all the splendour and the glory that He had, to come to earth as a servant, to bleed and die on a cross, to be buried and to rise again of course victoriously - but you and I both know the implications of the burden that the Son of God had on His heart. If you don't know, all you need to do is look at Gethsemane, and then read on and find out about Calvary.

Now the lesson that we can derive from Nehemiah, but chiefly the Lord Jesus Christ, is this: burden always necessitates the crucifixion of self. Have you got that? It means being crucified. To have a burden for the work of God means laying down your life for other people who are in need of Christ. This great burden that Nehemiah had led him from a life of privilege in the Palace, to a life of service in the midst of awful ruin and desolation. It took him from attending the high Emperor to helping the lowly and despised Jews just out of captivity. Now listen, if you're wanting to do a work for God in no matter how small or large a capacity you feel it may be, you need to be prepared and even in the place to receive a burden from the Lord.

Here's the second thing: taking risks. Nehemiah took a risk by even entering into conversation with the king on this matter, because the king right away could have slew him and had him executed. The fact of the matter is that when you try to begin to serve the Lord, people sometimes get suspicious - especially if you're young. They wonder what your motives are, why you want to do the work, especially if you're going to take risks in doing the work - they feel that you're glory hunting, or that you're trying to make a name for yourself, or you've lost your marbles and in some way you're fanatical, you're misguided in your zeal. But the fact of the matter is this: Oh that we had more passion and more zeal for the work of God than we do today, oh that there were more burdened among God's people to do God's work! I'm talking about the burden that takes risks! Sure what risks do we take today for the Lord Jesus Christ?

Elisha in the Old Testament, you remember, when Elijah came and put his mantle upon him to say that he would be his successor in his prophetic ministry - what did Elisha do? He didn't say: 'Well, I'll keep this yoke of oxen just in case it doesn't work out, and if the preaching doesn't have any success, well I'll come back to my farming' - not a bit of it! It says that he slew his oxen, he broke up his yoke, and he lit that fire as a sacrifice with the oxen on it unto God to say: 'I've burned my bridges, it's going to be all or nothing, I'm going to take risks for God'. I think that's the kind of ministry that God blesses - in fact, I think that's the only kind of ministry.

I think the story is, I can't remember exactly right, but I think the story is of Campbell Morgan, the great preacher in Westminster Chapel many years ago, that a young man came to him into his study and wanted to speak with him about serving the Lord. He came out with this statement: 'I think, Mr Morgan, that God is calling me to the ministry'. Mr Morgan's answer was: 'For God's sake son, stay out of it if you only think that God is calling you!'. We don't need people who think, or suspect, or who wonder, what God needs are men of burden, and men who are willing to take risks and leave all - because it is burden that drives you into God's work. That's what I think a call is: being driven that you can do none other! Remember Luther, leading the Reformation: 'Here I stand', after the papists called him to recant, 'I can do no other'.

I know there is zeal without knowledge often found in the young, but I know this much: it was the devil in Peter the apostle that tried to say to the Lord Jesus Christ, 'Look don't be going to the cross, don't have all this talk about risks and laying down your life, and all this blood - you can do it another way! Far be it from

you Lord!'. And the Lord rebukes him, and the Lord still rebukes those who try to discourage people from taking risks in the ministry of the word of God and the gospel. The fact of the matter is: here is Nehemiah in the presence of the king, and he could have lost his life for looking sad and being burdened, but he couldn't be indifferent to what was going on! He couldn't put on a hypocritical mask and face, he couldn't act it up. Here's the question friends: do we act up in our Christianity? Do we portray a facade in the sense that we are spiritual when we are really not spiritual?

The fact of the matter is, Nehemiah couldn't do the opposite, he couldn't ignore or hide this burden - and that's what happens when you do have a burden, you can't hide it from other people. But here's the difference in Nehemiah: he didn't stand aside and write a wee pamphlet about the demise of his brethren, or denounce them for backsliding - he did something about it! He had a burden, and he took a risk! My friends, he didn't wash his hands of the matter and say: 'Well, it's a sign of the times. It's only to be expected these days. Our people have been led into captivity, it's going to take a while' - but his deep grief, his genuine grief and burden, led him to do something about it. He had a desire deep within his soul to be an instrument in the hand of God for a revival of truth and the recovery of God's people and the derelict city of Jerusalem where God used to put His name and His glory.

He kept receiving God's burden, there's the first preparation in the palace. The second: he took risks for God and he couldn't hide his burden, and no matter what anybody said or did he just pressed on ahead. Here's the third, in the palace still - we mightn't get any further than the palace! - verse 4: 'Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven'. Now please see this: he received God's burden, he took risks for God, but he continued in prayer. Do you see it? He's looking sad because of his burden, he takes a risk in telling the king why he is sad in his very presence, and the king - here's his answer to prayer, I hope you noted it - the king said: 'What would you request of me now that I know the plight that your people are in in Jerusalem?'. What did Nehemiah do? Did he say: 'Oh here's the answer, bingo!', and ask the king right away? What did he do? 'Then prayed I to the God of heaven'.

Now is it not true, dear folk this morning in the Iron Hall, that we only really give lip service to prayer, and to continuing in prayer? It's like reward at the end of our lives, we believe in it but we don't really live in the light of it. We believe in prayer, we believe in constant prayer, this man lived in an atmosphere of prayer that surrounded him wherever he went. It was his constant resource throughout all his varied experiences good and bad, and he walked with God, and he was called of God, because he talked with God! Because of his continuation in prayer do you know what happened? He began to see things the way God sees them - how do I know that? You look at this verse, verse 4, he calls God 'the God of heaven'. You find that in the book of Ezra, you find that in some of the prayers of Daniel, and do you know what that means? That God is no longer being seen by the prophet as the God of Jerusalem or the God of the land, it is if God has taken His glory away from the planet and gone back to heaven, He's now the God of heaven! Do you see it? His displeasure with the people, and Nehemiah is seeing it, and that's the reason for this ejaculatory prayer - like a little arrow that goes right up to the heart of God.

Do you ever pray like that when you're in dire need? Just before you do something? I used to read about a man, and I try to practise it, before he even lifted the phone, before he opened a letter, he would send a little prayer to heaven to prepare him for whatever news it was - an ejaculatory prayer to glory, a little arrow to God. But this man was doing this, and this wasn't his prayer life, I heard somebody say not so long ago: 'Well, I pray to God all day. I mightn't have a quiet time, I mightn't have constant times of prayer, but I just pray from I get up till I go to bed' - that's a lot of nonsense. If you're doing that as well as continual prayer, well that's something to give yourself a pat on the back with. This man prayed like this after four months constant weeping, praying, crying to God day and night without ceasing!

You would have thought that was enough, wouldn't you? He had prayed four months day and night, you

would have thought he wouldn't need to pray at the last minute here. Do you know what this tells me? This is for the preparation of the work now: no prayer is enough prayer. Let us never get into the mentality that as a church, as long as we have a prayer meeting - and we're very spiritual here, we have two - that that's enough. Not in God's book! Not in the book of prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ, for He said - you remember this now - 'Men ought always to pray and not to faint', prayer and patience hand-in-hand. I want to ask you in the light of this context and your life: is there someone in your life or something in your experience that you fear is going to hinder you serving the Lord and doing what you believe God is calling you to? I don't know what that particular thing is, but I know this much - as I said to you last week, the words of Hudson Taylor, that great pioneer missionary to China: 'It is possible to move men through God by prayer alone'.

Now you watch it! It doesn't matter who that man or woman is, how important they are, or how close they are, God can turn the tables, God can change the seasons, and God changing hearts is a speciality of His. A little prayer on the foundation of four months prayer, and God answered the prayer in changing the heart of this king.

Now I'm never going to get through this, we're only going to get through his preparation in the Royal Palace, but can I ask you before we go any further: do you have a belief in prayer like this? Sometimes I think when I talk about prayer, and when other believers talk about prayer, there are some sceptics sitting around and they're thinking: 'That's alright, but when the rubber hits the road in real life and in reality, those things don't happen, or you don't expect them to happen - if they happen it's a bonus, but don't be expecting great things through prayer!'. Listen: this man saw the king's heart changed! Proverbs 21 verse 1 says: 'The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will'. God can do anything! I'm asking you: do you believe that? Not do you have a theology of it in your head, do you believe that God can do anything?

Well, the fact of the matter is, because Nehemiah believed that, he discerned the answer when it came - and in verse 5, right away after that prayer he said unto the king: 'If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it. And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,)' - probably giving him a bit of advice now and again! - 'For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah; And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into'.

Isn't this remarkable? He discerns the answer to prayer that God had given him. Now here's a lesson for us all: often we pray with regards to God's work, and when God answers our prayer we don't even see it! Yet it's glaring us in the face. Let me give you a personal example, I didn't plan on doing this. Many years ago, before I came near the place as a pastor, you were looking for a plot of land, and the men were in Inverary Avenue doing it. I was in Portadown, so it was nothing to do with me, but I didn't like the idea - Iron Hall being here all the years, and God calling us to do a work here. I know that some of you didn't like the idea, and the men didn't either - but there was nowhere to build! And God provided the second time, first refusal, second time a piece of land over here for 35,000 pounds - where have you heard of that in inner-city Belfast? God's will! The planners pass, the planners pass the plans! When everybody was nearly going to have to come in bicycles, and be pushed down in prams because we had no parking space - it's not happening anywhere else, as far as I can see, that someone is allowed to build a building without even a question asked - but that happened! Now I could go on on a few other things, yet there are still folk when they see prayer being answered they don't discern it!

My friends, God answers prayer - but we ought to discern God's answering of prayers. The king's word here

fulfilled, I'm sure that perhaps Nehemiah knew these words in Daniel 9:25 spoken by the prophet: 'Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times'. Daniel prophesied the exact time when the wall would be built - Artaxerxes didn't even know it, as he was speaking those words he was fulfilling God's word, but Nehemiah knew it, do you know why? He knew God's word. Not only did he know God's word, he was praying God's word. We saw in chapter 1 that he was laying hold of the promises of God, look at verse 8 of chapter 1, he said to God: 'Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them', and so on.

He was invoking God's word, and saying 'Lord, this is Your word, You fulfil it - I didn't write it, You wrote it, You fulfil it for Your glory'. That's why, when the answer came, he noticed it, because he was the man praying for it. He was the man up all night pleading and weeping and fasting for it! Well, this is what happens when God lays burdens on us. I think it was John Owen, or Calvin, I can't remember, who said: 'When God wants to bless His people He sets them a-praying'. God doesn't lay burdens on you to make you miserable - some of you here are doing that without the burdens! God lays burdens on your heart to set you a-praying, so that you might pray to fulfil God's will which is enshrined in God's word - that's all the more reason that when we're praying, and when we feel the burden to pray, we should be looking for God answers - because He sets us to pray to fulfil His will!

Do we claim the promises of God in prayer? Do you know what would be a good exercise for you, if you're reading through the Bible this year - or no matter how much you're reading of it - take a highlighter of one colour or another, and highlight every promise in God's book. George Mueller did this, and I've tried to do it, highlight every promise and write them down - different promises for different things - and then when you're in prayer before God, and you have a need, you can plead those promises. As Spurgeon said, it's the cheque-book of the bank of faith, where you cash in these words and you get God's will back.

Do we discern God answers? Here's the last thing of his preparation in the palace, and next week we'll go to the ruined walls, and go to his preparation of the remnant people. The last thing I want you to note - we have noted, if you've missed it: receiving God's burden, taking risks, continuing in prayer, discerning the answers - this isn't the last one, I told a lie there: accumulating all possible resources. He asked the king, after being asked what he would request, he accumulated all possible resources. He got everything he could get together for that work before he did it. Remember the Lord saying about preparing for war, and making sure that you have the army to fight? Well, here's John Wesley's three points on the subject of giving to God's work in preparation - very simple: one, earn all you can; two, save all you can; three, give all you can - isn't that good? Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can!

There was one time in our history of the United Kingdom that we had dark clouds over us of war, and there was the threat of Nazi Germany destroying our civilisation and our Christian heritage as they were doing right across the whole of Europe. There was a man, I believe, of God - I don't know whether he was a believer or not - but he was raised of God, just like Nehemiah, to meet that foe. That was Winston Churchill, and those who have heard his speeches could tell that his speeches were like an army in and of themselves. Just as the soldiers were about to wilt on the battlefield, the speeches would bring life and vitality into them. Well, when the Americans were just about to join the second world war near the end, the Prime Minister Winston Churchill directed these dynamite words to President Roosevelt - listen to this: 'Give us the tools, and we'll finish the job'. You can hear him say it, can't you? Give us the tools, and we'll finish the job! Like Nehemiah's request to Artaxerxes, Nehemiah said: 'Give me permission to build, give me the timber to build, give me safe passage to build, and we'll finish the job'.

Here's the final preparation at the royal palace, he was looking in all of this and recognising God's hand of blessing in it all. Nehemiah was so sure of God's blessing that we read - we haven't time nearly to read it - at the end of verse 6: 'So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time'. He was so expectant of the blessing and the answer to prayer, that he had already worked out in his mind when he was going to go, all that he would need in preparation, and when he was going to come back again. He worked out all the materials that he needed - why? Because he knew that God's hand was upon him. Look at the end of verse 8: 'And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me'. God's strong hand was his good hand.

Now let me ask you a few questions: what are you doing practically to make sure you've got God's hand on you? Are you receiving a burden from God? Are you taking risks in it? Are you continuing in prayer? Do you look for the answers? Do you accumulate all the possible resources for the work of God? And are you looking for God's hand and recognising it as upon you? Do you see until you do that, and that's not all as we'll find out next week, until you do that you're not prepared for the work, and you're not prepared to give any advice on it either! But if you have God's hand on you, it will be proved in the blessing of the resources spiritually that He gives you.

Maybe between this week and next week you could start to implement some of those preparatory factors in your life that we have heard this morning, so that next week we can take up where we have left off and implement more. But it's only then, when you get near to that cross, that cross of pain and agony and sorrow, that you start to feel the burden and you start to do the work that Jesus would have you do.

Father, help us: who is sufficient for these things? We all feel our inadequacy and our falling far short of all of these matters. We pray that, Lord, You'll forgive us as we confess our sins to Thee, and all our backsliding at times where we're not in a position or a place to really do the work that God would want us to do - but Lord, get us to that place soon, like Nehemiah, and give us a burden, and help us to take risks, and help us to pray through the answers of God. Help us to do the work for Jesus that is ready at our hand, Amen.

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Building For God - Chapter 3

"Preparation For The Work - Part 2"

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Let's turn together in the word of God to the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah chapter 2. You remember we started this study 'Building For God' two weeks ago in chapter 1, and last week we only got really through the first point with regards to Nehemiah's preparation for the work. So this morning, after looking last week at his preparation in the royal palace, we'll be looking God willing at his preparation at the ruined walls, and also his preparation of the remnant people who were left in Jerusalem when he arrived there.

So we're going to take up our reading this morning from verse 9 of chapter 2 of Nehemiah. Nehemiah journeys from his palace in Shushan, and then he says: "Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days. And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon. And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire. Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass. Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned. And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work. Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? Will ye rebel against the king? Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem" - and we end our reading at verse 20.

Let us just bow in a moment's prayer together: Our Father, we thank Thee for the lives of great men like Nehemiah, these great Bible biographies that encourage us, exhort us and enthuse us to follow their example. We remember the apostle Paul, who could say: 'Follow me, even as I follow Christ'. Lord, that is the ultimate goal that's in our hearts today - not to be like Nehemiah, but in the much that Nehemiah was like our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that we will be like him. As we come to look at the preparation for the work of God that all of us need to be engaged in if we are serving and labouring for the Master, we pray that our hearts may be challenged, our minds may be quickened, and our whole selves may be filled by the Holy Spirit of the Living God to go out after preparation, sufficient preparation, before our God, to make Him known to men and women effectually, for the salvation of the lost souls and to the exaltation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the furtherance of His kingdom. For it is in His name, and to that end we pray, Amen.

In verses 1 through to 8 you will remember, if you were with us last week - if not I'll just recap on a few of the thoughts - that Nehemiah was in the royal palace. He had heard the news of the awful desolation that was in his home city of Jerusalem from his brother, and his heart was moved as he realised the awful despair that God's people were in. It was in the palace, as the cupbearer to the king - Artaxerxes - that this man Nehemiah received a burden from God, a burden to go, a burden to minister to the people of God, a burden to build up the walls that were broken down. The walls of testimony, the walls of protection of God's people, the walls that kept out false gods, and kept the people from wandering into false lands.

So we saw in the royal palace that there Nehemiah received the burden from God, and it affected his countenance as we see in the second half of verse 1. Nehemiah, standing before the king and serving him, had never ever been sad - but he was sad in the king's presence. In fact the king said to him in verse 2: 'Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart'. We saw that it was a bad thing to be sad in the presence of the king - in fact, it really was saying that you weren't pleased and joyous to be in the presence of the monarch. He had a burden from God, you will recall, that was such a heavy burden that he couldn't mask it, he couldn't become hypocritical and pretend that it wasn't there even for the sake of the king, and even for the sake of his own life. It was written all over his face. In fact, his heart in this matter was worn on his sleeve.

We saw that because of this burden he had he was taking risks, because the king - as we looked at in the historical circumstances of King Artaxerxes and great monarchs and emperors of the day - that this king could have slew him there and then for being sad in his presence. He may have been sceptical of the fact that Nehemiah was tasting of his cup, and perhaps he was nervous because he himself had put something in the cup, or perhaps there was something in the cup that he tasted when he took of it. Nevertheless, it was a great risk to go into the presence of the King with a sad countenance. We saw last week that not only if we're preparing for God's work do we need to prepare to have a burden laid on us from God Himself, a burden that affects us in many ways, but we also need to be prepared to take risks for God in fulfilling that burden.

I read only this week the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, who said: 'No man is any use until he has dared everything' - no man is any use until he has dared everything. Nehemiah dared everything because of this burden. He continued in prayer when the king asked him in verse 4 what he could do for him. Nehemiah who had been praying now, you will remember, four months from the month of December through to the beginning of the month of April - there he was praying again! After four months of prayer and fasting and weeping and crying, night and day, it wasn't enough for Nehemiah - but when the King gave that request: 'What could I do for you Nehemiah?', he prays again to the God of heaven that his request would be answered.

He continued in prayer, and we saw last week great Hudson Taylor said: 'It is possible to move men through God by prayer alone', didn't we? Here is a great king, the great dictator, men's lives were in his hands - whom he would he would slay, and whom he would save he would save - but here this man Nehemiah raised a prayer to God, and God heard him and God turned the heart of the king. We saw that we need to continue in prayer in the preparation for God's work, and then we saw we need to discern the answers when they come. In verses 4 and 5 we see that Nehemiah saw this request from the king, that he would give him anything he wanted, as an answer to his prayer. Sometimes we don't see or perceive the answers that God gives us to our prayers. Then in verses 6 to 8 he accumulated all the possible resources, he got everything he could to build for this work of God. Then we saw finally in verse 8 that he was looking for and recognising God's hand of blessing, he was an optimistic faith-full man. He was looking for God to move, and he recognised when God moved! I wonder do we?

Now there's further preparation that we want to see today, and we're moving now from the scene of the royal palace to the ruins of the city. In between verses 8 and 9 three months have passed - you see, Nehemiah starts

to journey across the river, and comes to the city of Jerusalem, that holy place that is in such degradation. We read in verse 9: 'Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me'. He goes on this journey, and he finds the city and the walls that are so broken down. Then in verse 10 we find that the first thing that Nehemiah encountered in the city - if you like, he's got to the mission field, the rubber has hit the road, he's got to the place God wants him to be, the place where God wants him to do this great work, the place where he will be the man for the hour - and what is the first thing that he encounters in that place? Verse 10: 'When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel' - and we will find out as the weeks go on that these men, two of them and then the other man Geshem the Arabian that we read of later, these three men were the thorn in the flesh of Nehemiah. Immediately Nehemiah came to the field of work he faced opposition!

Now you listen this morning: if you're wanting to do any work for God, any work, it is inevitable, and you must anticipate opposition in that work. There is the first aspect of his preparation at the ruined walls - I wonder do we ever include this in any preparation in our minds? Do we anticipate opposition in what we're trying to do for God? You see, opposition in the work of God often causes some people to say: 'I wonder if I am in God's will?'. They question it, maybe they even turn their back on God's will - maybe they don't perceive it at the time, but they walk straight out of God's will because they're afraid of confrontations, they're afraid of opposition! The great irony, and I believe it's a dupe of Satan at times, is that the opposite is the truth. It is when we encounter opposition that we can almost know of a certainty at times that it is proof that we are in God's will - almost always, not always. Some people are always looking just for opposition and confrontation, that's not what I'm talking about, but I'm sure and certain that if a man or a woman is in God's will they will encounter opposition.

We have to ask the question: what does that say of those who run from it? Does it mean that they're not in God's will? Well, I'll leave that up to your estimation personally, but one thing I do know is that right throughout the word of God and right throughout the lives of great Christians whose biographies we read, we find that whenever a man gets a burden from God, and whenever he starts to pray through that burden, and he starts to take risks, and he starts to see answers, and he starts to accumulate all the possible resources, and looks for and recognises God's hand in it all, he will incur men's opposition! He will disturb the comfortable and complacent. We need look no further than the very person of our Lord Jesus Christ in John chapter 15. You know that like Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, the Pharisees and the Scribes were always chipping away and biting at His heels everywhere He went. They were talking to Him about doctrine, talking to Him about His lifestyle, how He didn't always keep the law the way they thought it should be kept. The Lord Jesus, answering His accusers in John 15, says this: 'If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin'.

What does that mean? It means this: that the very life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ showed up the Pharisees, the Scribes, and the Sadducees for what they really were! It exposed them, they saw the real thing and their hypocrisy wouldn't stand up to scrutiny. The Lord Jesus in John 16, the following chapter, said to His own disciples: 'My dear children, my disciples, those I have called from the world, in the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world'. Now listen: when a worldly spirit grips those within the church of Jesus Christ, you'll not only have persecution in the world, you'll have persecution in the church. When you try to do something for God you will anticipate facing opposition, and Nehemiah faced it!

He faced it through Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite. Now we don't have time to look in much detail at these two men just yet, but let me show you that one of them was a Moabite - Sanballat was the Moabite - and Tobiah was the Ammonite. Now if you don't know this, when you go to the book of Genesis the Moabites came from the son of Lot, and the Ammonites also of his other son - both sons

who were born to him through the incest of his relationship on a drunken night with his own daughters - have you got that? From that day on, those two nations - the Moabites and the Ammonites - were the thorns in the flesh of the Jewish people. The Arabians also in the person of Geshem - still to this day the Arabs are a thorn in the flesh of the Israelites! Do you see it? But as you look at the typology in the Old Testament Scriptures, you will find that the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Arabians and the sons of Ishmael all speak of the flesh, don't they? They all speak of a people who are carnal. We know from the studies that we've been going through in the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians that you can be a Christian and be a carnal Christian - Paul said to them: 'I can't speak unto you as spiritual, but I must address you as carnal, you're still babes in Christ'.

What happens when you try to do the work for God is that there is opposition that comes even from within the ranks, from within the walls of the church of Jesus Christ, to those works, from those who are carnal. The more worldly the church the greater the persecution will be, but here is the greatness of this man Nehemiah - what did he do? Did he say: 'I can't take this, I'm packing it in'? No, he just pressed on regardless. He was like Ezekiel, you remember when we went through those studies, God gave him a hard forehead to take all the opposition that was coming his way - and, boy, did he face it! Can I ask you: are you ready for this? Oh, you want to go to serve the Lord, maybe to the mission field, or preaching in a pastorate position, or an evangelist, or something else, working with children or even working in the Hall here in whatever capacity God has called you - are you ready for opposition? Some people just can't handle it, but you're going to have to handle it because if you're going to be in God's will you're going to get it!

Here's the second thought that we see as Nehemiah stands around these ruins, verse 12, he had to contemplate sacrifice: 'And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon'. He contemplated sacrifice - now, what do I mean? Well, the first thing he sacrificed in verse 12 was his bed, and a few men went with him in that sacrifice. Now follow it with me just up to this point - four months we have seen Nehemiah has been in prayer, he has been weeping, he has been fasting, he has been afflicting himself for the God of heaven day and night for four solid months. Then in the palace in chapter 2 and the beginning verses we see that he risked his own life before the King. Now in between verses 8 and 9 of chapter 2 he has travelled a journey of about 700-800 miles, imagine that! Now we find in verse 12 that as he arrives there he doesn't say: 'I'll take a couple of weeks rest and vacation before I start', but he is up all hours surveying the situation! He's looking at the dereliction of the city, and he's losing sleep over the matter!

Do you know that loss of sleep is a sacrifice? I'll tell you, if you make that sacrifice like Nehemiah, there'll only be a few people that will make it with you. Nehemiah was awake when everybody else was sleeping, Nehemiah was concerned when everybody else was at ease, but he saw more of the reality of the situation of the city of God at night than others did during the daylight - because it was at night that God gave him a great vision! I wonder do you sacrifice? Do you sacrifice your bed? Do you run to work in the morning without consulting the King of kings and the Lord of lords about God's will for your day? Have you come to the place of worship this morning, and you haven't opened your Bible, and you haven't lifted your eyes heavenward to seek the blessing of God's face? This is where it really matters, if you're contemplating serving God. There's times I find myself in a place where I'm so unworthy of serving the Lord - we're all unworthy, but these things that we can make the difference in, are we paying the sacrifice? Because here's what happens: when he sacrificed this pleasure of sleep, God cultivated a secret dealing in his own heart - God moved in on Nehemiah.

Look at this verse 12: 'Neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem' - I didn't tell anybody what God did! Listen to this: he's three days now in Jerusalem, he's arrived there, and there's three days and there's not a word he speaks to anybody. He gets on a horse and he rides around for three days

and nights, and there's no luncheons, there's no city officials coming to greet him, there's no press conferences, there's no guided tours of the believers around the wall, there's just silence! The only dignitary that Nehemiah consults with is the God of heaven! I'll tell you there's so many lessons in this book that it's going to take me an age getting through it, but I don't want to skip over this one quickly: do you practise the sacrifice of a time alone with God, where God can speak to you? A time in the silence, a time in the early hours, a time when God can put something in your heart that you cannot even express to anybody else?

Now only those that are practising this will know exactly what I'm talking about, but I think this is the reason for the demise within the church of Jesus Christ today - the people just don't have a sacrifice like this, and they don't cultivate God's secret dealings in their heart. Listen: if you're wanting to do something for God, you've got to be prepared for God to do something in you! A. W. Tozer, that great writer whose works I commend to you often, warns in these words: 'May not the inadequacy of much of our spiritual experience today be traced back to our habit of getting through the corridors of the kingdom like children through the marketplace, chattering about everything, but pausing to learn the true value of nothing'. Chattering about everything, but pausing to learn the true value of nothing!

Oh, I wish I had time to talk to you about Moses, 40 years in the palace, 40 years in the wilderness, and all of it was God preparing, God putting in his heart something that education, something that status in royalty couldn't do - only God could do it, and God had to take him into the desert to do it. What about the apostle Paul? We read of him in Galatians that he went into Arabia for three years, and he consulted not with flesh and blood or any of the other apostles - three solid years God was revealing to him His will and His word. Look at the Lord Jesus Christ! He's in Nazareth in a carpenter's shop in obscurity for 30 years before He begins His ministry of three years around the countryside of Galilee and further afield. My friends, do you see this? The Lord Jesus Christ, you see Him in the gospel writings, it says on many occasions that He withdrew Himself to pray and to seek God. Someone said to me not so long ago: 'You know, the Lord Jesus in His ministry didn't just make Himself available, there were many times He made Himself unavailable'. He went from the crowd, and He went to be before God, and we read on occasions that a great while before day He went into a desert place, into the wilderness, or He went up a mountain and He sought God - some nights all night!

Have you ever been in a desert, I mean a real desert? What's characteristic about a desert, apart from there being no water? One thing is you're usually alone, and that it is probably one of the most silent parts of God's creation - there is an eerie unnatural silence in a desert. But you see, that's where you need to be - you say: 'Why do you need to be in silence?'. I'm not just talking about literal silence, but you need to be in silence within your spirit before God, because God often speaks to us in a still small voice. If you're not still enough in your preparations before God, you'll not hear Him - but if you are still enough, do you know what will happen to you? God will lay further burdens on your heart, and God will take secret dealings in your heart that you cannot express to anybody else!

Let me give you an example if you think I'm making all this up. Luke chapter 2 and verse 19, you don't need to turn to it, but it talks about Mary and how the angel spoke to Mary of how the Saviour would come and redeem His people from their sin. The Bible says that all the angel told Mary, Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. These things were wrought when she was alone, and God's word was coming to her through the angel, and they were things that she couldn't express or even explain to anybody else - she could only understand it because it was from God, she got it alone but it was in her heart, God had dealt with her in her heart! Can you hear, as Elijah heard, the sound of the gentle whisper?

I love the poems of F. W. Faber, but without quoting any of the poems to you, let me quote you some of his words that he said with regards to this practice of silence and solitude before Almighty God. He says: 'Whenever the sounds of the world die out in a soul, then we hear the whisperings of God. He is always

whispering to us, only we don't always hear because of the noise, the hurry, and the distractions which life causes as it rushes on'. Is that not true? More so today than it has ever been! The alarm clock goes in the morning and you're up like a shot - or maybe after five minutes if you put the snooze on, you're up. Then you wash and get dressed, and you rush out to get the bus, or to get into work on time. You work to lunch, or your teabreak, however many you have, and then teatime - you're home, get your tea, maybe you're rushing even out to the meeting, or you're rushing to something else that is God's work - that doesn't make it right you know! Maybe you're just sitting in front of the TV, and I know the television and radio is company for some of you folk that live alone, and I don't fault that for one moment - but you know I think that most of us are frightened, in this world of technology in which we live, of silence, of being alone and being before God, of getting all the din and shutting it out, and allowing ourselves to hear the whisper of God!

Well, we'll move on. God cultivated secret dealings in his heart, and then in verses 13 to 15 if you're prepared for God's work you need to await a vision of the ruins. Verses 13 to 15: 'I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire. Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast' - grasp the import of this! The horse, some of you know what horses can do, the horse couldn't get over the rubble the place was in such an awful state. 'Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned' - he got a vision during the night of the ruin that the place was in.

The prophetic vision is something that is not sought after, as the pulpit and the limelight is sought after today in many regard to the Christian service - you want to be the preacher, you want to be the missionary, you want to be the one that's called 'pastor', or the one that stands up and everybody loves - the fact of the matter is this: if you're in the place that God wants you to be, and none of us are, not even me - don't be thinking I'm there, talking like this! If you're where God wants you to be, there will be a picture, a vision of ruin, that you'll get - you'll not be able to banish it from your thoughts, and it will drive you to a cross!

You've got to await a vision of ruin, and begin to see things the way God sees them. I'll give you one example: Hosea - have you ever read the book of Hosea? I remember reading someone who said, a lot of us will be embarrassed when we get to heaven - he might come up and say: 'Have you read my book?', and we'll have to say 'I'm sorry, I never got round to that one, I couldn't find it!'. Hosea, do you know what God told Hosea to do? 'Go and marry a prostitute' - what? How could God tell anybody to do that? Because God was wanting to give him a vision, and give the people a vision of their spiritual adulterous idolatry in His holy eyes. He felt just like Hosea felt marrying a woman who was loose. You see if it wasn't in the Bible, I'd have got the sack for saying something like that, wouldn't I? It's in the Bible, because God is saying: 'This is the way I feel, and I want my prophets to feel as I feel! So I have to get them out of the world, I have to get them in the stillness, I have to get them into a disposition where I start to work on their hearts, and I put a burden and a vision on our hearts that they can't explain to anybody else'.

You get a vision of the ruin of yourself, you get a vision of the ruin of the world, and you even get a vision of the ruin of the church! In verse 16 it says that in that preparation, and when we get that vision of the ruin, we need to expect to be alone. He says in verse 16 that the rulers knew nothing, where I was or what I did, 'neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work'. Those who are engrossed in their careers, in their domestic lives, in their leisures and their pleasures, will not have time for such an all-consuming passion as this. That's why you need to expect to be alone if you're going to follow God's voice in your heart.

The apostle Paul was alone, in 2 Timothy 1 verse 15: 'This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me...Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia'. He loved the word more than he loved God's will.

Now notice, as a man pointed out to me recently, it doesn't say that he didn't love Christ, it doesn't say that he had backslidden into the world, it says that he loved the world more than Christ - probably because he realised that if he followed this apostle Paul any further his life would be at stake! Oh, we can fault Demas, can't we? Preach a sermon on him, castigate him, but how many of us love the world more to such an extent that we will not pay the final price in our devotion to the Saviour? Ultimately Demas had no time for the cross, but Paul has said: 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world'. Well, Nehemiah's preparation at the ruins comprised of anticipating opposition, contemplating sacrifice, cultivating God's secret dealings in his heart, awaiting a vision of ruin from Almighty God, expecting to be alone in his understanding of it all - where are you, where am I, in our preparation for God's work?

Let me leave you just in the last couple of moments with his preparation of the remnant people in verses 17 to 20. Here's a few things that he gave them - first he gave them a frank appraisal of the situation, he said: 'Ye see the distress that we are in...', and bam, bam, bam he went through it all. He didn't paper over the cracks, he told it like it was - and just in the same way that you like when you go to the doctor and there's bad news to be imparted, you want him to tell you the truth! Nehemiah didn't believe in a one-man ministry, that he should carry the can, but he encouraged all the other people to come that we be no more a reproach. I believe this, that whenever God starts to work He often starts to work in a small remnant of His people, just like here in Jerusalem. God gives a vision to a small group exercised of Himself - wasn't that the same with Elijah? Elijah was depressed, he was ready to die: 'Lord, take my life, I alone am left, I'm the only one fighting for the cause' - and God had to humble him and say: 'There are yet 7000 men who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal'.

Will you give yourself, your own soul, a frank appraisal and assessment of its spiritual condition? Do you ever have a spiritual MOT, where you take time to sit before God and analyse your life, your motives, your practices, your habits? Do you tell it like it is, or do you try to explain it away? When you feel convicted do you stifle, and muzzle, and muffle that still small voice that says: 'That's not right, you should be there, you should be doing this'? Well, the fact of the matter is that what we need today is a frank appraisal of the situation, because that is what will matter when we get to the judgment seat of Christ. When Christ's fiery laser beam eyes scrutinise everything that we've ever done, said and thought, we'll wish we had done it before Him and sorted it out.

Here's the second way he prepared them, not only giving them a frank appraisal that was necessary, but in verse 18 he gave them a motivating exhortation: 'Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me, the hand of God can bless you'. 'I told them of the hand of God that was upon me', he gave them a motivating exhortation. 'God has put His hand on my life', Nehemiah says, 'and He can do the same for you if you'll give your life over to Him'. I love Christian biography, I know some men that don't like it because they feel - and this tells me a story or two - they feel that it sets standards too high, and it makes fairytales out of men that are impossible. Now I know sometimes it doesn't give you all of their faults, and the stories aren't warts and all, but I'll tell you this: they give you a fair motivating exhortation to a holy and a godly life.

We think of these Bible characters like Nehemiah as something out of Lewis Carroll's writings, something beyond us, that somehow these men were special, they were different than you or me. But when we read biographies, Christian biographies of even the 20th century, we see men of like passions as we are - yet they prevailed with God! Do you read Christian biography? Do you know what's brilliant about doing it? The Psalmist says in Psalm 42: 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him', and when I read these stories about Hudson Taylor, and D. L. Moody, and C. H. Spurgeon and all the rest of them, it encourages my soul because I can hope in God that I shall yet praise Him for His wonderful work in my life if I give myself over to Him. Is that not a motivating exhortation? Nehemiah is saying: 'I want to tell you about the good hand of God that's been upon me, it can be upon you!'.

Then in verse 18, the second part and the last part, there was an encouraging response from the people: 'And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work'. 'Let us rise up and build', we're not interested in building an empire for the Iron Hall, we're interested in furthering the name and the gospel of Jesus Christ, and getting people more into this building and winning them for Jesus on their level! Who will go with us? Who will say 'Let us arise and build'? Who will strengthen their hand to do the work? How are you strengthening your hand for the work of the Lord that you're involved in?

Oh, there are many ways we could talk about how you do that, through times alone with God as we've already spoken about, but are you doing it? - that's the question. The predictable persecution came too in verse 19, which is very telling - the devil, when he faces us, doesn't just give up after the first attempt: 'When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king'. Their first opposition in verse 10 was maybe only in their thoughts, they were grieved that someone had come to look after the Jews, now they're being outspoken about it: 'Who do you think you are?'. They're laughing at them! But the fact of the matter is, when you go up a gear spiritually so does the devil! But remember, remember John's words: 'Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them because greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world'.

Finally, after that predictable persecution, there was confidence in God - and if you want all these headings I can give you them afterwards. Verse 20: 'Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem'. He had confidence in God: 'God will prosper us' - Hallelujah! He would not be discouraged by those who had no part in spiritual blessing! It's always the same, isn't it? The people who want to tell you what night of the week to pray on are the ones that never come to the prayer meeting, isn't that right? They'll tell you what you're doing wrong, but they're never there with you, they never strengthen their hand for the work! They're not sacrificially giving, they're not moving, they're not praying, they're not agonising, they're not encouraging, they're not supporting! But praise God for men and women who have confidence in God, because they know God has blessed them and they have proved God, and when men like that take a lead the people will say: 'Let us arise and build!'.

Where are you? Do you anticipate opposition? Are you contemplating sacrifice? Are you cultivating God's dealings secretly in your heart? Are you aware that you may have to await a vision of spiritual ruin? Are you prepared to be alone? Will you give people a frank appraisal of the situation, and even yourself? But will you be motivated by the encouragements in God's word, and will you take confidence in God? Does He have all of you? Are you completely surrendered to Him? Oh, I pray that today - we're all involved in the work in one way or another I hope - that we will be prepared, prepared for the work.

Father, help us, help us to surrender, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - March 2004

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Building For God - Chapter 4

"Great Works And Their Beginnings - Pt 1"

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We're resuming our series again, and this I think is our fourth morning on the series entitled 'Building For God'. We're going to look this morning at our study of chapter 3 under the title 'Great Works And Their Beginnings' - great works and their beginnings, because right at the beginning of chapter 3 is the start of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Of course we saw, at the very beginning, the man, the man that God chose for the hour, who was Nehemiah. He was a man of burden, he was a man of prayer, he was a man of action, and in the next two studies we looked in chapter 2 and chapter 1 at Nehemiah's preparation for this work. It wasn't just a matter of him seeing the need, and then getting up and doing something about it, but there was spiritual preparation and practical preparation that were necessary before he actually went to Jerusalem to do God's work.

So now we're taking up, as it were, the sword and the trowel, we're about to begin God's work in chapter 3. Now we're not going to read all of chapter 3, because it's quite a long chapter full of very difficult names and so on, but what we are going to do is look at individual verses throughout this chapter that teach us how great works have their beginnings. So keep your Bible open at chapter 3, and we will move from verse to verse occasionally throughout this morning's message.

The workers are beginning to build, and over 40 times we have this word mentioned in the book 'repairing' - and as you read down chapter 3, for instance take verse 8 just as an example, you find this word over and over again: 'Next unto him repaired Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, of the goldsmiths. Next unto him also repaired Hananiah the son of one of the apothecaries, and they fortified Jerusalem unto the broad wall' - but you have that word 'repaired, repaired, repaired' right throughout the chapter, and indeed it's the theme of this book. The children of Israel are fortifying the walls that have been broken down, they're rebuilding the walls and the gates of Jerusalem that were important for the protection of God's people.

Now if I could just cast your mind back a few weeks to the very beginning of this study, we saw the importance of a wall not just for a city in these days of the Old Testament, but also for homes. You remember we read that in Deuteronomy 22 verse 8 Moses laid down in the law that 'When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thine house, if any man fall from thence'. So every new house, building that was built, had to have a battlement, or if you like a wall or a fence around its roof - the reason being protection. Not just primarily protection from invaders without, but those who would be on the roof - whether it be children, or young people, or elderly folk - who may fall over the edge because there is no boundary of protection.

Now there is the same thought, we saw, in the battlement that was put around the city - it was to protect from invasion from without, and also from infiltration within of false deities, religions and armies of other nations. We went through the Bible, I hope you can remember at least, and we saw that the roof was often a place of communion and a place of retirement. In 1 Samuel 9:25, Samuel communed with Saul on the rooftop. In the New Testament, in Acts 10, we read of the apostle Peter going up to the rooftop to pray. We read of the rooftop as being a place of testimony, a place of witness, for in Matthew's gospel 10 and verse 27 the Lord Jesus said: 'What ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops'. So this was a living area of protection for you and your family, but it was also a place of communion, a place you could pray and meditate upon God's word. The reason why there was this fence around it was to protect you from falling out

of that place, and protect it from others coming in and destroying it on you. It offered a place of protection and security.

Now around the city a wall or a fence also made it possible to cultivate spiritual lives without outside interference. You will know that the people of God in the Old Testament were continually following other gods of other nations, other deities, bowing down to idols of stone and gold and jewels - but this wall around Jerusalem proved to be a protection, at least at some times, to the infiltration of false deities and philosophies of religion coming among the people of God. Now the awful news that gave Nehemiah his burden was that that wall of protection had been broken down, and the potential spiritual decline and erosion of God's people because of that. We read in chapter 2 and in verse 13 the awful scene that Nehemiah saw: 'And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire'.

Now can I make an analogy, indeed I believe a valid application, of these truths in Nehemiah's prophecy to the state and predicament of the church of Jesus Christ in the West today. The walls are broken down, the walls of protection, the gates to keep the enemy out have been opened up - many would say they have been destroyed and are lying in rubble, and the world is now infiltrating the church, and the church is now infiltrating the world. Wasn't it Horatius Bonar who said: 'I looked for the church and I found it in the world, I looked for the world and I found it in the church' - the reason being that our spiritual walls of protection that have been given to us by God to keep us secure internally and externally have been broken down.

Now chapter 3 is teaching us today, if it teaches us anything, that the ministry that we need in a day of dereliction like our day, is a ministry of building up for God again. We need to be a people who are willing to build up the church of Jesus Christ once more. We will see today how that is done, but before we go on any further can I ask you: are you a builder for God? We saw in the studies that we're doing on a Monday evening in 1 Corinthians, that the word 'edify' that Paul keeps telling these Corinthian believers to do for one another, simply means 'to build up'. Are we edifying people? Believers in Christ, are we building one another up? Are we building the church of God collectively through soul-winning and through encouraging and enthusing those believers in Christ and seeing them matured into the full man, the perfect man in Christ?

Warren Weirsbe said: 'Some people in the church are constructionalists, they're helping to get the job done. Others are destructionalists, they are busy tearing things down. The third group are obstructionalists, they create problems for the people who are trying to do the work'. You need not necessarily be someone who pulls things down, but all you need to do is just sit in the way lazily, lethargically with an inertia that cannot be from the Spirit of God, and prevent God working in the hearts of those whom He's using in this day and age. Which are you? Are you a constructionalist, a destructionalist, or an obstructionalist?

A constructionalist not only in the church, but can I ask you: are you a constructionalist in your own heart? Because the symptom of the walls of protection and security being broken down in the church is only a sign that those walls of protection and security, spiritually in our own hearts, have been broken down long ago. You see there are walls of protection in our own souls that we need to guard, that we need to cultivate, that we need to build up, and they will have a ramification and effect on the church of Jesus Christ if we are not looking after our hearts. In fact in Proverbs 25:28 Solomon said: 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls'. How is your spirit today? How are the walls of protection? We are instructed by Jude's little epistle that we as believers, he was praying for them in verse 20 at the end of his epistle: 'But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith'.

Now you're saved, perhaps, today - can I ask you: are you building yourself up? Are you moving on? Are you one step further this year with Christ than you were last year? Or have you got stuck somewhere along the way? Jude says we ought to be continually building ourselves up, look at how he goes on: 'praying in the

Holy Ghost'. You might be praying, maybe you're not praying, but perhaps you are - but are you praying in the Holy Ghost? Are you seeing your prayers answered? Are you being guided by God as to what to pray for? He goes on: 'Keep yourselves in the love of God', meditating upon it, reading God's word, feeding your soul with the Scriptures, and then he finishes, 'looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life'. Looking for the coming, and living for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ - not going to be ashamed if He should come today or this hour!

He talks about soul winning: 'Of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh'. Trying to win others from false doctrine and from pagan sinfulness, and winning people for Christ - boys and girls, mums and dads, and older people for the Saviour! This is my question today: where are you? Where are we as an assembly? But effectively, what will determine where we are as an assembly, is where you are in your own heart - have the walls of protection and security been broken down?

Well, if they are, hopefully this morning we can start rebuilding them again. Let me start exhorting you to do such under this first heading that I want you to see in chapter 3, the pattern for the work - the pattern for the work. Nehemiah had a pattern that he set these people to work by, and I believe there are definite spiritual lessons in this pattern. It was the pattern of the gates that you have mentioned throughout this passage of Scripture, there are spiritual lessons for us to glean here I believe. If you look at verse 1 you'll read that: 'Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they builded the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel'.

Now, if you have been in Jerusalem, you may know that the sheep gate is just about on the North. If you can think of Jerusalem in a square sort of shape, well at the North - this is the old city I'm talking about - at the North there is the sheep gate. The sheep gate was the gate sheep destined for temple sacrifice were led as lambs to the slaughter through. Now I don't want to read too much into Scripture, but I want to show you the lessons that I believe are here for us as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is a pattern for the work of God always, and the first thing that we have to see is that the work must start at the sheep gate. The work must start at the place of sacrifice, that place where the Lord Jesus Christ bled for us and bore our sins. You cannot do a work for God or for Christ, unless you have first been to Calvary and been cleansed in the precious blood of the Lord Jesus.

In John chapter 10 the Saviour Himself said: 'I am the great shepherd: and the great shepherd giveth His life for the sheep', and the Lord Jesus entered through that sheep gate, metaphorically speaking, to go to His death on Calvary, to carry away our sins. Now listen: if you've never been to that place, and went through the sheep gate yourself, you cannot serve God. Maybe you've been wondering why trying to be a Christian has failed for you, and all your efforts to be a Sunday School teacher or a preacher, or going on evangelistic summer teams, has not worked for you, and you haven't got the buzz that everybody else seems to get, and you have never matured in your Christian life. Can I ask you: could the reason perhaps be that you have never entered through the sheep gate, you have never repaired the gate of the altar where you come by faith to the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance for salvation?

Can I ask some of you young people that have grown up in Christian homes, maybe your mother or your father or your grandfather or your grandmother have entered through that gate, but you have never built it up in your own heart, you've never been saved. Is that the reason why you're nowhere this morning? There's a lesson for us all in that. It was the only gate that was sanctified. There's a lovely truth about this gate: there were no bars or locks on the door, and isn't that a wonderful truth about the door of salvation? There's no locks or bars, you just come in by faith from the invitation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That was the first gate, now if you'll travel with me anticlockwise - you should know what that is after this

morning - anticlockwise, that direction, and go round each of these gates, there's a lesson for us all in each of them. The next gate after the sheep gate, after you've been to Calvary, is the fish gate - verse 3: 'But the fish gate did the sons of Hassenaah build, who also laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof'. The fish gate - do you remember the Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples: 'Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men'? I wonder are you going on with God, are you building for God, are you a fisher of men? Sometimes we reach an obstacle in our Christian lives, and we wonder why we're not going on - but if asked the question, 'Are you witnessing for Christ in the workplace? Are you talking to your family and friends about the Saviour who has died for them?', the answer would have to be 'No, I'm not', or 'I'm afraid to', or 'That's not my gift'. But the fact of the matter is that this fish gate needed to be rebuilt, as the church we need to ask the question: does the fish gate need to be rebuilt in our assembly? I mean, the effort that we make, the tangible literal effort to reach other people in this district for the Saviour, who are lost in their sins and on their way to hell.

How is the fish gate in your life? In verse 6 we read: 'Moreover the old gate repaired Jehoiada the son of Paseah, and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah; they laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, and the locks thereof, and the bars thereof', of the old gate. There are in the Scriptures what are called 'the old paths', Jeremiah said: 'Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, Where is the good way?; and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein'. 'The old paths' is simply a metaphor for the old truths of the word of God that have been handed down through centuries in the apostle's doctrine, the Bible.

We need to ask the question as the church, and as individuals: is the reason for the desolation in our day because the old gate has been broken down, and we are rejecting the old truths of God's word that generations past have seen fit to accept, and have lived in the good of them, because we feel in our human wisdom 'Well, we've got better ideas of how to God's work'. We saw last Monday night that the world is forever looking for some new thing, that's what the Athenians were striving after. One thing is common about the world and about worldly carnal Christians, and it is this: they harbour after the world's methods in rejection of God's basic truth which really works - and they refuse to go back to the old paths! I'm not talking about tradition here, I'm talking about God's word.

How are we when it comes to the old paths? There's the sheep gate, the fish gate, the old gate, and now look at verse 13 - we're still travelling around here anticlockwise round Jerusalem - verse 13: 'The valley gate repaired Hanun, and the inhabitants of Zanoah; they built it, and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof, and a thousand cubits on the wall unto the dung gate'. First of all the valley gate - now valleys in the Scriptures often describe a place of humiliation, going through the valley. Of course, there's no greater example of that than in Philippians chapter 2, where the Lord Jesus, we see Him coming from heaven and being humbled to become a man and a servant; and being found in fashion as a man, humbling himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Well, in our Christian lives, we not only need to get to Calvary, we not only need right away after salvation to tell others that we're Christians and to try and win souls for the Lord Jesus, and follow the old paths of God's word that we have revealed to us in scripture; but we need to come to a place of humility, where we lower ourselves before God and submit ourselves and see ourselves as crucified with Christ - abase ourselves!

'Lord, bend that stiffnecked I,
 Help me to bow the head and die,
 Beholding Him on Calvary
 Who bowed His head for me'.

How is that stiffnecked 'I' in your life? Me, mine, I. I've been reading recently the biography of Roy Hession, who is the man who wrote the book 'The Calvary Road'. He's just writing, and telling us how we are to humble ourselves at the feet of the cross and experience the filling of God's Spirit in our lives. But this book is called 'My Calvary Road', where he outlines how he saw this happen in his own life - and he says these words, I quote to you: 'In January 1947, I had a long-distance call to Dr Joe Church who was just returned to England from East Africa having experienced a deep and continuing revival in Rwanda. During our talk he said these words', listen carefully this is tremendous, "The Christians of England, Roy, seem to have the strangest ideas of what revival is. They think it is the roof blowing off, when really it is the bottom falling out". What a description of revival! 'They think it is the roof blowing off, when really it is the bottom falling out'. The bottom has to fall out before the roof blows off, you have to get to that point of humility before God, where you are totally and absolutely surrendered to Jesus Christ!

Now don't tell me all of you here today are totally and absolutely surrendered to Jesus Christ, because you're only making a liar of yourself! The top would blow off this church if that was the case! Where are you with regard to the valley gate? Does it need to be rebuilt in your life? We go on, we saw in verse 14 the dung gate: 'the dung gate repaired Malchiah the son of Rechab, the ruler of part...' - and we saw that the dung gate had to be repaired. Now what was the dung gate? Well, we believe that the dung gate was the gate of the city where all the waste and all the refuse was taken out of to cleanse the city. This is so important, yes we have been cleansed in salvation by the blood of Christ, and John tells us that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us, and goes on cleansing us from all sin - we don't need a second Calvary experience. What we do need is fresh cleansing every day before God in confession. We need to come before God - and listen, if you're in the valley and asking: 'Lord, touch me, and show me, search me O God', as we sang this morning, 'See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting' - if God shows you: 'Here, David, here's something in your life that needs to be put right', you need to put it out the dung gate! You need to cleanse yourself of that thing, it's really talking of repentance.

Did Paul not say in 2 Corinthians 7:1: 'Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God'. Where are you with regard to the dung gate, my friends? What is in your life that ought to be carried out that gate? You're asking why God maybe isn't blessing you, I'm asking you: has God not put His finger on something that's not right in your testimony, and you have done nothing about it, when you should be carrying it out that dung gate, and cleansing yourself and perfecting yourself in the holiness and fear of Almighty God?

In verse 15 we have the gate of the fountain: 'But the gate of the fountain repaired Shallun', he built up again the gate of the fountain. Now water in the Scriptures often referred to the Holy Spirit of God, and I hope that you remember that our Lord Jesus Christ in John's gospel chapter 7 and verse 37 said: 'In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)' - but Jesus is glorified today! He is in heaven, a glorified Man at the right-hand of the Father, and therefore we can enter through the fountain gate. Oh, but there are a few gates to get in through before the fountain gate - you've got to come to Calvary. I believe you've got to confess Christ in witness, you've got to come to the place where before God you debase yourself in humility at the valley gate, the dung gate, you need to cast out all that sin that's in your life - and then you will know the filling of the Spirit of God at the fountain gate!

Can I ask you where you're stuck today? Can you ask yourself why you're stuck there today? I think many Christians, could I say most - I don't know, maybe I'm wrong - most are stuck at the sheep gate. They've got through and that's about it, and they haven't gone any further!

Then we find the water gate in verse 26, that's nothing to do with Richard Nixon! Verse 26: 'Moreover the Nethinims dwelt in Ophel, unto the place over against the water gate toward the east, and the tower that lieth out'. Now we're told in Ephesians 5:26, Paul prayed that the Lord would sanctify and cleanse the church of Jesus Christ of all the filthiness by the water of the word of God. I believe that this signifies, the water gate, the word of God - and it's interesting that it's the seventh gate mentioned in chapter 3, and the word of God is perfect. Psalm 119 says: 'Thy word, O God, is settled in heaven', and the interesting thing about this gate here is that there were no repairs needed, no repairs necessary! Isn't that remarkable? You don't need to add to God's word, you don't need to take it away to be perfect - all you need to do is accept God's word and go through that gate!

Then we find after the water gate there is the horse gate in verse 28: 'From above the horse gate repaired the priests, every one over against his house'. The horses would have come in because of warfare - the armies of the people of Israel would have went in and out that gate on horseback. You know, we as Christians, as 2 Timothy 2 tells us in verses 3 and 4 are to be soldiers of Christ, enduring hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ - and Paul said to Timothy: 'No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier'. Now listen my friend: you're saved, you may have witnessed now and again in your lifetime, have you gone to the valley where you've submitted yourself before God and surrendered to Him, cast out of your life all the filth and sin, and allowed the Holy Spirit to enter in in all of His fullness? Are you reading God's word and being sanctified in it day by day? And are you a soldier, are you fighting for the Lord Jesus Christ? If you're not in a battle today, I question whether you're a soldier, at least whether you're truly following after the Lord! You should be in some battle somewhere if you're going to be a good soldier!

Then in verse 29 we see the East gate: 'After them repaired Zadok the son of Immer over against his house. After him repaired also Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah, the keeper of the east gate'. Now in scripture the East gate signifies the coming, the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ - in Matthew 24:27 the Lord Himself said: 'For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be'. He will come from the east - are you looking, are you waiting, and are you watching for the coming of the Lord Jesus? Maybe the reason why your walls are broken down in your heart is that the reality of the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ is not a reality in your life? In fact, if Jesus were to come back again today, you would be disappointed. You wouldn't be able to execute your plans and get up to the things you have wanted to do in your life. Are you watching, are you waiting for the coming of the Lord Jesus? Is the truth of the second coming of the Saviour prevalent within the church of the living God today? Is that why the walls are derelict and broken down?

Then the last gate in this chapter is verse 31: 'After him repaired Malchiah the goldsmith's son unto the place of the Nethinims, and of the merchants, over against the gate Miphkad', note that word, 'and to the going up of the corner'. 'Miphkad' is in Hebrew word for 'judgment', Miphkad. This is the judgment gate, signifying 'appointment' is the literal meaning, 'a count or census'. It's the idea of troop coming before the Commander for review and for criticism. What you have here is the full picture of the Christian experience - follow round with me as we tour round it. The sheep gate where we're saved; the fish gate where we confess Christ and share Him; the old gate where we take up the truths of God's word and follow in them; the valley gate where we surrender ourselves totally and completely to the will of God; the dung gate where we repent continually of anything in our lives that is displeasing to God; the fountain gate where He fills us full of His Holy Spirit; the water gate where day by day we sanctify ourselves, as it were, continually washing ourselves in God's word; the horse gate as we fight these battles of temptation and witness; and the East gate as we look for the coming of the Lord Jesus; and the judgment gate as we, as believers, await the judgment seat of the Lord Jesus Christ - and then we come back to the sheep gate, full circle.

There are two other gates mentioned in this book, the gate of Ephriam and the prison gate, which bring the

number of these gates up to 12 - which we know in Revelation 21 is the number of the gates in the new Jerusalem that one day we will inhabit. My question I'm asking you this morning - this was only my first point - but the question is this: there is a pattern for doing the work of God in the life of the believer - you can't just get saved and say: 'Well, I'm just going to have God use me, and I'm going to go into this work or that work or the other work, or I want this position in the church, or that position - there is a pattern whereby God works! You can fill that role or that office, whatever it may be, but if you want God to bless, if you want the Spirit of Almighty God to come into your life, into your home, into your church, and really see a work done for the Saviour, you need to follow God's pattern! You need to start at Calvary:

'It was down at the feet of Jesus,
O that happy, happy day'

The burdens are lifted at Calvary! Are you saved? Are you witnessing? Are you submitting yourselves, daily taking up your cross and following Him? Are you abasing yourself? Are you continually repenting of the sins in your life? Are you filled - that's a question not for charismatics or pentecostals, but Bible-believing Christians! Has the bottom of your world fallen out, so that the top of your head may blow off with the blessings of Christ? Are you filled with the Holy Spirit? Are you experiencing the blessings of God's word in the water gate? Are you fighting God's battles with Him from the horse gate? Are you looking for the coming of the Lord Jesus from the East gate? Are you living in the light of that judgment gate, where one day we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and every man's work shall be manifest, for the day shall declare it because it shall be revealed by fire, and the fire shall try every man's work according to what it is?

My friend, are we doing God's work according to God's pattern? You see if we're not: we need to, like Nehemiah, go on a tour round all those gates, and rebuild them one by one - and then, maybe, we'll begin to know the blessing of God personally and corporately as God's people.

That's only my first point, come back next week and you'll get the next two on great works and their beginnings.

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Building For God - Chapter 5

"Great Works And Their Beginnings - Pt 2"

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Last week was our fourth study, and we entered into chapter 3 of this book. The first week we dealt with 'The Man for the Hour', Nehemiah the man of burden, the man of prayer and the man of action. Then we looked at the preparation for the work - Nehemiah didn't just enter into the work after he got a burden and prayed about it for a while, but he actually had to go through a process of preparation given to him, I believe and we saw, from the Holy Spirit of God. Then last week we began chapter 3, and we only got through the first point of it, but it was important to take time, and we'll take time over the rest of it this morning. We took it under the heading 'Great Works And Their Beginnings', so this is 'Great Works and Their Beginnings Part 2'.

We noted that in chapter 3, and indeed throughout this book, the whole theme is repairing - repairing and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. You remember that we saw and we recapped last week how walls were for protection within Judaeon society, and we saw in the book of Deuteronomy and chapter 22 that everybody who built a house had to have a wall of protection around the house lest anybody fall out or fall in. We saw that there was the same thought behind the wall being around a city, it was there for protection. Just as there was a wall around a rooftop - the rooftop being a place of communion, a place of retirement and relaxation, often it was a place of prayer, a place of testimony where people heralded messages, and the Lord Jesus told us 'What ye hear in the secret place, herald from the rooftops' - but we saw that it was also a place of protection in the place of security nationally.

Because the walls of Jerusalem were broken down it was a sign, yes, of God's displeasure; it was a sign of the backsliding of God's people; but it was also a great danger that outside influences from the Gentile world would begin to infiltrate among God's people. Foreign gods, foreign customs, practices and culture that would come between them - Jerusalem, Israel - and Jehovah, their covenant God. We saw in chapter 2, and we need to refresh ourselves, the vision that Nehemiah saw in verse 13: 'And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire'.

What a sight this was to the prophet of God who had a heart after God, but like every other prophet there was a two-way relationship in love - there was a heart for God, but also a heart for God's people, and a desire that God's heart and the people's heart would be brought together. Now, the whole message really up to now in this series has been that we as the people of God today in our generation need to be a people who are building for God. The walls of spiritual life within the church at large, certainly within Western society and our society of the United Kingdom, morally, socially, beginning to be economically, are breaking down - and certainly religiously, ecclesiastically, we're seeing a great apostasy, a great dearth even among Bible-believing people of God. Will we take the challenge? Please don't miss this message as we go through many details this morning - don't miss the clarion call of the Spirit of God in this book, if there is any at all, and it is this: we need today to be builders for God; builders in our own lives, and builders in our church, wherever that may be.

Remember Warren Weirsbe's words last week? 'Some are constructionalists, helping to get the job done. Some are obstructionalists, getting in the way of those who are trying to get the job done. Some are destructionalists, and they're tearing things down' - which are you? Which am I? What am I doing about the

walls around my own heart? Remember the words of Solomon: 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls'. How are you this morning? How is it with your soul? Christian, I'm talking to you, how are the walls of protection in your heart today?

Well, last week we looked at the pattern for the work of God, and there is a pattern - you just don't launch into it, but there is a definite pattern, and we saw definite lessons from the gates of Jerusalem that also had to be restored. We went through them one by one, and you remember we started just about the north of the old city of Jerusalem, and we worked our way anticlockwise, and we took the sheep gate. We saw how we need to be at Calvary, that was the gate that the sacrificial animals came in - and we need first, if we're going to do a work for God, to have been to Calvary for the cleansing blood, to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. Then the second gate that needed to be restored in verse 3 was the fish gate, we saw that the Lord Jesus told Peter, remember, 'I will make you fishers of men, if you follow me'. That's what God wants us to be - not saved and stuck, but trying to win other people for the Lord Jesus - that's why He's left us here on the earth, is it not? Then in verse 6 we saw the old gate, the old paths of the word of God - we need to be imbibing the teaching of God's word and the apostles doctrine that we have been given in the Scriptures.

Then we saw in verse 13 the valley gate, the experience of anyone who wants to go on with God: we must lower ourselves in the sight of God, take up our cross and follow the Lord Jesus - self is to die and we are to live in Christ. In order for that to happen, the dung gate has to be erected - verse 14 - and all the old sin that's in our lives that God puts His finger on has to be carried out, we have to be cleansed. When that happens, verse 15, we come to the fountain gate, and it is rebuilt, and the Holy Spirit comes in and fills us full of His influence when our life is completely surrendered to Him. Then we saw in verse 26 the water gate, the Scriptures, the Holy word of God that washes us and cleanses us as we read it day by day - how we need to be in God's word if we're going to do the work for the Lord! Then there's the horse gate in verse 28, when there is a battle all the armies would have come in that horse gate - there's a battle on, and we need to be in the battle, and if we don't find ourselves in the battle there ought to be a question asked about whether the horse gate is erected in our lives.

Then in verse 29 there was the East gate, that East gate that the Lord Jesus Christ will return through. We need to be a people who are not living for down here, but living for up there, and looking for the glorious appearing of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Are we a people like that? Then in verse 31 we saw the Christian experience right from Calvary, right round to the day when we will stand at the bema judgment seat of Christ, this gate 'Miphkad', which in Hebrew means 'judgment, census'. We will stand and give an answer, do you know that, believer? You will give an answer as to how you have lived your life before Almighty God.

Well, the full picture of the Christian life there, I feel - but what we want to move on to this morning is not just the pattern for the work, you have to go around those gates and rebuild them, yes; but what I want you to see is that it's significant that in this chapter 3 God takes careful record of those who built up these gates, and those who began to build up the walls of Jerusalem. Do you realise this? That God takes record of those who serve Him in His work, and serve Him in His way? And so not only do we have a record of these gates that were rebuilt in chapter 3, but we have a record of the names and the families and professions of the individuals who were engaged in the building. God takes note of what you do for Him - do you realise that? If you're doing nothing for the Lord where you sit this morning, God is taking note of it. But more than that, maybe you're labouring away in secret, maybe it's in prayer, maybe it's doing a work for folk that they don't even know about themselves - well, note that God takes note of it! That's what's important! Not what men see, but what your heavenly Father sees in secret, and He'll reward you openly for doing it!

This is a sobering thought, so I want us to see first of all this morning from chapter 3 the people in the work. We've seen the pattern for the work, well, this is the people in the work. Now I want you to travel with me

again on this journey around the city walls, starting at the sheep gate at the top, and this time we'll go clockwise - the opposite direction, for those who are simple among you! Now if you imagine in your mind what you will find, and it's hard just in the reading of this chapter to see it right away, but I'll try and tease it out for you, you will see every man at his appointed task. He was where Nehemiah, effectively God, had put him; and he was labouring with all his might in that place, his appointed place.

What you will see this morning is that there were no shirkers - maybe one or two - but generally speaking, there were no shirkers. 'I'm not doing that work, that's somebody else's work, that's not mine', or 'I don't like the work that I've been given to do, I want to do his work. His part of the wall has got the sun shining on it, and that's the part I want to be on' - no! There were no grumblers: 'I don't want to do the work. I haven't got time to do the work, I've got other things, I've got the dishes to do, I've got the kids to take to school, I've got a career, I don't want to do the work' - no shirkers, no grumblers. In fact, what is very characteristic of this chapter is that the people in a general sense were united together for one cause: to get the job completed and the walls built!

Need I say any more? How irresistible the church of Jesus Christ would be, this church would be, if everybody was at their appointed task, doing what God had called them to, doing it with all their might for one cause: that the name of Jehovah exalted should be. There is a place of ministry for everybody in the church of Jesus Christ, but particularly for those who have a mind to work. You're in the body, and you're a member of the body, but what are you doing in the body?

Now look at the people in the work here, verse 1: 'Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests' - now don't read over that and ignore those facts. Here's the high priest, and he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. All his priests, they're all rolling up their sleeves and getting involved in building the walls of Jerusalem. If you look at verses 12 to 19, just look at verse 12: 'And next unto him repaired Shallum the son of Halohesh, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem' - rulers, statesman, politicians! They were involved in this work, they didn't shirk the responsibility or say 'This is below me'. Priests, rulers, then you look at verse 8: 'Next unto him repaired Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, of the goldsmiths. Next unto him also repaired Hananiah the son of one of the apothecaries', they make perfume, 'and they fortified Jerusalem unto the broad wall'. There were craftsmen and tradesmen involved, ordinary men, 5'8" men, working a 9 to 5 job - they got involved in this work because they identified with it.

Incidentally, we haven't got time to look at it, but if you were to go to the building of the tabernacle that I referred to in that four-week series on giving not so long ago, some of the things that were to be given to the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 35 were gold and silver, necessary things. But there was a third factor: you could give money, you could give something like a gift that could be used within the assembly, already made, maybe it was in your house, and you thought that it could be used in the church - and you could give, or buy something and dedicate it to it. But there was a third thing that comes under the title of these craftsmen - the women who were able to embroider, and their trade was sewing, were to make the beautiful garments of the tabernacle, and they were to put their trade work into the house of God.

You don't get much of that today - everybody wants to get the bill to you as quick as they possibly can for doing something among the people of God. Do you give of the trade and the skills and the crafts that God has given you, back to God's work? Then in verse 12 - in case you women, who sometimes feel you're a little bit left out - at the end of the verse, this ruler Shallum, ruler of a half part of Jerusalem, 'he and his daughters' got involved in this work. There were noble women who were exercised, dedicated women, to the work of the Lord here. We need dedicated women to God's work even in this assembly.

One other interesting fact that we find in verses 2, 5 and 7, is that God often also calls outsiders to help with the work. In verse 2: 'And next unto him builded the men of Jericho' - do you remember the men of Jericho?

Remember the walls of Jericho, and the story of how the people of Israel got in there? Well, this is the men of Jericho, and they're getting involved - not now in putting up walls to keep the children of Israel out, but putting up walls to keep them in and keep the enemy out! In verse 5 we read: 'And next unto them the Tekoites repaired', people, not Israelites, there they were repairing the work of the Lord. In verse 7: 'next unto them repaired Melatiah the Gibeonite' - do you remember the Gibeonites? They duped the people of God into dwelling with them in Jerusalem, they made a covenant with the people - well, here they are now getting up, previous enemies of the people of God from outside, and getting involved in the work!

Then we see that there are some who were more willing to do work than others, and willing to do more work than others. In verse 11 we read: 'Malchijah the son of Harim, and Hashub the son of Pahathmoab, repaired the other piece, and the tower of the furnaces'. They didn't just repair a piece of the wall, but they went the extra mile - and that's what we need in the work of God, people to go the extra mile, otherwise nothing would be done! In verse 19: 'And next to him repaired Ezer the son of Jeshua, the ruler of Mizpah, another piece over against the going up to the armoury at the turning of the wall'. He finished the turning of the wall, and we see in verse 21 that 'After him repaired Meremoth the son of Urijah the son of Koz another piece, from the door of the house of Eliashib even to the end of the house of Eliashib'. They did more than was asked of them!

We can hardly at times get someone to do what is their duty, let alone do what's extra in the work of the Lord! Here's a very interesting verse before we move on from the people in the work, look at verse 11 for a moment: 'Malchijah the son of Harim, and Hashub the son of Pahathmoab, repaired the other piece, and the tower of the furnaces'. Now you wouldn't know them from Adam, I'm sure - but if you go back to Ezra chapter 10, and try and remember their names - it's hard even to pronounce them, but try and remember them! Ezra 10 and verse 31 - verse 44 first of all: 'All these had taken strange wives: and some of them had wives by whom they had children'. All of these had taken strange wives, and God's prophet ordered them to renege and divorce their wives, because it was not God's will that they should have married them in the first place. Among these names in verse 31 we have: 'And of the sons of Harim', look back to Nehemiah 3, where were we? Verse 11: 'Malchijah the son of Harim', there he is! Could we say that this man, who had taken unto him a wife that he should not have, who was a backslider effectively, is now engaged and restored in the work of the Lord!

Isn't it wonderful that God is the God of a second chance, and the third and fourth and the umpteenth chance! You can't take God for granted, you can't play fast and loose with God, but if you find yourself this morning saying: 'How can I get involved in the work of the Lord? Look what I've done! Look where I've been!'. Here's a man who got the vision of the work, and got effectively the cleansing of the blood from the sheep gate right to the very judgment bema, where he was prepared already to stand before it in repentance - and he was involved in the work of the Lord. Isn't that tremendous? It's hard to believe all these things are there, but they are here.

The significant thing with all these people, different people, different backgrounds, different skills and abilities and statuses - they all co-operated in the work of the Lord and served the Lord! Isn't it wonderful? Well, they all did it, but a few - in verse 5 we read: 'And next unto them the Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their LORD'. 'Their Lord', isn't that a lovely phrase? But you have to read the rest of the verse: 'they put not their necks to the work of their Lord'. There are some people in the work of the Lord, and they do nothing! And some of them are nobles! You can even be high up in the church of Jesus Christ, it matters not - these were leaders among the people, of God's people, their Lord - but they weren't putting their neck on the line for God's work. I say no more, just to say and remind you of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3: 'Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is' - what a prospect.

We've looked at the pattern for the work, the people in the work, and now finally the place to begin the work - this is where I was trying to get to all along - the place to begin the work. Now look at verse 10 with me for a moment: 'And next unto them repaired Jedaiah the son of Harumaph, even over against his house. And next unto him repaired Hattush the son of Hashabniah'. Now what I want you to note in that verse is this: 'even over against his house'. Do you see that? 'Even over against his house'. Then look at verse 23: 'After him repaired Benjamin and Hashub over against their house'...over against their house...'After him repaired Azariah the son of Maaseiah the son of Ananiah by his house'. Then look at verse 28: 'From above the horse gate repaired the priests, every one over against his house'. Verse 29: 'After them repaired Zadok the son of Immer over against his house'. Then finally verse 30: 'After him repaired Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph, another piece. After him repaired Meshullam the son of Berechiah over against his chamber'.

'Over against their house', now what is that telling us? It's telling us the place to begin the work of the Lord - the work of the Lord must start at home! The first place to serve the Lord is not in the church, not in the organisation, not in the mission-field or the pulpit, but in the home behind the closed door with the family. What a difference it would make to the work of the Lord if we were working for the Lord in our domestic lives! Every real work for God must begin at home, even the preaching in the pulpit - if I'm not with the Lord at home, if this is all a farce and I don't have a devotional life of prayer all day with God in preaching God's word, it means nothing, it's not a work for God, it's a work for me!

It's the same whatever faculty of the work you're in, it must begin at home - and this is a principle within the Word. You remember the Acts of the apostles, the disciples were to begin preaching the Gospel where? At Jerusalem, then to Samaria, then to the uttermost parts of the world eventually - but they had to have victory in the place where they once had failure. They had to start at home. Is it not true that the church of Jesus Christ is no stronger than its homes? How strong are our homes? What is our family representation like in the place of worship? What is the family altar like, where we meet together with God once a day, at least try to, and open God's word and just pray a prayer to him as a family? What is it like? Is our faith real at home, or is it something that just happens once a week when we come together in this fashion?

Now listen, if we're going to pray with great fervency and passion for a revival, as we have been doing, and the one God to build up His church - He's not going to pass by our homes in the process! Many of our homes today are in great need of spiritual rebuilding, they're broken down, they're in dereliction, and we must begin at home if we are to do business with God and know God's blessing. I have been greatly blessed by the writings of Alan Redpath, and in his little book on the subject of Nehemiah he makes these observations about some of these men that built over against their house. I want to leave you with their names and the lessons that are in them, and I want you to take them to your heart: 'If you examine the record of those who repaired over against their house, you'll be impressed by the significance of their names. Each of their names has a meaning' - now you will know, I'm sure, that the Hebrew language is a great pictorial, colourful language. Names in Hebrew often have a meaning, and they're often a description of the character of the one who possesses the name - think for instance of God. Yahweh, or Jehovah as we have made it, the One who was, the One who is, the One who ever shall be - the covenant keeping God of Israel, who is the eternal God with neither beginning nor ending, who dwells in the eternal now. That describes the indescribable in one sense, but then you've got men like Joshua his name means 'Saviour', or 'Salvation'; you've got men like Jacob who was a wise old fox, a supplanter, his name literally means 'a thief' - remember he did his brother out of the birthright, and all of that great story of his wiliness with his family and among the people of God. There's meaning in names in Hebrew Scriptures.

Now let's look at four of these who repaired over against their own house. Look at verse 10, here's the first one that I want to let you see: 'next unto them repaired Jedaiah', or Jedadiah, 'the son of Harumaph'. Jedaiah, do you know what that literally means in Hebrew? 'Invoker of God', Jedaiah invoker of God! Let me put it in

your language: a man of prayer! A prayer warrior! One who was able to invoke God, summons God up by his faith, and cry and say: 'Lord, attend unto my prayer', and God bent His ear to his cry. He knew how to pray, and his life was founded on prayer. Can I ask all of us, and I ask my own heart this morning: how is the wall of prayer in your life? Could you be called an invoker of God, a prayer warrior? Is the wall of prayer broken down all around you? What's your family prayer life like? What happens when trouble enters into your home? What do you do? Do you go to the insurance company? Do you go to the counsellors or the psychiatrists? Do you go to your mum or your dad? What do you do? Do you go to prayer? Do you go to God? Are you an invoker of God, or do the walls of prayer lie in ruins around you? I'm not asking you now are you an active worker, I'm not asking how much you're doing, I'm not asking how much you're giving, I'm asking this: how much you pray!

Well, only you can answer that in your heart. Jedariah was an invoker for God - wouldn't it be a great thing, I think a revival would maybe break out overnight in this fellowship if every one of us determined, going from this place today, that we would build up the broken walls of prayer again in our hearts, in our homes, and in our assembly.

Let's look at verse 23 to Benjamin, verse 23: 'After him repaired Benjamin and Hashub over against their house'. Now Hashub doesn't have not significance, it just means 'associate of Benjamin', but the word 'Benjamin' means 'son of my right hand'. The sense is 'the one who is there for my help, the one who can protect me'. What we have here is Benjamin, the son of protection, building up his wall - what protection! How is the wall of protection in your home? Is it broken down? Is the television able to just flood all sorts of infidelity and immorality and idolatry into your home, that sacred haven of godliness that it ought to be, is that allowed - the world to infiltrate your home? I'm not saying you should just throw the television out the window this afternoon, that would maybe be a good thing for most of us, but I'm asking the question: is there any protection with regards to what your children watch, what you watch? The influences on our home - without becoming legalistic and overbearing upon our children, and provoking them to wrath, we need to make sure that our homes are a safe place, because there's no other safe place in this world for our children and for our loved ones! The blessing of Benjamin that we have in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 33 was this: 'The beloved of the LORD', Benjamin, 'shall dwell in safety by him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between his shoulders'.

You've seen some men, weightlifters, with big muscles, haven't you? And between their shoulders, you wouldn't like to get your hand stuck between them, they would crush you! Wouldn't they? What is our omnipotent God like? What are His arms like? What would it be to dwell between His shoulders? That is the blessing of those who protect their homes and their hearts in holiness. Not insurance policies, not that I have anything against them, but we ought not to be relying on the state or the world - we ought to be relying on our God, and we can do that if we commit ourselves to Him, and seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto us. You can't have absolute protection if you don't erect the walls of God's protection in your own life. It doesn't mean you'll be free from illness, or poverty, or danger, pain or death - but it will mean that you'll be free from worry, from fear, or from friction.

How are the walls of protection in your life? Let's move on to another name, verse 29, 'Zadok the son of Immer'. Now 'Zadok' just means justice, justice or integrity. How is the wall of integrity in your life? Do people say of you 'He can't be trusted as far as you could throw him'? Or 'I remember doing business with him a couple of years back, and he diddled me of so much, and I haven't heard anything since about it - calls himself a Christian!?' Men, women, what about your marriage vows? Made by you to one woman or one man in the sight of God, a covenant entered into - have you been faithful? Has there been integrity in your marriage? Do you long for the company of another that is not yours? Do you value someone other more than your husband or more than your wife? This is where the rubber meets the road: there are thousands of Christians who have lost their integrity, whether in business life, whether in social life, whether in spiritual

life - even among the people of God, servants of God, they have lost integrity! What about yours?

I must move on, the last one is still verse 29 'Zadok the son of Immer', and it's his father 'Immer', which means 'talkative'. I heard someone say recently that women, generally speaking, are generally speaking. You didn't get that one, did you? Women, generally speaking, are generally speaking! Forgive me! Talkativeness is a problem, isn't it? Especially among God's people. This is maybe not so much a wall that we want to build, talkative, this is a wall that we want to knock down and build up integrity in our conversation as well as our actions. Is there any greater weapon that is dangerous in the hand of a Christian or in his mouth, than the tongue - it is a fire that ignites the depths of hell! Some of you don't know how to handle it, bridle it! But we're talking about the home: how do you use your tongue in the home? Do you go away today from this place and tongue everybody that you don't like or you don't agree with that has rubbed you up the wrong way? Is that how we use our tongues as the people of God? Now I'm worthy of a lot of criticism - just don't tell me it! - but I'm worthy of a lot of it, but the fact of the matter is: are you one of these people that tears down the people of God, rather than builds them up, and even the servants of God? I love that great hymn that we often sing in our prayer meeting:

'What various hindrances we meet
When coming to the mercy seat'

And here's two verses that are near the end, and they're powerful:

'Have you no words? ah, think again,
words flow apace when you complain;
and fill your fellow-creature's ear
with the sad tale of all your care.

Were half the breath thus vainly spent,
to heaven in supplication sent;
our cheerful song would oftener be,
"Hear what the LORD has done for me."

If you prayed about me, prayed about the other Christians that you don't agree with, that you see faults with, that you will see that we're not Christ incarnate - but if you prayed for them, what a difference that would make, would it not?

Well, finally you'll let me deal with this one, verse 30: 'Meshullam the son of Berechiah over against his chamber'. Now maybe you're saying: 'Well, none of those names apply to me. I'm not talkative, I'm quite just, my integrity is intact, I feel my protection in the home is fine, and I am an invoker of God - I do pray, maybe not enough, but I do try my best'. Well, here's one for you, because this man Meshullam lived, we read, in a one bedroomed apartment - his chamber - not just his house here, but his chamber. He could have been a man that was very humble, what I mean is: an ordinary, working class, 5'8" gentlemen who felt insignificant in the whole ramification of the cycle of the universe. He wasn't a big hitter, as we would say, and maybe he had a very very small part to play in the work of the Lord - he only had a chamber, not even a house, a flat or an apartment we would call it today. Maybe he thought his work was nothing worth talking about or bothering with, it didn't really count - but we read here of 'Meshullam the son of Berechiah', and 'Berechiah' means 'devoted'. He was a little man that lived in a little house, but he devoted all that he had and all that he was to the work of God, and that's all God required of him. Isn't that lovely?

Are you devoted to the work of the Lord, whoever you are? The Lord has blessed this man Berechiah, and it doesn't have to be a big home for God to bless it, it can be a little home - because the blessing of the Lord

maketh rich! Just a humble little apartment, but absolute dedication in it. Maybe his home was even so small because he was giving so much money to help the building of the walls, and he was sacrificial in it, I don't know. But can I ask you as I close - we have looked at the pattern for the work, the people in the work, the place where the work ought to begin, the place to begin the work at home - as the Lord looks down upon all of us this morning, and He can see into the depths of your heart, what does God see? Does He see ruin in our homes? What does He see? Dereliction? What must we do? Arise and build!

The Lord Jesus said to the church at Sardis: 'Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found thy works perfect before God'. You see the things that you haven't let go, friend, don't let them go, strengthen them! Fire them up, stir up the gift of God that is within thee! Do you remember what Paul said to Titus in chapter 1 and verse 5? 'For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee'. We need to strengthen the things that remain - give yourself a pat on the back for what you're doing, but put in place, set in order what is not there - build it up!

I tell you, this wee part of East Belfast and your little home has not seen the half of what God can do, if you start building those walls today.

Our Father, we thank Thee that there is a work for Jesus ready at our hand, a work just for us the Master has planned. May we this morning haste to do His bidding, yield Him service true - and, Lord, may we in what we do, do it with all our might to the glory of God. But Lord, those of us who are not doing it, or not doing it well, may You speak to our hearts; and may this day we build up, strengthening the things that remain, and build up that which is lacking in our lives, in our church, and in this district. For the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.

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Building For God - Chapter 6

"The Enemy And The Overcomer"

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Nehemiah 4, and this morning we're looking at our sixth study in this book which we've entitled 'Building For God', and the title of this morning's message is 'The Enemy And The Overcomer'. Beginning to read at verse 1:

"But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall. Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders. So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work. But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it. Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them", and we end our reading at verse 9.

Now the simple lesson in chapter 4 that we will find out both this week and, God willing, the week after next, after Children's Day, is that if you're going to do a work for God - whatever that work may be, no matter how small or how large - you will face opposition to your work. You will face it, and this morning we're going to see how Nehemiah began to build the walls in chapter 3 - we took two weeks looking at that, how the walls were built - but as soon as he started the work there was an opposition that came his way. We will see this morning, first of all that there was external opposition from people outside of the people of the Jews; but then we will find that not only was there external opposition, but there was also internal opposition which is perhaps the most discouraging.

The fact of the matter is, and I want you to note before we go on any further, that if you're going to be a good spiritual leader for God, or worker for God, it is inevitable that hand-in-hand with that work will come opposition. If you don't want to ever face any opposition, then just don't do anything for God! Maybe that's why some of you don't do anything for God, because in the past you've faced opposition, you've faced criticism, and you couldn't handle it so you said: 'Enough of this! I can't take any more of this! I don't need this, I've enough problems in my life!'. So you put down your trowel and your sword, and you decide 'That's it, I'm not going to do anything for the Lord!'. But if you're about to take up the sword and the trowel, and do a work for the Lord - maybe go to the mission field, or be involved in some kind of work here in the assembly or in your local church, or an organisation you're involved with - you need to anticipate this fact: that you will face external and internal opposition if you want to do anything that counts for God. It's inevitable!

Some of you will be familiar with the writings of Oswald Chambers, you're maybe reading his daily readings at the minute 'My Utmost for His Highest', but he also wrote a book entitled 'Spiritual Leadership'. One of the chapters in that book is called 'The Cost of Leadership'. There's a lot of people, and they pander after the

position of an elder or a pastor, a missionary or a preacher or an evangelist, a Sunday School teacher, a Young People's leader, because they want to be in the limelight - anybody that's in the position will know that there's not much limelight there! It's not 'The Glamour of Leadership' that he calls this chapter, he calls it 'The Cost of Leadership', because that's where the rubber meets the road, that's the reality: if you're going to lead for God, in fact if you're going to do any work for God, it's going to cost you - there's a price to be paid!

In that chapter he makes this statement, and I quote it to you, take careful note to it: 'No leader is exempt from criticism' - no leader is exempt from criticism! - 'and his humility will nowhere be seen more clearly than in the manner in which he accepts and reacts to it'. I want you to get that: 'No leader is exempt from criticism, and his humility will nowhere be seen more clearly than in the manner in which he accepts or rejects criticism'. Now can I just say that if you haven't picked it up already in these studies, I believe that Nehemiah is one of the greatest characters in the whole of the word of God - certainly he is by far one of the greatest leaders among the people of God. Listen to what Alan Redpath says of Nehemiah's leadership in his little book on Nehemiah: 'Nehemiah's courage and determination in the face of the fiercest opposition, his complete faith in God, his great passion for the service of his Lord, all of these things point him out as a man in a million, a man whose life is worth emulating, whose character is worth our close scrutiny and examination'.

That's exactly what we're doing in this series. Nehemiah is a man to be marked, and what I want you to mark in him today is how he reacted and faced opposition in his spiritual ministry for the Lord. In fact, I would go as far to say that Nehemiah is a character akin to the great apostle Paul. Turn with me for a moment to 2 Corinthians chapter 4. We've just finished 1 Corinthians in the Bible Study, but 2 Corinthians is really rather an autobiographical book for Paul outlines much of his sufferings and much of what he did for the Lord - not for his own glory, but for the instruction of the Corinthians. Chapter 4 is no exception, and verse 7 - Paul says: 'But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us'. 'The reason why I'm so weak', Paul is saying, 'is that I may not glory in what God does through me, but that through these cracks in this old earthen pot and vessel, that glory would be brought to God. He is the power in me'.

But here is his experience, this is the experience, the cost of leadership: 'We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body'. There is a cost! J. B. Phillips in his translation, or paraphrase really, translates one of these verses we've just read like this: 'We are hard-pressed on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled, but never in despair; we are persecuted, but never deserted' - and listen to this statement - 'We may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out', isn't that lovely? We may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out! There is a cost to any spiritual work, but you've got to get that equilibrium from being discouraged to the point of finishing the work, or deciding: 'Well, I may be knocked down this time, but I'm going to get up again and again and again - I'm not going to be knocked out!'.

Now listen: if we are to build the walls of our church, as we've been talking about in these weeks - the walls of the local Assembly and the church at large, we're to build them up again, those spiritual walls of protection - if we're going to bring this home to ourselves, into our own houses - remember where we start the work? In our last study, over from our doors like those men in chapter 3, if we're going to do that and we're going to build up walls within our own hearts, setting in order the things that are lacking, strengthening the things that remain - we've got to realise that we've got to overcome the opposition of the evil one. There are forces and characters, personalities in the spiritual world, who are interested in our downfall, they are interested in keeping the word of God back.

Now listen, I want to give you this study of the enemy and the overcomers under two headings. The first is

this: the strategy of the enemy; and the second is: the strategy of the overcomer. Let's look first of all at the strategy of the enemy. Paul in 2 Corinthians 2 and 11 said these words: 'Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices'. Paul did not want the Corinthian believers to have the evil one get an advantage over them, therefore they needed not to be ignorant of his devices. Therefore we, as believers, if we're going to build up the walls of the church, and if we're going to build the walls of our own lives up again to the glory of God, we have to know the plan and the strategy of the evil one that he has to pull down, to destroy.

The first strategy that we see today is external opposition, external opposition to the work of God. Look at verse 1: 'But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth', or angry, 'and took great indignation', he was incensed, 'and mocked the Jews'. Now see these three things: Sanballat, when he heard that the work was going on, he was angry, he was filled with indignation, and he began to ridicule the people of God. Now if you turn back with me to chapter 2 and verse 9, you see that there he was only angry: 'Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel'. It grieved them, but now in chapter 4 and verse 1 that grieving is starting to be manifest, and he starts to get angry, be incensed, and it comes out of his mouth - he can't hold it in any more - and he ridicules these Jewish builders!

Sanballat was not pleased now that the building had started, and it irritated him even more that people weren't listening to all of his great human wisdom. I hope you realise this, that one of the chief characteristics of our enemy the devil is that of a mocker. The devil's mouth is filled with mockery and ridicule. You remember the Lord Jesus Christ on His way to Calvary was mocked and ridiculed, when He was hanging on the cross He was mocked and ridiculed - 'He saved others, Himself He cannot save!' - the people did it, the soldiers did it, the Romans did it, the Jews did it. Out of every corner and crevice of humanity people came, motivated and inspired by the evil one himself, to mock the Lord Jesus. The devil is the prime mocker of all time.

Now here's the question that I have to ask you at the very beginning of looking at the strategy of the enemy: if you are a mocker, or if you ridicule anyone involved in the work of the Lord, do you realise the seriousness of being involved personally in the devil's work? This is something that we can't poo-poo and ignore and brush under the carpet. We're all very good at justifying our criticism, our censoriousness towards other believers in Christ, perhaps, that we don't agree with - and we don't realise that we are actually getting involved ourselves in the work of the devil himself! One writer has said that ridicule is a device used by ignorant people who are filled with jealousy. Often all that motivates people in criticism is the fact that they are jealous of someone who is doing something greater for God that they have ever done, or have motivation within themselves to do.

Now look at this: they mocked the people in verse 2: 'And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews?'. Mocked the people, called them feeble Jews. Then he mocked not only the people, but the plan: 'Will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day?' - will they finish this job in a day? 'Look at these feeble Jews, these people! Look at their plan! They're hoping to get this wall built soon - do you think they'll ever do that?'. Not only did he mock the people and the plan, but he mocked the very materials that they were using for the job, at the end of verse 2: 'Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?'. 'Look at the rubbish material they're using!'

Then Tobiah joins in, the Ammonite, in verse 3 and says: 'Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall'. 'They're building up this wall as a wall of protection, even a fox would

knock it down'. Now my friend, I hope that you can see that Sanballat was filled with ridicule, but ridicule doesn't always work, the backbiting and the jibing at the sidelines. So, when ridicule doesn't work in those that criticise, often they resort to force. When ridicule and deceit didn't work for Sanballat here, he attempts by force to discourage the people of God.

What a confederation we see of opposers in verse 7, look at it: 'It came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth'. It's amazing, isn't it, that the devil has no shortage of manpower when it comes to opposition to God's work? When we started this study in chapter 2 and verse 10 there were two enemies: Sanballat and Tobiah. In chapter 2 and verse 19 there's Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem - there's three of them, somebody joins them. Now in chapter 4 and verse 7 there is Sanballat, and Tobiah and Geshem, the Ashdodites and the Ammonites - there's a whole multitude of people opposing the work of the Lord.

Do you know what this teaches me? That criticism, criticism rubs off and is contagious! Critics usually run with other critics - the reason why that is, is that critics like to be reinforced in their views, so they get friends alongside them that will agree with them - not challenge the status quo of their minds and hearts. So Sanballat runs with Tobiah, and another naysayer named Geshem, and then he gets all the close friends together in their mutual love of grumbling and griping, and together they oppose the work of the Lord. It's amazing that even mutual enemies at times can become mutual friends in their effort to stamp out the work of God! Sure don't we read of that in the case of the Lord Jesus going to Calvary in Luke 23:12: 'And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves' - but when it came to opposing God's work in Christ, they were united!

Now here's a very searching question to all of us, because I could stop my sermon here this morning and say: 'Isn't it terrible when people oppose our work that we're doing for the Lord? Have you ever been persecuted in a work that you do for God?' - and you'd be saying: 'Yes, I can remember this time, and that time, and the other time'. We're all very quick to identify ourselves with Nehemiah, aren't we? We say: 'I know what it is to suffer for the Lord, and to do a work for the Lord that's not appreciated' - but how many of us today will identify ourselves with the Sanballats and the Tobiahs? That's a different thing, isn't it? Well, here's one diagnostic question that will discern whether or not you are a Nehemiah or a Sanballat and Tobiah: who do you naturally gravitate towards in the Christian church? What type of people do you naturally gravitate towards in a body such as this? Is it the complainers? Is it the backbiters? Is it the jibers? Is it the criticisers? Is it the people that want to get the boot into the leadership at every opportunity? Is it the negative people?

Do you ever ask the question why you do this? Could it be that you do this because you are one as well? Now, it should be no surprise to any of us that in every group of people, especially God's people, there are always Sanballats and Tobiahs - and in one regard there's very little you can do about them - but the issue is not whether or not they're there, the issue is how to handle them. You have got them in your life, I have got them in my life, Nehemiah had them in his life - how did he respond? How did he respond? What did he do? Our natural reaction would be to strike out in defence of ourselves, maybe another natural reaction would be to run to someone else and talk to them about it, and say: 'Look what such-and-such did to me, or said about me, can you help me? Do you think this is right?'. They say: 'No, that's not right', and you feel reinforced in your position. Nehemiah did neither of those two things. He did not lift up a hand to defend himself, and he did not talk to others about it, the first and foremost thing he did was talk to God.

How quick we are to run to other people, when the God of heaven gives us - any moment, any time, any place - an audience with Himself. Look at this prayer he prays in verses 4 and 5: 'Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee

to anger before the builders'. He prayed - now you can see that he felt like doing something with his hands, but he took those feelings that we all have times and, rather than venting them on the person, he went to God and he poured out his heart. Prayer, for Nehemiah, was a release mechanism where the valve just blew off and allowed all the steam out before God rather than before ones whom he could offend, and if he did offend it would only accentuate the difficult circumstances.

Now, we look at the strategy of the enemy - the strategy was to be angry, and then to ridicule, and when ridicule didn't work to take the matter into their own hands and start with force. Now let's look more closely at the strategy of the overcomer. I love Nehemiah, you know why? Because he is the epitome to me of a balanced Christian. You hear that saying about some people that they're too heavenly minded for any earthly good - there's not too many of those about mind you - but this could never be said of Nehemiah because he was both prayerful and practical. You remember in our first week he was a man of prayer and he was a man of action, and he had within himself in his character this combination of both prayer and what I call 'sanctified commonsense'. There's not a lot of that about: prayer and sanctified commonsense.

You've heard the expression 'Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition' - that's maybe not a good one, but it's the same thought. It's not just about prayer God-ward, but we have a responsibility man-ward to others - as the old song put it: 'Put your trust in God, my boys, and keep your powder dry'. It's the idea that there's not just something to be done in prayer in some kind of spiritual realm, but there is a work for Jesus to be done - and we must come down from the mountain of prayer, and get involved on the field of service. Now I think that Nehemiah's strategy as an overcomer, a man of prayer and a man of action, can be summarised in three short points. Here's the first found in verses 4 and 5 in our prayer: he had a prayerful heart, he had a prayerful heart. He had a heart to pray! How did Nehemiah fight his battles? Did he run to his solicitor? Is that what he did? Did he get a petition? Did he get a clique around him on a Sunday night at his own home for supper and talk about all the grievances, one with the other, over a cream bun? No, that's not what he did, he went to God. He went to God in prayer, he fought his battles through prayer, and every great man of God has done exactly the same!

Remember David and Goliath? What were the odds on David overcoming Goliath? But before David even threw a stone at Goliath, do you know what he said to Goliath? 'The battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands!', what about that? He knew that the battle was the Lord's, he had committed the situation to his God. Was Daniel not the same? Daniel was commanded to bow down to that great image of Nebuchadnezzar, and what did Daniel do? He went up to his room, opened the windows, three times a day he cried unto his God and he committed the whole thing to prayer - and the battle was won, because spiritual battles are won by prayer warriors!

Oh that we could learn that, and that I could learn it: that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers - and we are to pull down those strongholds, not with our hands or our arms or our influences or our advertising or our organising, but our agonising! Nehemiah had a heart to pray. It's amazing, you know, that elders and pastors and leaders of the church of Jesus Christ never have any bother from the people who've got hearts to pray. Isn't that strange? The praying people are the encouraging people, because they're praying for you. They maybe see your faults, and if you're looking at me you'll see a lot of them, but they don't talk about them, they pray about them - thank you for doing that. But leaders, this man Nehemiah overcame in his praying - how do we fight our battles? How do we build the church? For if it's not with prayer, the Lord's not building the house, and we labour in vain that build it!

I love that little verse: 'Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees'. What are you facing today? Are you facing the enemy? Are you staring into the blood eyes of the devil himself? My friend, take courage, there is a calm, a safe retreat, 'tis found beneath the mercy seat - he had a heart to pray, that was the first thing he did. I'm too quick to lift the phone and talk to some man of God, there's not a man of God that's

just available - there's a God of men that's available! Not only had he a heart to pray, but he had a mind to work and so had the people, he had an industrious mind. Verse 6: 'So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together' - it's so matter-of-fact, isn't it? After the opposition and after his prayer, he just says: 'So built we the wall'. He didn't take any notice of all those jibes, and all those pokes of criticism - 'So built we the wall...', the end of the verse, 'for the people had a mind to work'.

You see, critics demoralise - anybody doing a work for God, critics pull down, they don't encourage, they demoralise and sap the strength and energy and vitality out of the servant of God. The fact of the matter is: Nehemiah got off his knees with a renewed spirit, because that's what prayer does to you. You can go into the very presence of God and cast your armour down, and say: 'Lord, I've had enough, I can't take any more', and get on your feet again after a few moments in prayer, and put the armour on again, and go out and fight as never before. I can see Nehemiah, and all the jibes and criticisms and destructions in words and now in actions are coming towards them - they're now ready to fight, the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other, they're building the wall and all the shouts and jeers are coming - and the people are maybe getting fearful. He offers up this prayer to God, and what does he do? He just says: 'Come on, let's keep mixing the cement, let's keep building the wall' - as Chuck Swindoll says in his book: 'Hand me another brick!'. That's his attitude: 'Hand me another brick, till we build this wall all the quicker!'.

Do you know what God loves? God loves a man or woman who, when the criticism gets hotter, their determination gets greater. Do you know what it's called? In my dictionary it's called 'stickability'. I think it was William Carey, who saw very little, it would have to be said, in his earthly ministry - it was what happened after his ministry on the mission field. But I think it was William Carey who said: 'God loves a plodder' - God loves a plodder! Someone who is able to roll with the punches, who is able to keep sticking all the abuse and all the criticism and all the dejection, of people who are doing nothing perhaps, and still build the wall of God no matter what. God loves a practical Christian!

Are you a practical Christian? I'm trying to get you folk to pray as much as I can, but you know if you just pray all the time that's not good enough. You've got to be practical - if you want nobody to break into your house you've got to lock the doors and shut the windows. One of the brethren here in the assembly told me about the time a young man came to him, and was praying about getting a job, that the Lord would lead him to a job. This brother asked him: 'Have you bought the Belfast Telegraph?', and he hadn't. He was praying about a job, but he wasn't doing what he could do, what was necessary to look to see if he could find a job!

Watch what happens: he prays from his heart, his mind is active and industrious to work, and then as his work intensifies the opposition intensifies, and as the opposition intensifies Nehemiah's prayer intensifies. In verse 9 he gets them all together: 'Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them'. He didn't just pray, he watched and prayed. He watched and prayed - I wish I could take you, I don't have time, to all the three times in the New Testament that that admonition is repeated, 'Watch and pray'. Once it's regarding the world, watch the world; once it's regarding the flesh, watch the flesh and pray; and another it's regarding the evil one, Satan, the devil in Ephesians 6, watch the devil when you're praying. But he didn't depend on prayer alone, he watched - here's one for us, a Psalm: 'Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips'. Put your hand up if you pray that one everyday! Not too popular, is it? Setting a watch before our mouths - whatever scorn was directed toward Nehemiah, what did he do? Do you know what he did? He did exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ did: when he was reviled, he reviled not again; but he committed himself to Him who judgeth rightly. He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

He didn't react as most of us would have reacted, but his soft answer turned away wrath and his weeping and wailing, and cries unto God, brought strength to take the work on and to win the victory. When the opposition and the ridiculing came, he prayed. When the ridiculing came into force, what did he do? He

watched and prayed. Can I ask you: are you a criticising Sanballat? Now don't be going through the roll book know, and saying: 'She is, and he is, and they are - you see that couple, that family' - it's you we're talking to here! Are you a criticising Sanballat, or an encouraging Nehemiah?

I was reading, as you've probably gathered, Chuck Swindoll's book on Nehemiah this week - and I was tremendously encouraged from a quote in it where he is very honest, and I end with this. He says this, when he was writing this book: 'I became discouraged because of criticism in my ministry. My optimism eroded as a lengthy chain of events led me into the pits. Knowing of my need for encouragement, my wife searched for a way to lift my spirits, and she found a hand-lettered statement written by a statesman I've always admired. She used it to make a wooden plaque, and gave it to me as a gift. What an encouragement that was! I often read it when opposition abounds and my shoulders start to droop, when I'm knocked down and feel like I'm about to be knocked out'. It reads like this, now you mark this, and I'll give you a copy of this if you want it - I quote: 'It is not the critic that counts, not the man who points out how the strongman stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done even better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly'. Now this is what really impressed me: 'Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though chequered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy or suffer much because they live in the grey twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat'.

What are you? A Sanballat or a Nehemiah? Are you aware of the strategy of the enemy in your life? Do you see the strategy of the overcomer? Have you a heart to pray? Have you? Have you an eye to watch? Have you a mind to work?

Our Father, we pray that You will move in our hearts. We are so prone to criticise others, but Lord we think of what the Saviour said to the apostle Peter when he asked 'What shall this man do?' - 'What is that to thee, follow thou Me'. Lord, if we took account of our own lives and spent the energies that we spend in criticism of mind and mouth on others, and applied it to our own lives and shortcomings, and started building the walls of our own personal spiritual existence - O Lord, we believe that we would be revived overnight. Lord, let this church be a church of builders, not destroyers. Let us be a church of encouragers and not criticsers. Let us see a building, not a brick building, but a spiritual building for God built up to His glory and honour, for Jesus' sake we pray, Amen.

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Building For God - Chapter 7

"Discouragement: Its Origins And Its Answer"

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Nehemiah chapter 4. Now we'll take time to read from verse 1 to get the gist of what we've already been studying. Remember in our last week studying this portion of Scripture, we were looking at 'The Enemy and the Overcomer'. There were particularly three enemies: Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, and then there was a whole crowd of people that gathered together in an external sense to oppose the work of God that Nehemiah was doing. We looked really that particular week at the external opposition that often we can have when we seek to do a work for the Lord. It's par for the course, we saw that: if you want to do something for God, you've got to be prepared for external opposition.

We're looking this morning at verses 10 to 23, which really deals with internal opposition, internal opposition. Let's read from verse 1 to 23: "But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall. Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders. So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work. But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it. Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them. And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall. And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease. And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you. Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the LORD, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses. And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work. And it came to pass from that time forth, that the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah. They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me. And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another. In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us:

our God shall fight for us. So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared. Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a guard to us, and labour on the day. So neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing", and we end our reading at verse 23.

The title that we have this morning is: 'Discouragement: Its Origins and Its Answer'. Charles Swindoll, the author who wrote a very good book on this book of Nehemiah called 'Hand Me Another Brick', wrote these words about discouragement - I quote: 'What a difficult disease to cure. I don't know of any thing that will take the wind out of your sails quite so quickly as discouragement. Rare is the person who can resist it'. Let me read it to you again: 'What a difficult disease to cure. I don't know of any thing that will take the wind out of your sails quite so quickly as discouragement. Rare is the person who can resist it'. Now two weeks ago we looked from verse 1 to 9 at external opposition, opposition that was from without. Now we're looking this morning at verses 10 to 23, at opposition that is from within. Now if you remember from the very beginning of this book, at first everything seemed to be going tremendously. Nehemiah had come as the cupbearer to the King, and asked the king that he would be sent to his home town of Jerusalem which was burnt down and derelict, and that he should be allowed to build it. Not only did he ask permission, but he asked for resources, and the king gladly give all that to him even though he was going to the king and making such a request under peril of death.

So Nehemiah went to Jerusalem with all the resources that he needed, and we remember that we followed Nehemiah as he prayerfully surveyed the ruins, as he thought and meditated before God about what to do - and it wasn't long until he had an army of workers all around him that had a heart and a head to work. They really wanted to work to rebuild the city of God! But so often in the work of the Lord, immediately following a time of blessing, the enemy comes in in a counter-attack. The enemy keeps coming again and again and again to discourage from the work of the Lord. Now the opposition that we looked at in the first half of this chapter was the opposition of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem and a number of their friends, and even some of their enemies united together in opposition to the work of the Lord. But up until now they were able to keep that opposition at bay, they were able to deal with it, and facing those enemies they were overcomers - the people had a mind to work, they had a heart to pray, and we saw that they had an eye to watch - and they overcame!

But this morning we're going to see something that is even more fatal than the opposition that was external from Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem; for everyone who is engaged in the work of the Lord will face two foes - they will face an external foe, and an internal foe. Let me remind you of the words of the Psalmist David in Psalm 41, where he said this: 'Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me'. This is a tactic that Satan has often followed, even up to this very present age. Not only does he bring opposition externally from without, from the world and from our enemies religiously and spiritually, but he has a knack of bringing opposition from within. You remember he did it among the ranks of the apostles through Judas Iscariot. In Acts chapters 5 and 6 at the very beginning of the life of the early church, he used Ananias and Saphira, professing Christians, to bring contamination into the church. Then he brought complaining widows along - their complaints may have been legitimate, but yet there was internal opposition that was threatening to thwart the work of God from within.

Now what I want you to see in this passage today is in verse 10, just those first three words: 'And Judah said'. Up to this point we have had the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, and the Arabians, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem - but now in verse 10, you could almost miss it, 'And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall'. Judah, Nehemiah's own people, were starting now to rise opposition why the rubbish should stay the way it has always been, and why there shouldn't be a building built to the glory of God. Now we're not told what Nehemiah felt like,

but I imagine that he would have had a sickening sense of being let down, he must have been overwhelmed by the feeling of betrayal! There he was trying to lead the people of God, and at first they were all around him - but all of a sudden they have given in to the jibes of the enemy, and they want to down tools and give up.

How persistent Satan is, there's no doubt about that, because we read that ten times - verse 12: 'It came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you'. Ten times the people of Judah came back to the great commander Nehemiah, and said: 'No matter where you go, these people are going to follow us - you might as well give up!' - ten times! Now anyone who's in the work of the Lord will know what it is to be discouraged, and Satan loves to discourage His servants, and he loves to discourage them by these little niggly foxes that spoil the vine. What I'm talking about is persistently coming again and again and again with the same, if we could call it in this context, rubbish! It wears you down! It doesn't matter what work of God you do, sometimes you get discouraged, and often that discouragement doesn't come from Satan in the external sense, it doesn't come from the world, it doesn't come from temptation, but it comes from those who ought to be encouraging you.

One of the things that facilitated the Nazi rise to power in Germany was a propaganda that was called 'the big lie'. It was simply this: if you told a big enough lie enough times, people would start to believe it. That's exactly what happened in Nazi Germany, and later spreading across the whole of Europe. One lie they told everybody was that the Jew was many notches down from other white Caucasian human beings. People started, intelligent scientists, even theologians, started to believe the lie because it was a big one and it was told often enough. If I can make this illustration: if you're in the work of the Lord, whatever capacity you may be in it, if people come again and again and again and discourage you, eventually it rubs off.

Let me turn you to a character in the Bible who was discouraged. Acts chapter 7, one brother a couple of weeks ago reminded me of this fact, and the more I thought of it the more I wanted to include it this morning - Acts 7, which speaks of Moses in verse 23: 'And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel. And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote', and you remember murdered, 'the Egyptian: For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not'. In other words, the very people that should have appreciated what Moses was doing were the very people, we will see in a moment, who threw it in his teeth. Verse 25: 'For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not. And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove', two Israelites this time, 'and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren', you're two Hebrews, 'why do ye wrong one to another? But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust Moses away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us? Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday?'. Now watch these words in verse 29: 'Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons'.

Now Moses could enter into a fight between an Egyptian and an Israelite, and he could slay the Egyptian and bury him - he saw it as being for God and his people, we're not entering into the morality of it all, we're just pointing out this fact: he was man enough to do this, and he was man enough to interrupt two of his brethren, Israelites who were fighting together - but when they threw an accusation at him, an internal source discouraging him when they should have been in reality encouraging him for what he did - what did he do? He fled! How easy it is to give in when internal discouragement comes. How easy it would be for Nehemiah to just say: 'I've had enough of this', and walk away back to Persia and be the cupbearer for the King again. There are so many people in the work of God who do this, and I can understand why they do it!

Alan Redpath, in his book on Nehemiah, said these words - and I think they're profound, so listen to them: 'What a powerful weapon is this which the enemy thrusts into our souls, this internal discouragement: when

the cream of the army threatens desertion, when the prayer partners become discouraged, when the fellow missionary threatens to return home because it's too tough at the station, when those who should be sharing the burdens most deeply with the Nehemiahs of our time have no vision at all - how disheartening it is when those who should be right in the thick of the fight in real prayer warfare are men and women without any vision, without any burden. They will do the same job and carry on the same work as they have done for years, but they do not seem to be capable of real hard travail. Those who would be prayer partners think the task is too much to handle, 'We just can't do it!'

Now I'm trying to echo a cry that's perhaps in your heart today in the work that you're doing for the Lord, or maybe even in your own everyday domestic work at home, or your work at the office. Is there something that cries out from your heart: 'I can't do it any more! I'm overwhelmed! It's got too much for me!', and you just want to walk away - you just want to run away from it all! Well, Nehemiah did not have that word 'retreat' in his language. Let me share with you three things that were the source of Nehemiah's discouragement, and then quickly four things that were the secret of his encouragement - the origins and the answer to discouragement.

Here's the first source of the people's discouragement - Nehemiah 4 and verse 10: 'Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed'. Here's the first thing: their strength was depleted. Their strength - now we're talking about physical strength, so the first source of their problem was not necessarily spiritual, but it was physical. Their physical strength, the burdens that they were bearing building these walls, was depleted - they were, if we could put it in our vernacular, burnt out. They couldn't do God's work any more, not just from a spiritual perspective but from a physical one. The actual Hebrew original means 'stumbling, tottering, staggering under a load' - you can almost see them drained so much physically that they couldn't actually carry the bricks, and they were falling down under the load. Now please see this distinction that I'm about to make: they were so busy building the walls of the city to protect the city, that they forgot to build their own walls to protect themselves. Did you get that? They were exhausted physically from doing the work of the Lord.

In Song of Songs and chapter 1 and verse 6 we read of the Shunnamite, in chapter 8 verse 12 - I think it is - we read that her father's children were angry with her, and they sent the whole family out into the vineyard to tend it under the auspices of King Solomon. But she in particular had that responsibility in chapter 1 verse 6, and when the shepherd King stands beside her, you remember we read that she says: 'Look not upon me, for I am black' - and the blackness came from the Mediterranean sun that was beating down on her every day as she was out. She was so busy doing the work in the vineyard for her brothers and for King Solomon, that she hadn't time to look after herself - and she actually says that: 'Mine own vineyard have I not kept' - my own physical appearance I have lost.

What a lesson there is in that for us all. We're not talking now about spiritual strength, we're talking about physical strength - sometimes you can start a work of God strong, but you can't finish it because you're too tired. Now there's something we all have to remember, whatever capacity we're doing the work of the Lord in, it's this: when you get saved you don't become a superman, you're still physical flesh and blood that needs sleep, that needs food, that needs all sorts of rest and even recreation at times. But equally we have to also remember that the servants of God, individually, who we might see as called of God, they are not supermen either. No individual, whether they be a pastor, or a missionary, or an evangelist, or an elder, or a Sunday School superintendent, or a young people's leader, no one person ought to shoulder the burden physically of all of the work of God! That is why the Lord's ideal was a body, a body of people who would carry the whole strain of the work.

Now, listen to me, this is talking from experience, one cause and source of discouragement often is this: a depletion in physical strength - physical strength. You're not getting enough sleep, you're not getting - maybe

this isn't applicable to me! - fed enough, you're not getting enough exercise - something as simple as all that. Remember Elijah, he had ran a supernatural run beside a chariot, and the next time we see him he's sitting under the juniper tree dejected, exhausted, depressed! What does God do? Does He give him his sermon in John chapter 17? No! He gives him a meal, and He gives him a sleep, and He tells him to have a rest. Are you discouraged today? Could it be something as simple as you're doing too much, even in the name of the Lord, but you haven't kept your own vineyard?

Secondly, their strength was depleted, but we see that their vision disappeared - verse 10: 'there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall. And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease. And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you'. Verse 11 says: 'They shall not know, neither see', the enemies were saying that, but the people were starting to believe it: that possibly they couldn't see their enemies any more, that their enemies would come up behind them, but more importantly than all that they didn't have a vision any longer for the work of God. Instead of being encouraged by what had just happened, and all the building that had already been accomplished, they only saw the huge task that was before them. They couldn't imagine it being completed, all they could see was a big mound of rubble, and a lot of army rebels coming towards them.

Now we know from chapter 4 and verse 6, if you look at it, that they were halfway: 'So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work'. So they were at the halfway stage of the building of the walls, the task was half finished, and perhaps we could say that the halfway task of anything - especially the work of the Lord - is the hardest place of all, is it not? Let me give you an illustration like this: if you've ever been rambling - maybe you think I ramble every Sunday morning! - if you've ever been rambling in the sense of climbing a mountain or something like that, you will know that if you take your compass, or maybe even a map that you can't read too well, and you set off in one direction, you see on the horizon what you feel is the destination that you're going towards. You walk, and you walk, and you sweat, and you puff, and you sit down at every seat that comes along, you look at your watch - and then all of a sudden you realise that you're at the halfway point, but you haven't realised that the halfway point is the place that you originally thought was your destination, the horizon that you could only see. But when you reach there, what do you see? You see another five peaks further on to go! The equation that you make in your mind is not: 'Oh, I've halfway done', but 'Oh, I've all that to do it again!'. Isn't that it?

Sometimes when you're in the work of the Lord your vision can disappear when you realise that you're only halfway there, you don't particularly see all that you've done, but you see all that is yet to do. It may be the toughest point of all, and your initial enthusiasm that you had for this work of God when you started it has departed. You can see it even in your early days of conversion: when you're first saved you're on fire for God, you're wanting to do everything for God. Maybe even as you enter middle-age and old age you don't have the zeal and the enthusiasm and the zest that you used to have - but the danger is that you can lose vision.

Here's the third thing: their confidence was deflated. Their strength was depleted, their vision disappeared, and the confidence was deflated. Verse 10: they feared the enemy, they had exhausted their physical reserves, their vision had deflated, and so had their confidence now. Once we read that they had a mind to work - do you remember reading that in verse 6? The Hebrew literally says 'they had a heart to work', but their heart had been buried under all the rubble, if we could say it as we would say it: they lost their heart for the work! Their motivation had gone, and in place of it was a feeling of overwhelming defeat, even fear.

Now let's look in the remainder of the time that is left at the four secrets of their encouragement. If you're here this morning and your strength is depleted, and your vision has disappeared, and your confidence has

deflated - here's four things to grab hold of. In 1 Samuel 30 and verse 6 we read of David, that one city was taken over - Ziklag - by the enemy; and the army that David had, many of their children and their wives had been taken captive. All of a sudden, when the fight was starting to affect the men's families, they were going to turn on David and they were going to stone him, the Bible says. Now we read in 1 Samuel 30 and verse 6 that David was greatly distressed at this predicament, but David encouraged himself in the Lord his God. What a lesson there is for us all in that. But what I want you to see is the greatness of Nehemiah here: for not only did he encourage himself, but he also encouraged the people of God - he went a step further.

Let's see how he encouraged them. First of all he gave them all a common goal, verse 13, he gave them all a common goal. When Nehemiah looked, he saw that families were broken up. One part of a family was at one side of the wall, and another was at the far end - they were broken up, and all that he could see was that the work was scattered, it was counter-productive because father and mother weren't able to give morale to one another and encouragement because they were apart. So what Nehemiah did was he reorganised the work. He teamed up people into the same families, and the same neighbours, around one common goal. Now one of the reasons why we get discouraged in the work of God is because the church of Jesus Christ, whether locally or globally, is split up. It could be said to be split up in denominationalism, and sometimes you would almost think that we're working against one another rather than working with one another. But even in a local capacity, sometimes there can be what I would have to say is competitiveness, to such an extent that all you want to have is the biggest church, the most successful programme, the best pastor in the pulpit, and all the rest - simply out of a human, carnal competitiveness.

We read in verse 20 that Nehemiah had a rallying point for all of the army of Judah, he had a trumpeter always by his side verse 18 says, and what he was doing was: whenever there was trouble, Nehemiah would get his trumpeter to blow the trumpet, and he - Nehemiah, the commander - would rally all the troops around him for one common united goal. Listen, I think there's a lesson in this for all of us today, because the family of God - whether it be locally or globally - is broken up into various scattered parts. It is counter-productive for our rallying cry which is the Gospel, isn't it? The trumpet is our cry - woe unto me if I preach not the Gospel - but we're all split up at times preaching the Gospel and it's counter-productive when we all have one common goal - what is it? To rally round our Commander, the Author and Finisher of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ, and fight His battle - it's not our battle, it's His battle!

A common goal - do we have a common goal here in the Iron Hall? Do we have a common goal to see the work of the Lord Jesus Christ built up, to see people saved for Him? Do we have that common goal above all other desires, whatever they may be? Well, that's one encouragement if it was there - if we all worked together for that common goal, I believe much of our discouragement in the work of the Lord would disappear.

Secondly, verse 14, they had a unified focus. We read: 'And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the LORD, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren'. It says that Nehemiah looked up. Now he looked up to survey the rubble and the rubbish and the debris that was around, but it goes on to say that he didn't just focus on the rubbish around him, but he lifted his eyes heavenward, as it were, and he encouraged the people not to focus upon the rubbish and dereliction that was around them, not to focus on the enemy, because if they did that there would be no progress at all - but to look to the Lord! How we need to look to the Lord if we're going to guard against discouragement. You see if you look to Christians? You will be discouraged. You see if you look to yourself? You will be discouraged. But if you look to the Lord, that's what David did, he encouraged himself in the Lord; that's what Nehemiah did; that's what Jehoshaphat the King encouraged the people to do in 2 Chronicles chapter 20: 'We have no might against this great company', he said, 'that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee!' Isn't that it?

I wonder in the service of the Lord that you're doing, have you taken your eyes off the Lord? Are you looking up, or are you looking at the problems all around you? It's very easy to do, and Peter saw the boisterous wind and the waves, and he began to sink because he took his eyes off the Lord - could it be that you need, today, to turn your eyes upon Jesus again? What an encouragement we get in the Lord Jesus! We could spend all morning on that - but if we had that unified focus as not only a company of God's people, but as individuals, our focus for the work is the Lord Jesus. That old hymn is right: 'O pilgrim bound for the heavenly land, never lose sight of Jesus'.

A common goal, the work of the Gospel, our great Commander. Two: a unified focus, the Lord Jesus Christ, and looking to Him, not looking to others. Thirdly: a balanced approach, verses 15 and 17. Imagine this: there were some and they wanted to do all the fighting, and then there were others and they wanted to do all the building - they were the scaredy-cats, or maybe they were the engineers. There were the bloodthirsty and there were the cowards, or maybe there were the industrious and there were the volcanoes - for want of a better phrase - those who just wanted to pick a fight. Now Nehemiah is coming to them, and he says 'There's got to be balance here, we've got to take it in turns, there's got to be a circuit. Everybody has got to take the role and the responsibility that I give them'. There has to be a balance in continuing the work of the Lord, you've got to be prepared to fight - the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other - and prepared to build as well.

There aren't a lot of balanced Christians about today. You meet some Christians and all they want to do is fight - not just fight with one another, but fight for some cause. They want to defend this, that, and the other - and that just seems to keep them going. Now we need people to fight for truth, there's no doubt about that, but I worry about folk when all their Christian existence seems to be is fighting or defending some cause! They're always pulling down rather than building up. Then there's people who are always working, and they never seem to get a rest for their family or for their friends, and if they aren't fighters they're workers! Fighters who are always doing something bad, workers who are always doing something good - but yet one defeats the other. Alan Redpath says: 'If Satan gets Christian people involved in controversy at the expense of capturing souls for Christ, he has secured a masterstroke. Men spend their lives in so-called defence of truth, and defence of position, and neglect the main task of building - they fight over hair-splitting matters of doctrine while souls are perishing'. We need to be very careful, especially in this fellowship, of doing just that: of being a balanced, of making things that are less important more important at the peril of those things which are all-important.

A balanced approach, fourthly - and this is perhaps the most challenging - an others-orientated occupation. First, a common goal; two, a unified focus; three, a balanced approach; and fourth, an others-orientated occupation. Nehemiah encouraged them in verses 19 to 22: 'When you see your family in need, or you see your neighbour in need, and there's an attack on the way at their piece of the wall, you all rally round and support them!'. What about that? The thing that Nehemiah was encouraging them to do was to rally round others, because God is fighting for you, you can be encouraged - you're never fighting alone, because if your neighbour's not with you God is with you! Now listen, whenever you are discouraged often what you want is the support of another Christian, you want somebody to support you. But did you ever think of it this way: what people really need when they are encouraged is not the support of another, but to be a support to another.

Some people say to me: 'You seem to be awful busy', sometimes - and you make this humorous quip: 'Well, it keeps me out of trouble', but there's a lot of truth in that, isn't there? When you're thinking about something else, or someone else, or doing something else apart from your worries and your stresses and strains, doesn't it lift the load off us to be thinking and bearing the burdens of others rather than bearing our own? We really are essentially selfish people, deep down in our hearts, and all we have to do is a diagnostic question as to whether we are others-orientated people: what are you going to do in the week that lies ahead of you to help

others? What have you planned? Will your week be spent serving others, or is it wrapped up only in yourself? Could that be the reason why you're so discouraged? I would have to say that self-centred people are often discouraged because they always let themselves down, they're always looking internally and at what others are doing to them from outside.

Are you overwhelmed by the task that's before you? Whether it's the work of the Lord, whether it's not, some are involved in very demanding jobs, even life-threatening jobs; some have difficult people to work with, for some the tasks seem endless - whether you're just a mother changing nappies, or a managing director moving companies; whether you're a minister of the Gospel, or a missionary on the field - you can let the work get to such an extent that you discourage yourself, and are pulled down into the mire which cannot be described, and you can easily lose your whole strength, your whole vision, and all your confidence because of the rubbish around you.

Can I encourage you to do four things? Get a common goal, like the apostle Paul, and say: 'This one thing I do, and if all else fails I'm going to do this'. Do you know what it is? It's the Gospel and it's the Lord Jesus. Get a unified focus, don't look to the Christians around you that let you down and let others down, look to the Lord Jesus who will never let you down, and who will fight for you. Get a balanced approach, don't become one of these 'issue Christians' that stands on a soapbox and won't talk about anything else but this particular thing - be balanced, and remember that there are souls that are dying! Fourthly: serve others - I think that's the greatest antidote. Forget about yourself, and serve others.

Our Father, help us not to be ignorant of Satan's devices. Help us not to be unaware of the origins of discouragement, which at times can come from very close, internally. Father, we just pray that we will always avail ourselves, by the Spirit, of those encouragements that are open to us. Let us always look unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. Let us rally round to His cry in the Gospel, let us unite with those who preach His word, and let us win the lost, our Father, and let us serve others and forget our own gripes and problems. Lord, we all need to be encouraging one another, and if we were none of us would need be discouraged. So help us all, our Father, to love one another, and so fulfil Thy truth in the Saviour's name, Amen.

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Building For God - Chapter 8

"The Fifth Column Of God's Work"

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We're now in our eighth week under the study of Nehemiah's prophecy entitled 'Building For God'. The title I have put unto the study of chapter 5 this morning is 'The Fifth Column of God's Work' - the fifth column of God's work. Now you may not know what a fifth column is, but 'the fifth column' really is a military or political term about a group of people within a country, a country who are at war - but that group of people are sympathetic to the enemy of that country, a hidden enemy if you like. The term 'fifth column' dates from the Spanish Civil War when General Mola, leading four columns of troops toward the city of Madrid, declared that he had a fifth column of troops inside the city. The fifth column was working against the inhabitants, because they were in allegiance with the enemy.

Now what we're going to talk about this morning is the fifth column of God's work, a hindrance that comes from within. What we're going to see in chapter 5 are really two things, the first is this: first of all the hindrance, the potential hindrance that God's people can be to His work because of compromise in their lives, the potential hindrance that God's people can be to His work because of compromise in their lives. Then secondly we'll also see the potential influence of only one person who has a godly example to give to the rest of God's people, and can actually affect them all for good and for God - a godly influence, even just one that can make an impact upon all of God's people.

Let me just reminisce with you over the events that we have studied in these last weeks in our series 'Building For God'. We looked at the opposition that this man of God, this man for the hour, had. First of all we saw that he had opposition from outside, external opposition to building the wall. In chapter 4 and verses 1 to 6 we saw that there were people who ridiculed the man of God and the people of God for building this wall. They said: 'Will they be able to have the strength and the resources to build the wall, these puny, feeble weak Jews? Could they build a wall for God?'. We saw that when ridicule doesn't work in our lives as opposition to what we're doing for God, that the enemy often takes a gear up and he then uses force. If he can't get us through words - sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me - he resorts to the sticks and the stones, and he comes in with real force. At the end of chapter 4 we saw that Satan inspired these people to actually take up arms against the people of God and threaten them with violence to stop the work of building the wall.

Now let me just recap, do you remember how they overcame that external opposition from outside? We learned that they had prayerful hearts. Nehemiah especially had a heart to pray, and we find him right throughout this whole book praying before God, bringing the need before Him. They had industrious minds, we read that wonderful verse: 'The people had a mind to work, a heart to work'. Then thirdly we saw that they had watchful eyes, they weren't just working away in some kind of spiritual fairytale land where they thought nothing could happen to them as long as they were praying, but they were watching and praying. They were ready to fight if necessary, but they were also on their knees when they had to be.

So, they had prayerful hearts and industrious minds and watchful eyes. Now, last week we looked at the opposition that was from inside - do you remember that? We saw that this can be the most damaging, perhaps, because it often comes and discourages us. We saw last week in chapter 4 verse 10 that the people of Judah were discouraged at the rubbish, the rubble and the debris, that was all around them that just didn't seem to be getting built up again. They were halfway through the work, but they couldn't see the half of the

work that was already done, all they could see was the half that hadn't been done yet - we read that they were getting depleted in their strength, their vision was disappearing, and their confidence was becoming deflated. Then at the end of chapter 4 we see that fear entered into them, they were discouraged first of all because the work was getting done as fast as it could, and then they heard this word from the enemies that wherever you go, whether it's your houses, whether it's the walls, wherever you turn, we'll be behind you, we'll be hunting you down to stop you and dissuade you from this work of God.

We saw how sometimes in the work of God we can get discouraged; our strength can become depleted; we can lose our vision, it disappears; and our confidence can deflate - and we give in to the fear of the enemy. Now let me just recap again with you how they overcame that internal opposition from inside. We read that Nehemiah got them together and gave them a common goal to build a wall for the glory of God unitedly - one common goal with a united focus. You remember that if the trumpet was blown the people were to rally around Nehemiah, the commander of the hosts of the Lord if you like, and there he was going to tell them where to go and where to fight. We saw that we as Christians ought to rally round the gospel cry and unite together around our Saviour for the cause of the gospel and the furtherance thereof.

He had a balanced approach, the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. It wasn't all fighting and it wasn't all working, it was a bit of both - and we had to take it in turns and relieve one another. Then we saw finally that they were involved in an others-orientated occupation, simply meaning this: they were thinking about their brothers and sisters who were under threat, and if they saw they were under threat they were to go and help them at whatever point of the wall that may be. When they were thinking of others they weren't thinking about themselves. So often when we get discouraged in the work of the Lord the reason is that we're thinking about ourselves rather than others.

Well, let's move on this morning. We have to say that these weapons that Satan had thrown at the man of God and the people of God failed. Now they had come very close to succeeding, and they had discouraged them, but there's a foe we're going to look at this morning and this is the only foe that really succeeded in at least temporarily stopping the work of God. At this enemy the people of Judah downed tools. At this enemy Nehemiah became very angry at how the people had just fallen down at the face of this great enemy. So you might say: 'Well, what was Satan's great weapon that succeeded?'. Well, let me just caution you there before we go on any further, because we could hardly even call it Satan's weapon. The reason being, what we find in this passage was that the factor that stopped God's work in building the walls was located within the breast of the people of God. It was not owned by Satan, it was owned by them. Now it was found in their hearts, and admittedly Satan found it and exploited it, and he does that whenever he finds it in all of our hearts - but nevertheless it was owned by ourselves.

What is it? Simply this: it was the gremlin of greed, the gremlin of greed. I want us to look first of all at the gremlin of greed, and then I want us secondly to look at the answer to avarice - which is simply another name for greed - or indeed any other vice that may be in our lives that is hindering the work of God, that is like a fifth column in our lives working against the Holy Spirit's influence coming from within. Then thirdly I want us to look at the influence of Nehemiah's example on us all. Now you mightn't know what a gremlin is, but a gremlin - if you look it up in the dictionary - it's not a wee green monster, but it's an imaginary mischievous sprite of some kind of spiritual world that is responsible for mechanical faults, maybe in an aircraft or something. You might hear these technical people, engineers, or computer engineers, saying 'I've got a gremlin in my machine', or 'I've got a gremlin in my plane'. It's just something that's really mucking up the mechanism.

Now the gremlin of greed was what was mucking up and messing up the mechanisms of the work of God building these walls. They had faced opposition of ridicule, of physical force from armies of other nations; they had faced discouragement from within of all sorts - but yet it was greed within their own hearts, as the

people of God, that stopped and halted the work of God. It's staggering, isn't it? Now I have to fill you in with some of the facts of the situation in Jerusalem so that you can understand what a great gremlin this greed was.

In verse 1 we read: "And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives" - you notice that it doesn't mention husbands there, I'm not reading anything into that - the wives were crying all the time against the brethren of the Jews. The situation in Jerusalem was dire. Basically what you have in verse 1 is a strike, a strike on the walls. The people, there was a great outcry from them and their wives against the Jewish brothers, and they were saying: 'We're on strike, we've had enough, we've got our rights. This is not fair, this is exploitation'. That cry of grievance from within their hearts halted the work of God on the walls.

Now Nehemiah was a good leader, and we see that he didn't just say: 'Go to your work or you'll lose your job', but he got them together and he listened to their complaints. It says here in the Scriptures that he sized up the situation, and he decided what way to go. Let me show you why these people were grieved, and they had good reason to be so. The first thing that we find in verse 2 is that they said: 'We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we take up corn for them, that we may eat, and live'. The people had large families, and they had to feed these large families, and there was not enough food within the city to feed them - very simple. Now if you were working and you couldn't feed your family, you would have a right to complain to your employer that you couldn't do so - if it was genuine, of course. Now here's the second reason, this time in verse 3: 'Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth'. Others owned property, now perhaps we're a wee bit more wealthy, but they're saying here: 'We have to mortgage again our houses and our property to survive the spiralling inflation that is in the land'.

There was spiralling inflation as well as big families, and then we see in verses 4 and 5: 'There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards'. King Artaxerxes was taxing the people in Judah, remember that he was in charge here of the city of Jerusalem, but these people have heavy debt because they couldn't pay the taxes. They were borrowing money and they didn't have enough money to pay back what they had borrowed. Then verse 5: 'Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants'. What happened? Well, those that they owed the money to had come and taken their land - and when they had no more land to give, what happened was they came and took their sons and their daughters, and all their cattle and their animals because they couldn't pay the money.

Now friends, if you see this situation that was there you can understand why the people were stopping the work for just a moment and saying: 'Now hold on a minute, we can go on any further in this. We can't feed our children, we can't pay back the debts that we owe for paying these taxes, some of our children are even being taken off us and we haven't got money to buy them back again and redeem them. What's going to happen? We can't go on any further until we know what's going to become of us'. Let me go a bit further into the reasons why the financial situation was as it was. In verse 3 we read that there was a famine. They had to buy corn because there was a dearth, that simply means a famine. Now imagine this: Jerusalem is in famine, Nehemiah decides to build the walls of Jerusalem again, so hundreds of people come from the countryside to help the man of God build the walls. There is already great pressure on the resources that are depleted in the city, and now all these - not illegal immigrants - but legal immigrants come. What a further force that was on the resources that were in the city, a further pressure, and there was a famine.

Then we read that there were too many taxes, as I mentioned in verse 4: 'There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute'. They couldn't pay their taxes, and if you know anything about tax collectors - even in the Old Testament, as well Zaccaheus in the New - they were people who tended to take more off the people than they owed, they exploited the people and lined their own pockets. So there was

physical strength or spiritual vision - but it was the greed that was in their heart, and the compromise that was in their lives that even the world could see.

Nehemiah's reaction is an interesting one in verse 6, he was angry. Now we're all guilty of being angry too often - it's a hard thing to be angry in the right sense, towards the right things, isn't it? We get angry at the wrong things, we get angry in the wrong sense, our anger boils over sometimes to hate - but remember what Paul said in Ephesians: 'Be ye angry and sin not'. Here we have Nehemiah being angry, and after his anger at the external opposition that was coming from other nations, can you imagine how his anger was almost going to boil over when he thought: 'We have been able up to now to avert all opposition and rebellion towards this work, we've kept at bay the thwarting vile plans of the enemy - yet look at what has stopped the work!'. Compromise in God's own people, God's people shooting themselves in the foot simply because they disregarded the law of Moses - 'that's for the Sabbath, the wallet is for the rest of the week'.

Now I don't know whether, he doesn't tell us, whether they had forgot the law of Moses; or whether they had remembered but completely disregarded it. Now we don't have time to look into all of this, but Nehemiah knew God's word, that's for sure - and that's what we need around us today, men who know God's word. But just quickly, Exodus 22, Deuteronomy 23 and Leviticus 25 all give rules and regulations for God's Old Testament people with regards to lending money. Here's four of them, the main ones: one, it is not wrong to lend money to a non-Jew for interest. So you can lend money to a Gentile for interest, to get back gain on the money when it comes back to you - it's not wrong to do that for a Gentile. Two: it is not wrong to lend money to a Jew, it's not wrong to lend money to a Jew. Three: it is wrong to demand interest on a loan to a Jew. You can lend them the money but you're not allowed to take interest from a Jewish brother if you are a Jew. And fourthly: it is wrong to enslave a fellow Jew. In other words, if he can't pay the money back, that you take him as a slave and his family and all his kith and kin and make them work for what they owe - that is wrong!

Now God's people had set it aside, maybe they had forgotten, but I think probably they knowingly ignored and were disobeying God's word, and that was what weakened God's work because the ordinary people who were working hard were suffering! Isn't it interesting that hardship often can be traced to some sin somewhere or another? Remember after Joshua led the people over the Jordan into the promised land, it was Achan who saw and coveted and took the wedge of gold and the Babylonian garment. Do you remember Ananias and Saphira in the early church in the Acts of the Apostles, they conspired after selling a field to give the money to the church, but they kept back part of it and they lied to the Holy Spirit and were struck down for it. The Bible tells us in Revelation that the characteristics of the end of the age, the age that we are in now, is the Laodicean period where the rich people will be increased with goods even in the church, and will be in need of nothing. A time of spiritual compromise, but it's married with a time of love of money.

It was well said that the love of money is the root of all evil, and here we have the gremlin of greed. Now let me say secondly that there is an answer to this avarice, this greed, and indeed it is an answer to any other vice or sin. Whatever is in your life, or in the life of the church, that is hindering the work of God, that's in your heart, there is an answer to it - but it must be dealt with if you want the work of God to go on. I don't think we realise the seriousness and the import of all this, that prolonged personal sins take a heavy toll on God's work, they pull it down. Dr Clarence McCartney, that great pastor I think was in Pittsburgh in the United States many years ago, said these words: 'The better the man, the better the preacher' - now you just replace that word 'preacher' with 'Christian' - 'The better the man, the better the Christian. When he kneels by the bed of the dying, or when he mounts the pulpit stairs, then every self-denial he has made, every Christian forbearance he has shown, every resistance to sin and temptation will come back to him to strengthen his arm and give conviction to his voice. Likewise every evasion of duty, every indulgence of self, every compromise with evil, every unworthy thought word or deed will be there at the head of the pulpit stairs to meet the minister on Sunday morning to take the light from his eyes, the power from his blow, the ring from

his voice, and the joy from his heart'. In other words, sin follows you like a shadow if you don't deal with it.

The message of Nehemiah in this passage, as he was angry with the people, was simply this: 'If there is sin in your life, get rid of it. You Judaeans, if you're exploiting your brethren, if you have them as slaves against God's law, finish it now!'. Let me summarise his message in three short points - one: quit! That's it, simply, verse 10, look at it: 'I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, let us leave off this usury' - let us stop it! Now that is God's word to sin! Some people say to me: 'Oh, I'm seeking God's guidance on whether it's right to go out with this non-Christian or not' - God's word says it's wrong! There's not a period to wait and to seek God to see whether it's right, here's what Matthew 5 says: 'If your hand offend you, cut it off; if your eye offend you, pluck it out' - throw it away! Get rid of sin! If in doubt, cut it out!

It's not just quitting sin, there's a second thing: correct. 'Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day', verse 11. There's not just quit, but there is correct - you have to put right what has been done wrong against someone. We're not too fond of that one, are we? Facing our problems, and facing the people that have been problems perhaps, or we have been a problem to. Quit, correct, and then thirdly: commit. Nehemiah told them in verse 12: 'Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called', Nehemiah, 'the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise' - and he shook his lap, which was a sign saying 'God curse you if you don't honour this vow'.

They quitted the sin, they corrected their lives, and they committed themselves. Sometimes we're very quick at vowing things to God. Maybe you have a time in your life when you recommitted your life to Christ, or you vowed to serve Him and do all this - I know people, and you hear of it all the time, and they're lying on their deathbed, and 'If I get out of this deathbed, well I'm going to serve God all my life' - and they never do. Listen now, this is serious: a vow that you make to God is a very very serious thing. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes: 'When thou vowest a vow unto God defer not to pay it, for He hath no pleasure in fools. Pay that which thou hast vowed, better it is that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay'.

The answer to avarice or any other sin in the life of the believer, or in the church, that is hindering God's work, is simply this: quit it, correct it, and commit yourself again to God. Thirdly and finally, there is the gremlin of greed, the answer to avarice, and thirdly the influence of example. This is where I want us to home in - we've looked at the people now, we've looked into their hearts at their sin and what their sin did, now we're homing in and focusing on Nehemiah on his own. Now after he was righteously angry in verse 6, in verse 7 we see - and this is interesting - that there was a time of contemplation: 'Then I consulted with myself'. He wasn't a knee-jerk reaction person - sometimes people turn to me and others, and want an answer right away, or want wisdom right away - and it doesn't happen like that! Sometimes you have to go away and think about a thing, not just pray, but even think about a matter. He says 'I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers'.

So there was anger, there was contemplation, but there was resolution. When he knew what he had to do - rebuke the nobles - he went and did it, and there was no fear in doing so. But this is what I want you to see: it was his example. Verses 14 to 19, we'll just look at verse 15: 'But the former governors' - people like me, Nehemiah said - 'that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God'. What he was saying here was that the leaders and governors of Jerusalem that have been before me, they had rights - and they were rights now - they had rights to take bread and wine and all sorts of things off the people for themselves, and Nehemiah is basically saying: 'That was my right as well, but so did not I'. Isn't that a remarkable statement?

Do you know what some Christians say to us today, and others, for an excuse of their compromise with the world around us - whether it's in business or pleasure, or vice of sin of every kind - they say this: 'Sure, isn't everybody doing it? Isn't everybody at it? Every Christian does that nowadays!'. Listen to one man, one man and his example - what an impact it had! He said: 'So did not I, I'm not going to do it. You can all do it, I'm not doing it, I'm taking my stand'. Now there is also a spiritual principle here, and it's simply this: anything of value usually involves a denial of self in one form or another. If Nehemiah wanted the work of God to go on, he couldn't behave like everybody who had gone before him. He had to deny self in some way, and he did, and the work of God went on!

Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Paul counted all things that were gain to him as loss that he might win Christ, our Lord Jesus it says 'Humbled Himself and made Himself of no reputation'. Do you know what Nehemiah was simply saying here? If we could hear him singing it: 'Take the world, but give me Jesus'. Now friends, this is where it really becomes very serious, because no one today listens to 'Do as I say, not as I do' Christianity. You might have your big Bible and your fancy suit, and your orthodox theology, but at the end of the day the world is not listening! It is not enough! The 'Do as I say' day is gone, you need to see in the believer's life more than ever the life of Christ! You need to see that self-denial, and I'll tell you: often the world places higher standards upon Christianity than we do in the church. The world expects to see a man or woman who is different - what the church is trying to do today is show you Christians that are the same! Even the world knows that that is only a counterfeit!

Alan Redpath, in his book on Nehemiah, made this statement: 'Your Christian experience is valueless, regardless of what you believe, unless it leads you to a standard of conduct which is in violent opposition to a lot that goes on in the world today'. Now I'm asking, and I'm speaking to someone here this morning, and you have lowered the standard in your life, and you're now involved in compromise in some sinful way - and that is what is hindering the work of God in your life, and - who knows but God - it could be what is hindering the work here!

Notice what he said in verse 15: 'so did I not' - why? 'Because I'm a big fellow, and I have a reputation to keep, and I believe A...B...C...' - no. 'Because I fear the Lord' - the man that fears God need fear none else. We could say in our day and age today: 'Look, I'm not going to do that, I'm not going to do that because I love Jesus'. Do I think that way when I'm tempted to sin? Do I say, like Joseph in Potiphar's house, 'How can I do this thing and sin against the Lord Jesus Christ?'? Do I think of the nailprints? Do I think of how He bore in His own body my sin there on the tree, and because He loved me so He died for me in that way - how can I indulge myself in that habit, how can I look at that thing, how can I be involved in that practice? Yes, you'll be unpopular, you will be despised perhaps, but it doesn't matter! If you fear God you'll not fear anybody else!

There's a very interesting verse that I want to finish with, verse 19: 'Think upon me, my God, for good', Nehemiah says, 'according to all that I have done for this people'. Many scholars believe that the latter verses of this chapter date to a later period long after the building of the wall when Nehemiah was made the Governor of the city. It seems to indicate that he's looking back at the period after the wall was built, and even after - mark this - the wall has been built, he has been made the Governor of the city, and there he is ruling: he still feels that the people don't appreciate what he did, those who he sought to serve. Yet even though Nehemiah didn't get the praise from men that was his due, he didn't seek it, all he sought was the 'Well done' of God, and he was comforted in the knowledge that one day he will get a reward in the sight of the God in whom is all we have to do, the God with whom we have to do with, the God with whom we have to answer with. Nehemiah said: 'Lord, think upon me, according to all that I have done for this people'. That's all that matters - not what your wife thinks, not what your husband thinks, or your children, or your parents; not what the church thinks, not what your generation thinks. I wanted to sing it, but one verse says:

'Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always.
Thou and Thou only first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my treasure Thou art'.

Is there a fifth column in your heart working against the work of God? Quit it, correct it, and commit yourself to the work again, and get up and start building.

Father, help us to be done with sin if sin there be, and to commit ourselves completely and fully to Thee and Thy cause. In the Saviour's name, Amen.

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Building For God - Chapter 9

"The Final And Most Fearsome Assault Of The Enemy"

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"Now it came to pass when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;) That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief. And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you? Yet they sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner. Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand; Wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words. And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together. Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart. For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands. Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee. And I said, Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in. And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me. My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear. So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days. And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God" - and we finish our reading at verse 16.

The title I have given the message this morning is: 'The Final And Most Fearsome Assault of The Enemy' - the final and most fearsome assault of the enemy. Now we read together, and we will look at it in more detail, a very very encouraging verse in verse 15 which said this: 'So the wall was finished'. That is an encouragement, isn't it? After we have followed all the opposition that Nehemiah and his forces faced as they tried to do the work of God, we are encouraged to realise that the work was finished and God was glorified. But what I want you chiefly to notice this morning is that before it was finished there was the final and most fearsome assault of the enemy.

I don't know whether you've found this out about people in the life that you live, but there's just some people who can't take good news at all - good news has to have some kind of bad news mixed in among it, and every silver lining has to have a cloud. They are called, commonly, pessimists. I believe these people, and I suppose there's a bit of it in all of us, they feel more secure when things are going wrong because perhaps

they're more familiar when things are going wrong. They like to see things fail, not succeed, because it confirms their prophecies of doom that they love to make, and they delight when they come true.

We are told within the Scriptures as believers in 1 Corinthians 13 verse 6 that we, as God's people, are not to rejoice in iniquity but to rejoice in the truth. We as Christians ought not to be pessimists in that kind, but it ought to be no surprise to us that the enemy loves to be in such matters. He loves to turn good news into bad news. He loves, when he hears about good news, to make sure that in some way he can destroy, he can thwart the work of God. This is what we have in verse 1 of chapter 6, if you look down at it with me: 'Now it came to pass when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief'.

They had heard that God's work was not only going on, but it was almost near completion, God was going to get the victory - and in spite of all the internal strife that was created by the believers themselves, and the external strife that these three - Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem - could arouse up within the people and the nations round about, God's work was coming to fruition. It's interesting, just in passing, that in chapter 5 that we looked at last week, when God's people were involved in the internal strife among themselves, we hear little of these three men, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem - because Satan didn't need to bother with God's people when they were causing enough trouble among themselves.

But you remember we saw last week that Nehemiah was able, by the power of God, to sort out these internal problems, and the work progressed again. But the evil one couldn't leave it at that, his ultimate goal was that the work of God should stop - therefore he pushes these three people again to the fore, unto the stage, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. Now there are some lessons, many lessons, in this book - some we will see this morning - but one of which is simply this: the devil always should be expected on the scene when things are going well. Now that could turn you into a pessimist if you're always looking for the devil, and when something goes well you're thinking: 'Well, I wonder what's round the corner?'. But although we're not to be pessimists, we ought to be realistic about this fact: the devil doesn't like it when the work of God goes well.

Those who are in leadership need to understand this as well, because the position of leadership, whatever it may be - whether it's in Sunday School, or youth work, or in an oversight capacity - in a sense it's a Catch-22 situation and scenario, where you can't win. If things are not going well you get dejected, and when things are going well you get the devil. Spurgeon used to say: 'Satan never kicks a dead horse'. Another has said: 'He who would closely follow God will be closely followed by the devil'. Now please note that here at this point in Nehemiah's work of the building of the wall, they're not starting, they're not at the halfway stage where we saw we can really get dejected and discouraged as we realise there's half of the work still to do, we don't seem to dwell on the fact that half of it's already done, but we're now almost at the point of completion - and it's at that point of success, and of apparent victory, that we as believers and God's people can let the guard down.

It is at that point that we need to beware. We need to beware that when the work is almost done, that is the time, perhaps, when we are most vulnerable to Satan's attacks. Let me illustrate it to you like this: several years ago I was on a United Beach Missions team that was right at the very bottom of the tip of Ireland, it was the furthestmost place I could have gone to, and I happened to be preaching on the Sunday so I drove there on the Monday. I did a very unwise thing, getting up at six in the morning or something - that wasn't the unwise thing - but then travelling down all the way in one go without a stop to a place called Onaghincha (sp?). We had a tiring week, as anyone will know in Beach Missions, and then I decided to come home as usual on the Saturday, and I had a car of people with me. We travelled non-stop to get home, continually, and we were almost home - coming up the A1, the Newry to Belfast road - and just coming up to that

Lisburn/Sprucefield roundabout I fell asleep. If it wasn't for the fellow on the left-hand side that pulled the wheel away we would have all gone into the reservation. But the fact of the matter is - what I want to illustrate to you is that we were almost home. The likelihood, psychologically, was that I dropped my guard. I wasn't so concerned about keeping awake now because I was almost home, what was round about me was familiar territory and I knew how many miles there were - almost 20 or so, just to get home - and the guard went down.

This is a principle throughout the word of God, Paul said 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed, lest he fall'. You can look throughout all the characters of the Bible and see this in their lives. When was it that Bathsheba and David fell into adultery? It was at a time in David's life that he had never, to that point, experienced defeat in battle. He had never known that, he had been successful all along spiritually, militarily, religiously, in his reign over the nation politically - yet at that point, at his strongest if you like, he was his weakest. The devil saw that, and he fell.

You see it in the prophet Jonah - when did he fall into self-pity and sat underneath the gourd? It was after the greatest revival, perhaps, that has ever swept across a city, the city of Nineveh - but here is the prophet dejected. We know the reason why, but nevertheless it was after a great victory. Joseph, you remember when he received that temptation from Potiphar's wife to sleep with her, when was it? It was soon after his promotion from Mr Potiphar, where he was granted charge and a free run of the house. Right after that the devil came in. You can see it, believe it or not, in the life of our Lord Jesus. He is baptised in the Jordan, and the Holy Ghost comes down, you read about it many a time - and then the heavens open and God pronounces this of His Son: 'Here is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'. It is after this, the next chapter in Matthew's gospel, that we read these words: 'Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil'. Job: behind the scenes God and Satan are conversing. God says to Satan: 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there isn't anybody like him in all the earth?'. Immediately after that, a victory, a conquering success of testimony, the devil's testing comes.

Just before they cut the ribbon to the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah faces the final and most fearsome assault of all that the enemy could muster up. Could I just fire a warning shot across all the people here in the Iron Hall? We need to beware, because in many modern building projects in churches today the devil often gets in, particularly at a time of success - apparent success. I hope that we will not let our guard down, because the devil's attacks are always well timed - and here we see in Nehemiah's life that they are intensified, the enemy's activity is at fever pitch, it is his last-ditch attempt to sabotage the work of God in Nehemiah's life. But what I also want you to see this morning from our study is not only that it's the final and most fearsome assault of Satan, but I want you to see the exemplary attitude and approach of God's man, Nehemiah - how he faced the most fearsome assault of his foe. That approach and that attitude ultimately saw the work of God completed.

You might think that the final three foes that Nehemiah faced were Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem - but those are only the personalities that Satan put in front of his methods used to assault and sabotage God's work. The three of them can be found, first of all: one, in verses 1 to 4 - compromise. They tempted Nehemiah to compromise upon his principles. Then number two in verses 5 to 9 - they tried slander to bring reproach to the testimony of God's man, Nehemiah. Then thirdly in verses 10 to 14, when that slander failed they tried intimidation - they tried, with threats, to make him fearful.

Now let me share four things with you this morning, the first is this: he was not masked to their methods. Nehemiah was not masked to their methods. I want to look firstly briefly at the methods that they used. Here's the first method: there was politeness and plausibility in their approaches. Even though it was very evil, they shrouded it and dressed up in politeness and plausibility, but Nehemiah had the perceptiveness to see through it all. Look at the first compromise in verses 1 and 2. In verses 1 and 2 we have a very polite

invitation that came from these three, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. They asked him to come and meet with them, verse 2: 'together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono'. But Nehemiah perceptively saw: 'they thought to do me mischief'. 'And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you? Yet they sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner'.

A polite invitation: 'Look, let's just talk about this Nehemiah, don't be so intransigent, don't be so dogmatic in principle, let's come out of the city a wee bit to a neutral piece of ground in some wee village called Ono, and we'll just talk about the thing like grown men'. Four times the invitation came like that, and four times Nehemiah says: 'I'm not going, no!'. Now, if anybody reacted like that towards us, we'd probably say: 'What an ungrateful, intransigent, unreasonable, inflexible individual he is! Can't even talk about the thing! Four times I've come to him and asked a request to meet him'. But what you need to see about Nehemiah was that he could see through it all, he had the perceptiveness - or we would call it in the New Testament, the spiritual discernment to see that, as Paul says, Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.

Now it's good to be polite, and it's good to be plausible - but politeness and plausibility does not equate with spirituality. We must realise that, and if you've an ounce of perception you will know that already. Nehemiah's reason for not going was not only that he saw through it, but in verse 3 he says: 'I am doing a great work, I cannot come down: why should the work suffer for me going to pow-wow with you about something that I'm already convicted and convinced about? What I'm doing is right, and the work must go on'. In other words he was more concerned about the work of God than he was about his own reputation.

Now it's not that we, in some ignorant way, as some do, disregard what people think of us totally, and we don't any longer worry about relating to others in a polite or plausible manner - that's not what we're saying here. What we're saying here is this: he got his priorities right, and the chief and foremost thing that mattered to Nehemiah was the work of God, the glory of God, and that the work should go on. If people thought ill of him because of that, well then too bad, that's their problem. There was going to be no compromise in Nehemiah's life.

It's very strange today that many in the work of God seem to think that the work of God is their reputation, building little empires around their own ministry under their own name, lining their own pockets at times - tele-evangelists and all the rest, but we need to guard against it ourselves. The work of God is not our reputation, it is what John the Baptist said when he said: 'He must increase, and I must decrease'. There was no compromise for Nehemiah.

We see secondly, the second method that they used was slander in verses 5 and 6. Nehemiah says that there was a letter, the fifth time, an open letter in this man's hand. The words written in it were: 'It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall. In other words, 'Nehemiah, we have heard from the nations and Gashmu', or Geshem, which is probably what that really means, one of these three, 'who is a very reputable source', that's the inference, everybody believes Geshem, 'he says it's true that you only came into Jerusalem to build the walls to set yourself up as king against Artaxerxes back in Persia. You're wanting to build a little kingdom around yourself. It's reported among the nations, Geshem says it is true, the ball is in your court now Nehemiah - you prove it wrong!'

It was an official letter, it was an open letter, many of us have seen open letters just like this one. It even appears, as we read it, to be quite measured; and the claims seem, as we read, to be substantiated; the accusations seem to be named - but Nehemiah was able to see through all the sham. He could see the hypocrisy behind it, and he realised that the method of this letter was to persuade people of blatant lies. Now, to the naked eye, what is to say that Nehemiah hadn't just come to build the wall to make Jerusalem a

stronghold again, and a power, and to defeat their enemies, and to take over the world and the throne away from the king - and maybe even Nehemiah take it himself. There was nothing to say that that motive wasn't in the breast of Nehemiah, and here it's substantiated by Geshem and these nations, whoever they are - what's to say it wasn't true? Simply this: it wasn't true! That's why you should never judge motivation in anybody's heart, because you cannot see as God can see.

Slander reported among the nations, we'll look into that little bit later - but here's the third method that Nehemiah was not masked to, in verse 10: intimidation. There was this man in verse 10, Shemaiah, who was shut in it says. Nehemiah visited him, and he asked him: 'Look, you come with me, your life is under threat, and they're going to come and kill you tonight. You come with me into the temple, and we'll shut the doors and you'll be saved'. So he was trying to intimidate Nehemiah, saying that they were coming to him that very night, and going to kill him lying in his bed. Apparently this man Shemaiah had a special prophecy, a revelation from God to say that there was a threat on Nehemiah's life - and he seems here to be protecting Nehemiah from death: 'Let's take refuge in the temple, they're coming for you tonight'.

What did Nehemiah say in verse 11? 'I will not go', I love this man! 'I will not go' - he recognised that they were from the enemy. He didn't fall for the compromise, he didn't fall for the slander, he didn't fall for the intimidation - you might say: 'Where did he get such perception?'. Well, it's simply this: you recognise a counterfeit when you know and are familiar with the genuine. Just like those who are able to spot the forged pound notes, they don't study the forgeries, the counterfeits, they study the real McCoy - and then they know that if there's a deviation from that, it is falsehood.

This is what we have here, Nehemiah - we found it already when he pointed out the transgressions of the law and the people's greediness last week - he knew God's word, one, but two: he knew the God of the word in prayer. Right throughout this book he's consulting God, whereas the people lacked that knowledge of God's word, and lacked that knowledge of God - as Hosea said: 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because thou hast rejected knowledge'. As Paul later says in the New Testament, Satan got advantage over them because they were ignorant of Satan's devices - but Nehemiah was not ignorant of Satan's methods!

I wonder are we? Sometimes people can be very polite and plausible toward us, but very few of us see through the sham, see through the hypocrisy, and even see to the intent that is behind it all. It doesn't mean that you don't turn the other cheek, you do, but God has given us a brain - and sometimes we don't use it sanctified by the Holy Spirit! Now look at what he perceives, this is what I want you to see secondly - not only he was not masked to their method, but he was aware of their intent. He was aware of what was behind it all. Sometimes in counselling situations the secret to delivering someone through, particularly a mental problem, is to show them as a Christian the source of the problems that they're having - in other words, where they come from. At times, just by simply realising the source is Satan, the evil one, or demonic forces, right away the pipeline is cut from the power of those troubles, because you realise where they're coming from, and why they're coming, and what they're trying to do.

Do you understand what I'm saying? It's what the Lord said: 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free'. Nehemiah saw the truth - he wasn't masked by their methods, because he understood the intent of the enemy to rob him of the victory, and to get an advantage over him. Now here's a question for you: do you see through the methods of the evil one right to the intent of why he's doing it? Why he wants you to compromise? Why he slanders Christians in this day and age? Why we, as many people in this world, even as believers, are intimidated by fear?

Well here's four reasons, at least in Nehemiah's life, that I think can be mirrored in ours. In verse 3 he says quite plainly that even though they wanted to meet him for a pow-wow in Ono, he says that 'they wanted to do me evil'. Simply that, that's all Nehemiah could see: they wanted to do me evil. One: the enemy wants to

destroy you. Do you realise, as a Christian - sometimes we think it's all about making daisy-chains and having a nice time as believers - we have an enemy who seeks to devour us, and destroy us, and destroy our work! The tragedy is that he's not terribly interested in most believers, because most believers have stopped that work for themselves. You remember the sons of Sceva in Acts chapter 19 verse 15, and they tried to cast out demons in the name of the Lord Jesus, and the demons retorted back: 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?'. Satan wants to destroy us.

In verses 5 and 6 this letter, this open letter, Satan wants to discredit us. He wanted to destroy the testimony of God in Nehemiah's life, and many of us have read and seen lives wrecked through open letters like the very one that we have in chapter 6 of Nehemiah. It is tragic to me today that the pet sin of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ is the very sin that Satan seems to keep as his last bullet, the sin of slander, the sin of the rumour mill! Can I point out to you two characteristics of something that is slander and rumour from this passage, that is very clear that we should reject anything to do with it? One: the source is never declared. The source is never declared, even if the source exists. In verse 6 it says that the nations, it is reported among the nations, and Geshem testifies to it, that you're only coming to build the walls to make a kingdom for yourself. Well here's my question that I feel shows that the source is never declared: who is reporting this? Who is reporting it? Look at it, look at it in verse 6: 'It is reported' - who reported it? It's not mentioned! It's reported among the nations, who are the nations? He doesn't tell us! Geshem is not to be believed, because he has it in for Nehemiah right from the very beginning - but rumours are never substantiated, the source is never declared.

Here's a second characteristic: rumours have exaggeration and inaccuracy right throughout it all. Remember what I said earlier? To the naked eye, who was to know what Nehemiah's motivation was? But God knew his heart, but what they did with these rumours was exaggerate - 'He's building these walls to build a kingdom'. They were inaccurate, they were non-factual, ultimately they were lies. Listen to what Charles Swindoll says about rumours in the life of believers: 'I am personally convinced that the number one enemy of Christian unity is the tongue. It is not drink, it is not drugs, it is not poor homes, it is not inflation, it is not the television, it is not even a bad church programme, it's the tongue'. Of the seven things in the book of Proverbs that God hates, three relate to the tongue - and do you know what the Bible teaches? Even if something is true about another brother, if you pass it on as gossip not to help him but to hinder him, it is a sin! Often we pull down other's reputations because we think it sets ourselves up higher than them. Do you see if who you're talking to is a person of perception? They will discern and see through the sham of it all that shows the lack of spirituality in your own heart.

The enemy wanted to destroy him, he wanted to discredit him, thirdly he wanted to defile him in verse 10. Shemaiah: 'Come on into the temple with me, you'll be safe there. We'll close the doors and everything will be okay. They're coming for you tonight, you better get in'. Now listen: Numbers, which Nehemiah knew, taught that only priests could go in. So if Nehemiah was to go in in the sense which Shemaiah meant, he would be transgressing God's law, he would be cursed because of it, he would lose credibility in the eyes of the people - and you know the rest, the wall would not be built.

Secondly verse 10 says that Shemaiah was shut in. Now we don't know this for a fact, but that statement 'shut in' can often mean that there was something physically wrong with him. Maybe he was ill, he maybe had a disability - and you know that the Old Testament law taught that nobody with a disability could enter into the presence of God in the temple. So not only would Nehemiah be defiling himself, but effectively he would be defiling the sanctity of God's temple by bringing Shemaiah along with him - and Shemaiah knew it! Do you realise that the enemy wants to destroy you? Do you realise that the enemy wants to discredit your testimony? Do you realise that the enemy wants to defile you with sin? How many of us, time and time again, walk into the trap that the enemy sets for us because we don't realise his intent? Who is behind it? Sometimes I even think we believe we can disobey God's word and it not affect our witness. Here is a prime

example: if Nehemiah had gone and sinned as Shemaiah tempted him, the work of God would have stopped. The work of God is affected by everything in our lives that is defiled.

The enemy wanted to destroy him, discredit him, defile him, and then in verse 10 again: deter him. He says: 'You better get out of your bed tonight, Nehemiah, and come to this temple because the hit squad is coming for you - the boys in the balaclavas, with the baseball bats - and you're going to get it tonight. They're coming tonight to kill you!. Believe it or not, God's people in the work of God, and even in our lives, and people in the world - not just saints but ordinary sinners - can use threats to stop the work of God. Sometimes they go like this: 'What will people think of you if you do this?', or, 'if you say this? What will happen to your reputation if you do this?'. This has been an age old ploy of the devil - do you remember what the Jews said to Pilate when he was thinking of letting the Lord Jesus go? 'Thou art not Caesar's friend if you do this'.

Emotional blackmail - Nehemiah could have thought: 'What will people think if I turn these apparently gracious invitations, and very polite letters, and approaches and all the rest, if I turn them down what will they think of me?'. Well, here's what I want you to see thirdly: he was resolute for right. Not only was he not masked to their methods, and was aware of their intent, but he was resolute for the right. Here it is in three points - one: he was resolved in his conviction. Verse 2: 'Come on Nehemiah, meet us in Ono', and - you'll like this one - he said: 'O no!' to Ono. 'I'm not going to Ono - why should I come down and the work stop? I'm doing a great work!'. He was resolved in his conviction, resolute to do right. He wasn't prepared to go out of Jerusalem, the holy city, to neutral ground outside the city. That is what the enemy wants us to do, wherever we are, through discouragement and opposition and despair he wants us to climb down from a great work and go to neutral ground, and dilute and ignore our convictions and our principles. You women drivers will know - I think you will know this - that when you're in neutral you're not going anywhere. When you're on neutral ground, you're not going anywhere for God. So in verses 3 and 4 he says: 'I'm doing a great work, I can't come down' - four times they said it, four times he replied, it didn't matter: 'I'm not going'. He was resolved in his conviction.

Here's the second thing: he was secure in his conscience. Verse 8, all this that they wrote about him in this open letter, he was secure in his conscience. He didn't think: 'I wonder is there some truth in that? I wonder am I really doing it for this reason?'. Maybe he could have thought: 'I wonder will people believe what's written in this letter about me?'. What did he do? He told them point-blank 'It's a lie, and it's out of your head!'. Their ploy was to weaken Nehemiah by these repeated accusations, but Nehemiah was secure in his own conscience - do you know why? Because he was pure in his own heart. Let me tell you: it doesn't matter what anybody says about you, as long as you're pure before God in your own heart, you can be secure in your conscience.

Remember what the apostle said in Acts 24 and verse 16: 'Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men' - and because of that the apostle didn't fear anybody but God, and he had that holy boldness that you find right throughout the Scriptures. He knew before God what was truth and what was error. One: he was resolved in his conviction; two: he was secure in his conscience - and thirdly: he was un intimidated under threat. Verse 11, un intimidated under threat, look at it: 'I said' - after Shemaiah said they're coming to kill you tonight, you better come with me into the temple - 'Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in'.

'Should a man like me flee? I'm not going'. Winston Churchill, that great war hero, once delivered a speech to the Harrow School. It went like this, listen or you'll miss it: 'Never give in. Never, never, never, never, never give in'. That was Nehemiah, he was resolute for right, therefore fourthly and finally he was successful in his service. Verse 15, isn't it wonderful: 'So the wall was finished'. Now don't misunderstand this portion of Scripture, or the character of Nehemiah - he was not invincible. I'm sure that if he was human, and I

believe he was, that he had times of dejection - but the point about this is simply that he was not ultimately overcome by his opposition. He might have been down at times, but he wasn't knocked out. What distinguished Nehemiah is what he did with the opposition that he faced. It was his defining moment when he decided to take all his cares, and to turn them into prayers! At that God gave him the victory.

We read his prayer in verse 9, after this letter came out, he said at the very end of verse 9: 'Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands'. I need divine strength, and if you're facing the opposition of the world, the flesh and the devil, and even at times of the church, you need to come into the presence of God and plead His strength. In verse 14 what did he do? Did he go and try to fight his enemies with the arm of flesh? He brought them all to God: 'My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works'. In other words, he put God into the scene by his prayer, he put God between him and his enemies in his supplications.

Do you realise, my friend, that prayer ultimately puts God into the frame of your life - and I say that very reverently. When we do that, when we bring God into the situation the result is that the work of God will be finished, and it was finished in 52 days. The wall was built, and further to that: not only is God's work finished, but the tables are turned! What am I talking about? Well, read verse 16: 'And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God'. Let me read another translation: when they saw that the work was finished, they were afraid, and they lost their self-confidence because they realised that this work had been done with the help of God.

He was not masked to their methods of compromised standard, intimidation. He was aware of their intent to destroy him, to discredit him, to defile him, to deter him. He was resolute for right, he was resolved in his conviction, he was secure in his conscience, he was unintimidated under threat - and therefore he was successful in his service, and the tables are turned. Those who tried to make him fear were afraid, and their work foundered.

Isn't it tremendous that even when Satan comes in the most final and fearsome attacks on our lives, and on our work and testimony for God; if we commit ourselves to God and turn our cares into prayers, we will overcome and our enemies will falter?

Father, we acknowledge that we face a fearsome foe in Satan. We read within Your word that he is a roaring lion, seeking to devour us - but we are also told: 'Whom resist, steadfast in the faith'. Lord, we stand upon this solid ground of Thy promises in Thy word, and we pray that You will make us overcomers. We ask, our Father, that You would help us to say within our hearts and from our mouths, from the vantage point of wherever You have placed us, 'I am doing a great work, I cannot come down to you'. Oh Lord, give us that conquering, courageous spirit that we need to never ever give in to the enemy. Bless us now, we pray, heal those who are wounded in the battle, help those who have feeble knees and whose arms weigh down heavy. Give us another boost of energy to go into the forefront of the battle, and face the enemy, so that the tide may be turned and he may flee - for in the name of Jesus we have the victory. In whose name we pray, Amen.

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Building For God - Chapter 10

"Getting Back To The Bible"

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There was a time in the life of the Israelites, and indeed right the way through all of the history of God's people - whether it be the Jews in the Old Testament, or indeed the church in the New - right throughout church history, when God's word, although it stands forever, had been forgotten or sidelined by the people. It never changes, it is always relevant - you don't need to make God's word relevant, it is relevant - but sometimes it can be sidelined or even forgotten. We're going to read about that and think about it today - the title of my message today is 'Getting Back To The Bible'.

Verse 1 of chapter 8: 'And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaijah, and Urijah, and Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law. Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our LORD: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength. So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved. And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them. And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law. And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month: And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written. So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim. And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua', or Joshua, 'the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner', and we end our reading of God's word at

verse 18.

Now I did not say, I don't remember saying, at the very beginning of this series that the book of Nehemiah really is divided into two sections - the first is found in chapters 1 to 6, and you will have noticed that we skipped out a chapter, because really chapter 7 is all the organisation and you can read it at your own leisure at home. We may refer to some facts within it throughout this morning's study and further studies, but we're skipping over to chapter 8. Really the first section is chapters 1 to 6, and the second section is chapter 7, the last seven chapters of the book. The first six chapters that we have spent nine weeks on was chiefly taken up with the theme of the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem, and indeed reconstruction of the whole city. But the last seven chapters that we're now entering into this week is the re-instruction of God's people.

They have now rebuilt the city of God, and built up those protective walls which were protective for various reasons that we looked into over the weeks - but now it was time from God's word, and the book, to re-instruct God's people regarding who they were and what they were to be as His chosen people. Now what I want you to note right away before we go on any further this morning in chapter 8 is that what we are witnessing in this chapter is a revival among God's people, a spiritual revival. I hope you do know that revival has got nothing whatsoever to do with those who are not Christians, it's got nothing to do with people being saved! Revival is chiefly something to do with those who are believers, those who are saved. We see the very simple meaning of the word 'revived' is 'to bring back to life', and you can only bring back to life if there was life there in the beginning. So, although there may be an offshoot of revival, and a side-blessing of revival in folk getting saved because of the state of the church, and because they're on fire and they're going out with the gospel in the power of the Spirit, primarily revival has to begin and start in believer's lives - new life, the Holy Ghost of God getting the whole sway in the lives of believers.

So, as long as we understand that we'll not make any mistakes this morning. If you've ever read the biblical revivals, or indeed the revivals of history, you will see that there are two characteristic features in all of them. One is the unadulterated and straight preaching of God's word - that is one prominent feature of every revival that has ever happened in history: the preaching of God's word in power. The second chief characteristic which you will clearly notice if you've ever read anything about these revivals in history or in the Bible, is that there is always an active response from God's people. In other words, when they hear the word of God, they obey the word of God in an extraordinary sense that they have never done before, and one of the outcomes of that is a great joy among God's people, an overflowing continually perpetuating blessing that just seems as if it's never ever going to stop. Two characteristics in every revival in history, in every revival in the word of God, and in the revival that we have been reading about in chapter 8 of Nehemiah this morning. One: the preaching of God's word; and two: the active obedient response of God's people to that word which engendered joy within their lives.

Take the Reformation for instance, the whole of Europe, indeed the whole of the world was in darkness. It was during a period of the Dark Ages when men began to harbour after God's word, rather than the teaching of the church of Rome. The church of Rome had shackled God's word and bound it, and only the real religious authorities and those who were thought to be educated enough were allowed to read it. The fact of the matter is there were men like John Wycliffe, who came along and took their lives in their hands, and lost their lives inevitably, because they knew the importance of God's word. From then on through Martin Luther and John Calvin and all the various reformers, the word of God was put in the people's language, and the New Testament church was reborn, as it were, out of the darkness of Romanism. Where the word of God is bound or suppressed or forgotten darkness prevails, but when the word of God is rediscovered there is revival. I know that a lot of the Reformation was on a political level, but there was no doubt that there were many people swept into the kingdom of God because the word of God was found again and preached in an undiluted form.

One of the greatest revivalists, this time in the 18th century, by the name of George Whitfield, records his own relationship to the holy Scriptures in his journals - I want to read it to you. He said: 'I began to read the holy Scriptures upon my knees, laying aside all other books, and praying over - if possible - every line and word. This proved meat indeed and drink indeed to my soul, and I daily received fresh light and power from above. I got more true knowledge from reading the book of God in one month than I could ever have acquired from all the writings of men'. George Whitfield, a very learned man, but a man who realised the importance of God's book and God's book alone. Because of that he was sent forth of God and saw thousands brought into the kingdom of Christ through his preaching. Jonathan Goforth (sp?) was another man who was greatly used of God in China and elsewhere in revival from the year 1908 onwards. Looking back at those great years of blessing in his life, he records in one of his writings: 'We wish to affirm too that we can entertain no hope of a mighty globe-encircling Holy Spirit revival without there being first a 'Back to the Bible' movement'. There needs to be, he said, for a revival that is big enough to bring our loved ones to Christ, there needs to be first and foremost a back to the Bible movement. Goforth certainly practiced what he preached, because for 19 years he read through the Chinese Bible New Testament 55 times - of course, it was not his first language.

We add to Goforth and to Whitfield and to men like Wycliffe, Wesley - Charles and John - Spurgeon, Brownlow North who was used in Ulster in revival, Jonathan Edwards used in North America in revival - all these great men of God believed in the Bible. It's a very interesting point and an historical fact that revival never ever emanates out of the liberal wing of the church of Jesus Christ, because the liberal wing dilutes the word of God.

Now at the point we have reached in chapter 8 of Nehemiah, the walls are finished. But isn't it very telling that the work of God, as it was prescribed to Nehemiah, is finished - the practical end of things - but there is still a spiritual vacuum within the people's hearts. According to chapter 7 that we didn't read, the people are now well ordered, they're well defended, and they're well governed by Nehemiah. Yet in this community of nice homes and good jobs and great security, there is an emptiness, there was something that was missing. I believe, if we could put it in our context today, it was simply this: the Lord was not given His chief place in their lives, the place that He ought to have had.

What a lesson there is for us today, especially where we are as the Iron Hall. It's not enough to have well constructed superstructures, it's not enough to have all the best music that we can have, and all the best preaching if you can get it somewhere - if there is nothing real in our spiritual lives which knows the unction of God's Spirit, if inside we are still empty, if there's no power, if there's no fire, if there's no vitality it means nothing! In chapter 6 Nehemiah said this work was a great work, there's no doubt about it. I believe this work is a great work, I believe everything that goes on here is a great work, but the fact of the matter is: if all we have are these externalities, we have nothing! Don Francisco, a gospel singer, most of you probably wouldn't like his music, but I like it. One of his songs goes like this, it's called 'The Steeple Song':

I don't care how many buses you own, or the size of your sanctuary
 It doesn't matter how steep your steeple is, if it's sitting on a cemetery.
 I don't care if you pave your parking lot, or put pads upon your pews,
 What good is a picture perfect stage, if you're missing all the cues?'

What does it matter if the power of God, the glory of God is missing? You can have beautiful architectural structures, well-oiled programmes, but it means nothing if God's power and God's presence are absent! Now here's how they got back the presence of God, how do you get back the presence of God? Well, they got back to the word of God. Let me leave you, if time allows, with five points. They are steps, they're five steps to spiritual revival - here's the first: they read the Bible. Now that may seem very elementary, but that's where they started, and that's where we all need to start: they read the Bible.

Secondly: they recognised the meaning. Thirdly: they responded in obedience. Fourthly: they rediscovered lost truths. And fifthly: they rediscovered strengthening joy. Let's start with the first one: they read the Bible, verses 1 to 7. Verse 1 says that they all gathered together 'as one man', they were united. We don't need to go on any further, just to say that they were united together around God's word. Psalm 133 says: 'How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!', and later on in the Psalm it says that God commands the blessing where such unity is. Now brethren, we need to be united! This gathering of Nehemiah's was not a Bible Conference, rather it was a Bible Convention - now you say: what's the difference? Well, a Bible Conference is a place for discussion, but there was no open discussion here. Some of you love Bible Conferences where you can discuss until the cows come home things that don't matter. But the fact of the matter is this was a Convention, for Conventions are a place of decision. God was bringing His word through His servant Ezra, and He wasn't looking for a red light or a yellow light or a green light as to whether the people agreed with what God was saying, He was wanting decision not discussion!

A united people are here in verse 1 waiting on God - where are they? It says that they're at the water gate. Now you remember the week that we went round all the gates, and they had typical meanings, they represented things. Do you remember what the water gate represented? Can you remember? Am I wasting my time? The word of God, remember? The word of God in Scripture is represented by water. Here they are, in a typical sense, they're coming to the cleansing refreshing reviving power of the word of God - this is the place to be! Look at it: the open place before the water gate - have you got an open place before God's word, where your heart is open, your mind is open? Do you come with God's people even, and gather together around God's word?

I tell you this - and this might be a very very general statement, and you might think it's a bit simplistic, but I'm going to make it because I believe it's founded on Scripture. If God's people, with one mind, gather around God's word, to seek His will and His will alone, they will experience revival. Can I ask you: do you gather around God's word with God's people? Do you know where we chiefly gather around God's word? It's on a Monday night, it's at our Bible Reading - many of you don't come. Some of you can't come, and I acknowledge that, but many of you can come and should come, and if you did come this place would be packed out - and if the visitors were taken away from a Monday night, we would be ashamed at how few from the Iron Hall are actually here! These people realised the importance of gathering around God's word as one people. When you do come, as many of you come, do you come with the spirit of conference or the spirit of convention? Are you coming to see 'whether I'll agree with what he says today', whether it's wrong or right? Or do you come saying, 'What will God say to me today'? Oh, there's a difference.

Well, the cry came from the people, and that's what I like to notice here: it came from the people. 'Bring out the book! Ezra, we want to be revived, we want to know God, put away all that rubbish that we've known for years in captivity that's done our hearts no good, and bring out the book!'. I'm telling you, you don't hear that cry today - it's bring out everything but the book! Do you bring the Book to church? Now we don't want to get legalistic, but the fact of the matter is a lot of people don't even bring their Bibles to church. They're spoonfed, they're not searching the Scriptures to see whether these things are such. Can I ask you fathers and mothers: do you bring out the Book in the home when there's a decision to be made? What's the first thing you do? Pick up the phone and ring your solicitor or your insurance broker, or do you bring out the Book and see what God says? Leaders in the church, in your deliberations and your planning for the future of this fellowship, how often do you bring out the book, and say 'What saith the Scriptures on this'?

I want you to notice that the people didn't ask what Ezra's opinion on the matter was. They didn't say: 'Nehemiah, you're very wise man, and you're our governor and our leader, what do you think about all this?' They didn't even call Zerubbabel and ask what his thoughts on the matter were. They respected God's servants, and God's servants ought to be respected because they're sent to minister God's word - but we ought

never to forget that they are only ministers of the word of God. It is the word of God that is what is important. I'm not meant to be a minister of science or a minister of philosophy, or even a minister of theology, you've got to be a minister of God's word and preach God's word as it is.

I don't know whether you've noticed this or not, but sometimes great men of God are quoted and adhered to as if they were the same authority as the word of God. Do you ever notice this? Maybe there's a discussion or something, something's being debated, and someone says: 'Oh, but Mr So-and-so, he didn't teach that', or 'he did teach that. John Calvin, he said this. J. N. Darby, he said that. A. W. Pink, he said the other. C. I. Schofield, he believes this'. Many of those men are great men, and I agree with a lot of what some of them said - I'm being careful there - but the fact of the matter is that they do not have the authority of God's word no matter who they are! Ezra was asked: 'Bring out the book!', the book of God! We must be careful that we do not teach for doctrine the commandments of men!

Let's answer a couple of questions: who was there? It says men were there, women were there, and all who could understand were there - that infers children who could understand what was being read. Now you'll see a little bit later that it would have been very hard to understand a lot of it, because it wasn't even spoken in their language - but Ezra felt that it was sufficient that they understand the translation, and they must have done otherwise God's word would not have said it. Now when we read further: how was it done? Very simply, and very similar to what we do today: there was a public reading from a makeshift erected pulpit, there and then. So that's what it means when it says that Ezra stood over the people, and they read the word of God constantly, with probably breaks of exposition in between, from daybreak - the morning dawning - until noon, until the afternoon - 12 o'clock. How many of you could have stuck that?

What was the reaction of the people? 'When's this boy going to shut up? You've gone well over your time!' - was that the reaction? Or as some people say: 'Oh, people who do those things, they don't know any better, or they've nothing better to do' - these people had been years in captivity without God's word, and now they'd got it and they couldn't do without it! Do you know what their reaction was? They lifted up their hands to heaven - and can I say that there's nothing wrong with doing that. The charismatics might do it, but you can do it too if it's from your heart and it's in prayer to God and praise - and it would do us well if we all did it from time to time. They said: 'Amen, Amen!' - they agreed, that simply means 'Thus, it is correct', 'Amen and Amen' - and do you know what else they did? They fell on their faces before God, and they worshipped at the reading of the holy Scriptures.

My friends, they didn't know what we know, but they had a reverence and a respect for God's holy word. Some people would call it 'bibliolatry', that they were almost worshipping the Bible - and some people throw that charge at us because we take the Bible so seriously, but that is a lie. We are acknowledging the Author of this book, and His sovereign will and purpose which is found therein. Do we have a respect for God's word? Do we reverence it? The cry was: 'Bring the book', it was the cry that brought them out of the darkness, it was the cry that brought us out of the darkness in the Reformation, and every revival since it. It freed them, it freed us, and it will free us again if we bring back the Book!

Now can I ask you - I don't want to rush over this, and I have so much information here this morning I'll probably not get through it - but I want to ask you a very very simple question as individuals: do you read your Bible? I think I've said this before, that sometimes in counselling situations people have problems with sins, and they come to me, or they have problems with other things in their mind - and they really don't know what the answer is. One of the first questions that I've learnt to ask is: are you reading God's word? And usually the answer comes back: 'No, I'm not. I know I should be'. David said in Psalm 119: 'Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee' - God's word is what pushes all that sin and dirt out, but you can only push it out if you're pushing God's word in!

Everyone: are you daily reading God's word? Are you, preferably, reading the Bible through once in a year? It was said of that great man of God, George Mueller, that he read the Bible over 200 times in his lifetime. William Evans, who in the early part of the last century pastored College Church in Wheaton, it is said of him - you might not believe it, believe it or not - that he memorised the entire Bible in the King James Version...and the New Testament in the American Standard Version! Billy Graham says of his medical missionary father-in-law, Nelson Bell, that he made it a point in his life, I quote: 'To rise every morning at 4:30 and spend two to three hours in Bible reading'. He didn't use that time to read commentaries or to write, he didn't do his correspondence or any other work, he just read the Scriptures every morning - and he was a walking Bible encyclopaedia - people wondered at the holiness and the greatness in his life. It was Spurgeon who said: 'A Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't'. Imagine asking, having to ask Christians: do you read your Bible?! How many of you read your Bible this morning? How many of you will read your Bible today at all? How many of you will open your Bible between this morning and this time next week? My friend, if you want revival in your life, you need to know revival in Bible reading in your life.

Let's deal with the second point: they recognised the meaning. Verse 8, this is very interesting: 'So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading'. Now here we have the fact that they recognised the meaning, the characteristics of authentic Bible exposition. The first thing was that he read God's word. Now this might seem elementary, but this is where we've got to begin: it is not the opinion of men that exposition rests upon, but it is the establishment first and foremost that all truth comes from God. He is the source, not my wisdom, not my expertise or my education whatever it may be. They read from God's word, secondly: there was a respect for God's word. The people listened intently, verses 5 and 6, and we see the response. But the third thing is this: the truth was explained so that all could understand, all that were at an age of understanding.

What lessons there are for preachers in our midst this morning and myself: those gifted in God's truth translated and gave the meaning. It's interesting that Nehemiah knew that this wasn't his gift. He had been using his gift up to chapter 7 in erecting these walls, but his gift wasn't preaching, so he stood aside and in came Ezra. It's like John the Baptist, his job was making roads, preparing the way for the Lord; Nehemiah's job was building walls, but when he knew his job was over he got out of the way. Maybe we need to get out of the way for someone else to take over. But here is Ezra coming to the fore, the word of God is preached; Ezra reads the Scriptures in Hebrew, but the word here for 'understanding' really in verse 8 - he read in the law distinctly, and gave the sense - that word 'distinctly' means 'making a distinction', it literally is 'translated'. Now you might say: 'Why did the Jews need the Bible translated when they wrote it?'. Here's the reason: for years they had been in captivity in Babylon, and they had learned things in Babylon that caused them not to understand God's word, and they had even learned another language - they were now speaking Aramaic - so they didn't even know the language that the Bible was being read in.

Ezra, he read it, and these other men around him that we had trouble reading this morning, they translated God's word and they expounded it to them - but isn't there a lesson in this for us all? They recognised the readings, they were Jews from birth, they had lost their tongue, they had lost their culture, they had come out of Babylon back to Jerusalem, their mentality and their lifestyle were worldly - and when they heard God's word they didn't even recognise it because their ears were Babylonish. There was a communication breakdown, and some of us might find it hard to get into God's word again because it's been so long since we've been in it, and because our lives have imbibed things that are a total antithesis with God's law, commands, and rules and principles.

Although it was hard for them, although it was inconvenient, they unlocked the door of understanding; and someone with ability led them beneath the surface of God's will and they understood it. Now listen to this: they didn't have a Bible in their own language. The possibility is that Ezra had the only Bible that was in existence at this particular time, yet they heard God's word, they understood God's word, and through the

powerful preaching of God's servant they obeyed God's word. They didn't have one iota of the amount of things that we have been blessed with in this day, but they were streets ahead of us! Can I say that we spend much of our time occupying our minds with unanswerable questions and irreconcilable issues, rather than that which is clear and plain within God's word - don't we? It puts in the time thinking about all these issues that you cannot reconcile, that you cannot make sense of, but the fact of the matter is - as Mark Twain said - it's not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me, it's what I do understand. Are you obedient to what you do understand?

They read the Bible, they recognised the meaning, and thirdly they responded in obedience: the truth was applied in verse 9 - they did that day. They wept, they cried for guilt - why were there crying? Because they knew that they were the ones being spoken of, they committed the sins, they were guilty in the eyes of God! They were thinking back over years of darkness where there was no spiritual input in everything that they had done, and they were now realising how far away from God they had been. When was the last time you and I wept as we read God's word and applied it to our hearts? When was it? Has it ever been?

They read it, they recognised the meaning, they responded in obedience, and here's something interesting: they recovered lost truths. We read that on the second day, verse 13, the chiefs of the people came together, and the reading of God's word continued - but there was a notable discovery that was made in verse 14. The discovery simply was that, yes, they had celebrated for years what was called the Feast of the Tabernacles, but since the days of Joshua, the conquest of the promised land, since those days one particular feature of the Feast of Tabernacles had not been obeyed - what was it? Well, it was the building of booths. They used to get these olive branches, and all sorts of things mentioned here in these verses, and they used to build these little huts, and the people would live in them for the duration of this feast to celebrate the Feast of the Tabernacles. They were celebrating the feast, but they were not adhering fully to God's word in the celebration.

Now this is remarkable, because at once when the people in Nehemiah's day recognised the challenge that they had not done this thing, they were obedient there and then to it. They could have said: 'Well, here's something that hasn't been observed for 1000 years or more' - do you know all that mattered? It's still in this book. They could have said: 'Well, David, the great King, the King of our glory period and Solomon his son paid no attention to these feasts - even in the days of Joshua these things were not built'. But the fact of the matter is, because it was in this Book, that is what motivated them to obedience. I hear people saying today: 'As long as the spirit of the word is adhered to, it doesn't matter how you obey it in form. As long as you are, in your heart, adhering to a principle within God's word, it doesn't matter what the form is'. Now there's no doubt that the principle is more important than the form, but let me tell you this: if the form is stipulated in scripture, you've got to obey the form as well as the principle. If you find it in God's word, conference is not asked for, your opinion is not applied for from God, what God wants from you is obedience. It was awkward for them to implement this since the days of Samuel, David and Solomon, but God blessed them for it because they found it written within the Book!

Are we like that? Do you know what the Christian church is regulated by, as far as I can see today, in the West? It's what everybody else does - 'They don't do that down there! Do you know what they're doing down there? Why can't we do it here?'. Friends, I'm not making a moral comment or judgment on anything that anybody else does, but we ought to go by the Book, not by what others are doing. The people in Nehemiah's day could have said: 'David was blessed, and he didn't see this as an essential! Samuel was blessed, it wasn't essential for his life!' - they said, 'It is written in the Book, we will do it'.

They recovered lost truths, and fifthly and finally: they rediscovered strengthening joy. These people had lost touch with God, maybe they thought God had left them - but the fact of the matter was, they had left God. But now that God was back in His word, they thought God was angry - and that's the way some people feel, or maybe are made to feel, when they get away from God in their life and sin enters. Then all of a sudden

they hear God's word, and they get convicted, and you know there's nothing wrong with conviction - in fact, we could do with a lot more of it: tears of contrition and repentance. This is what we have here: they began to weep, they began to mourn - but do you know what Ezra said? 'Don't weep, don't mourn, for this day is holy unto the Lord your God' - verse 9 - 'Mourn not, nor weep, for all the people wept when they heard the words of the law'.

If you're like these people, and you have sidelined God's word in your life, the devil sometimes comes along and he says: 'You will never make it back. You have done this, or done that, and that has cut you off from God. There is no opportunity or no chance really for you to be what you used to be, or for God bless you'. That even discourages some people from praying or from coming to Bible Readings, or from reading God's word and studying it themselves. The accuser, the devil says: 'You're no use. It's no use trying this, forget about it! You're a hopeless sinner, just give in, because you've been cut off from God, God is angry with you'. Now yes, repentance is needed, and we're instructed to weep and to mourn - but the people were told in Nehemiah's day: 'God is not just angry with your sin, but God is a God who wants to forgive, and God is a God who wants you to be strong again'.

The people could have said: 'How can we be strong? We've lost our testimony. Our children and our grandchildren have been brought up in Babylonish systems, they haven't learned the law, they don't even know the language of the Bible - how can we possibly be strong again?'. This is what God's servant said to them, verse 10, listen to it: 'The joy of the Lord is your strength'. You may say: 'Well, that's some argument! Is that not a bit of a circular one? I don't have any joy - the joy of the Lord is your strength! How can the joy of the Lord be my strength when I don't have it?'. Do you know what the joy of the Lord is? It perhaps would be better read: 'The joy that is the Lord's is your strength' - the joy that is the Lord's? The joy that the Lord owns, His joy, not your joy, His joy! Now what is His joy? His joy is seeing His people doing what He has asked them!

Do you remember 3 John chapter 1 and verse 4, the apostle said: 'I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth' - I have no greater joy! Tears of repentance are good, beating your breast before God is good, making sacrifices in your life - cutting off that right hand and plucking out that right eye and throwing away, that has caused you to sin - it's all very good and it's very necessary...but God's word says: 'To obey is better than sacrifice'. The joy of the Lord, His own joy in His heart will be yours if you do what He says. Do we do what He says?

'When we walk with the Lord
In the light of His word,
What a glory He sheds on our way.
When we do His good will,
He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey'.

Do you want to be revived? You need to revive reading this book! You need to recognise the meaning of this book! You need to respond in obedience to this book, completely 100%! You need to recover the lost truths of this book in your life, and in God's people of the assembly! And you need to rediscover the strengthening power of God's joy when you obey Him - and I can tell you, and I don't obey Him as I ought, but in the times when I am obeying Him the most there is a buoyancy, and even a confidence that is not self-confidence or pride, but to know that before God you've got a conscience that is clear!

Do you know that? Do you want revival? We want revival: we need to get back to the Book.

Building For God - Chapter 11

"Putting Prayer Back In Its Place"

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Chapter 9 of Nehemiah, 'Putting Prayer Back In Its Place' - now if the revival recorded in chapter 8 of Nehemiah, and indeed, as we saw, every revival in history, teaches us anything, it teaches us that the preaching of God's word faithfully and powerfully, and indeed joyful obedience to that word are both central to a revival amongst God's people. One: the preaching of God's word faithfully; and two: faithful obedience in a joyful way to that word - both of them are intrinsic to revival.

One sure third ingredient must be added to those first two - preaching God's word and obeying - and that is simply that of prayer. You'll find within all of the Scriptures, and indeed all the revivals of history, that the preaching of God's word, obedience to that word, and faithfulness of God people in prayer are intrinsic to God's moving by His spirit among God's people in revival. Now what we read partly of this morning in Nehemiah chapter 9 is what is the longest recorded prayer in the whole of the Bible. It's very interesting that it's right in the middle of a spiritual awakening, it's there in revival and it's good that it should be such because it testifies to us the great need that there is if we're going to see God's people revived, if we're going to see the outworking of that in the salvation of our friends and loved ones who are lost, that we are on our knees in prayer.

We hear often quoted 2 Chronicles 7:14, where God says: 'If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land'. But there are requirements that God needs us to fulfil where prayer is concerned, until He then pours out the blessing upon us. It has always been, it will always be, there are certain principles of revival - the preaching of God's word fearlessly in the power of the Spirit, God's people being fearless in their obedience to God's word and their surrender to it, but we're going to see this morning that we need to put prayer back in its place if we're really going to see our lives, our church, our district revived for the Lord Jesus Christ.

I've spoken to you before about the Moravian community, and prayer was intrinsic among the Moravians at Hernhut in Saxony, when the Spirit of God came powerfully among them in August 1727. The history records that adults covenanted to cover each 24-hours of the day in prayer. By the end of the month, after covenanting this, the children alone were holding their own prayer meetings - spending many hours, believe it or not, in praying, singing and weeping. The same pattern was found in the life of a Mr James McQuilkin - who many of you may not have heard of - but he was a man used of God here in Ulster in the revival in 1859. He was converted in 1856 in Ballymena by the witness of an English lady who just spoke to him about the Lord Jesus, and later on James McQuilkin went on to lead three of his friends to the Lord Jesus Christ. So the four of them were saved, very early in the faith, but all four of them agreed and covenanted together to meet every Friday evening for prayer and for Bible study. You may know this, that they chose an old school house near Kells in County Antrim, and during the winter of 1857 and 1858 each of them gathered an armful of peat and made their way to the school house every Friday evening. The peat warmed their bodies, and the fire of God coming down from heaven warmed their heart as they sought God's face for revival.

Two other people later joined them, one a very old man named Marshall, but it wasn't long until that prayer meeting grew. By New Year's Day in 1858 they saw their first convert, and by the end of that year the prayer meeting had grown to 50 people. Now let me quote them, they said they prayed: 'For an outpouring of the

Holy Spirit upon ourselves, and upon the surrounding country. This was the one great object and burden of our prayers. We held right to that one thing, and did not run off to anything else'. The prayer group was ridiculed for praying in this way, 'but we kept right on praying until the power came' - and it did come! You can be sceptical today in our 21st century world, but the fact of the matter is that by this time the following year there was 100,000 souls saved in Ulster in answer to these men's prayers. As the revival of the gospel spread across the land, so spread a revival for prayer meetings - they were everywhere! The Conner district alone had 100 weekly prayer meetings commenced in that year. Prayer meetings were everywhere, from graveyards to gravel pits, everywhere people were on their knees crying unto God in prayer.

Ballymena's Wellington Street Presbyterian Church could be, I quote: 'Crowded in all of its parts by a prayer meeting - and this on a Saturday, this weekly market-day when at normal times a dozen persons could scarcely have been convened for such a purpose'. There was an unusual, and unnatural, yea a supernatural movement of God's Spirit in revival - but what I want you to see today is this: it came intrinsically from a revival of prayer among God's people. I say to you today here in the Iron Hall, that if we're to know true revival we must know personally and corporately a true revival of prayer in our lives and in our church. Nothing else will do! So here's the question: how is prayer in your life? How are you doing with regards to prayer? I've been reading a lot of Charles Swindoll, and his book on Nehemiah, and he quotes a man by the name of J. Oswald Saunders who some of you will know from his book 'Spiritual Leadership'. J. Oswald Saunders quotes a man called Dean C. J. Vaughn, and he does it, he says, to rattle the skeleton that hangs in many of our closets - that is the skeleton of prayerlessness. This is the quotation, listen very carefully and apply it to your own hearts: 'If I wish to humble anyone', he says, 'I should question him about his prayers. I know nothing to compare with this topic for its sorrowful self-confession'.

It's true, isn't it? If I wanted to humble any of you here this morning, all I would need to do is pinpoint you and say: how long did you pray this morning? How good were your prayers this morning? And let me tell you, all you would have to do is return the question to me and I would be satisfactorily humbled as well! It's something we all like to keep quiet, because it really is the measure of the spiritual man, isn't it, how often we are on our knees? It was Robert Murray McCheyne and he said: 'A man is what he is on his knees, and no more'. The truth of this sentiment, it humbles us - and whether you're a preacher hiding behind a pulpit, or an elder hiding behind an office, or a deacon hiding behind some activities that are external and other people see; whether you're a member coming to the meetings and hiding behind that, or hiding behind the tithe that you give to the Lord every Lord's Day; whether you're an evangelist hiding behind all the missions that you're taking and the Gospel meetings that you're preaching, the Open-Airs that you're convening; whether you're a missionary hiding behind the activity on the mission field that seems to be so spiritual, or a theological professor in the seminaries right across our world, an author of many of the Christian paperbacks that we see a plethora of our Christian bookshops, even on prayer - this question humbles us all! It is the great leveller!

How is your prayer life? Is it given its proper place? J. Oswald Saunders, in that book that I mentioned, says: 'Most of us are plagued with a subtle aversion to praying. We do not naturally delight in drawing near to God. We pay lip-service to the delight and potency and value of prayer. We assert that it is an indispensable, we adjunct that it is part of mature spiritual life. We know that it is constantly enjoined and exemplified in the scriptures, but in spite of all: too often we fail to pray'. Then he quotes an eminent Christian who said these words: 'When I go to pray, I find my heart so loathe to go to God; and when it is with Him, so loathe to stay'. Now let's be honest with one another: do we ever feel like that? Of course we do! I feel like that, there are times in prayer when you almost feel that you're holding your breath beneath the water level, and you're holding it as long as you feel you can before you can burst out to get a breath of normality again.

We can make all the excuses that we like, and they've all been made, but the fact of the matter is: much of the time we fail to admit the real problem that we have, the real problem in the church today of

prayerlessness. The question we've been asking is: do you want a revival? Do you want a revival in your own life, in your own home, in your own church? Well, the question then is: are you willing to pay the price? Are you willing to implement the four prayer principles that we'll see this morning in your life, and indeed in this assembly to see a revival of God? I'll tell you, I believe that God is the same today as He's always been. I believe Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever - and I don't believe that there was a different dispensation in 1859 than there is in 2004. No matter what your theology is or mine, God is the same, God is still the God of miracles, God is still the God that answers prayer, and God I believe is just as eager to give the fullness of His blessing today as He has ever been - but mark this: He does it always in answer to prayer.

Now let me leave you with these four principles if you want to put prayer back in its place in your life, and indeed in this church. Here's the first: repentance - they're all from this passage of Scripture. The wall has been rebuilt as we saw last week, and then we also saw that Ezra was called and he opened God's law. He began to read it, and then he gave the sense, he expounded it. Then we saw that there were things that they were disobedient with in the Scriptures, even from the days of Joshua, the building of these booths for the Feast of the Tabernacles - it may have been a little dot and cross of the 't' in some people's eyes, but God felt it was important. It wasn't until this generation that they'd got a revival in the discovery of scriptural truth once again. So here they are, they've gathered together, they've built God's wall, they're expounding God's word, they're starting to obey God's word joyfully - but after a few days of celebration and joy (remember they weren't allowed to weep or mourn, they had to joy in God's feast) - but after that their feasting turned to fasting, and their joy very quickly became humiliation. They humbled themselves before the mighty hand of God, and they wept, they mourned, they fasted in sackcloth and ashes because of their sins and the sins of their forefathers.

Are you surprised at that? It seems a bit strange, doesn't it, that one minute God is telling them 'I don't want you to weep, I don't want you to mourn. I want you to celebrate and be joyous'; and the next minute in God's will, they are weeping, they are mourning, they are being humiliated. Well, you ought not to be surprised because that is what the Christian life is all about, isn't it? The spiritual life, is it not true that it's filled with both feasting and fasting - the two go together! You've the wonderful privilege of fellowship with the Lord, communion with the Lord and with the saints, rejoicing together in worship and in your daily life with Christ - but then the other side of the coin is the denying of self, humiliation of self and mortification of the flesh, the walking in the Spirit that we may not fulfil the lusts of the flesh. The two are being continually and constantly repeated together.

I wonder have you've forgotten this? I think the great deal of the Western church, because perhaps of the affluence and materialism that we enjoy, much of which we need to thank God for, it stifles this aspect of Christianity. We think we should get it good all the time, that the whole life should be filled with joy - we don't realise that there's something called of us, and that is repentance. Some, you see, think that confession and repentance is something that they have done at conversion and it doesn't need to be repeated. You've done it once, or maybe when you rededicated your life, when you came back to the Lord as a backslider, you did it then - but you feel that 'it's not something I need to do everyday'. My friend, that is not the gospel of Christ! He said: 'Follow me, and daily take up your cross and follow me, and daily deny yourself' - that is intrinsically repentance. Do you do it?

Have you repented today? You need to know that it is the humble and contrite heart that God does not despise, and that God speaks to. Now here's the problem, here's where it all comes into vogue with regard to your prayer life: you see, if you don't humble yourself before God, and keep short accounts with God, and continually repent from your sin before God, you will soon become hardhearted. When you become hardhearted you become cold to spiritual matters, you become indifferent to the Bible and of course to prayer, and your prayer life suffers. The fact of the matter is it is a vicious circle, because God will never

plant a seed of His life in soil that is hard, unbroken, cold and indifferent! So the more you become disinterested in spiritual things, because you won't repent, the less you want to pray and the less chance there is that you will ever pray.

Do you need to repent? I'll tell you, you do - there's not one person, including this preacher, in this place this morning that doesn't need to repent today of something. If there's someone like that, who doesn't need to repent, I want to speak to you afterwards because you need a come down. If you don't need to repent, you don't know your heart, you don't know that it is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked - and repentance is needed every single day of your life. But it is through this repentance that God's blessing comes - didn't the Psalmist say: 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again rejoicing bringing his sheaves with him'.

I wonder have you relegated brokenness to some immature past in your Christian life that you think you have grown out of? God help you if you have! 'Where is the blessedness I knew, when first I saw the Lord? Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and His word?'. If you want revival you've got to implement this principle of brokenness of heart in your life. I don't often do a lot of work in the garden, in fact I do none! But yesterday I was left one instruction while the ladies were away, and that was to hammer something into the ground in the garden. Because of all the dry weather we've been having, it was like concrete - I had to get the watering can out and wet it all before I hammered it in - but you know the Bible talks about our hearts being like that. It's like the farmers field that is the fallow ground that hasn't been used, seed hasn't been sown and the elements - the weather, the wind, and the snow, and the frost, and then the sun in summer - has hardened it all. But if the farmer is going to see fruit in that field, what has he to do? He has to get the plough out and he has to break up that fallow ground, to churn it over again, and 'repent' that ground, to turn it all around - and that's what God said to Hosea: 'Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy, break up your fallow ground for it is time to seek the Lord till He come and rain righteousness upon you'.

Will you, will I this morning repent of our prayerlessness? Will you? Repentance is needed, the second thing is reflection is needed. What a prayer of confession and praise this is, we haven't even time really to read it all - but constantly repeated in this prayer from verses 6 to 15 is the little word 'and'. I haven't got time to read it, but just look at verse 6: 'Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee', and go right down to verse 15, and this word 'and' is continually repeated as this man who is praying to God reflects on God's faithfulness and God's goodness in his life. He just goes on and on, he's counting his blessings and being surprised at what God has done. He goes on and on: '...and God, you did this, and you did that to me, and you helped me here and there and everywhere!', and he just keeps repeating it.

Now when he reaches verse 16 the word 'but' comes: 'But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments'. It changes in emphasis, what he's saying is this: 'Lord, you've been so good to us, and you've done this and that and the other, but look at what we have done, look at how we have returned in ingratitude all your goodness towards us'. Yet, regardless of their stubbornness before God, how unyielding they were and how proud. In verse 26 we read these words, it goes on to say what God continued to do to them: 'Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations', and verse 27, 'Therefore thou deliveredst them into the hand of their enemies...', and goes on. But then he talks about how He blessed them, verse 28: 'But after they had rest, they did evil again before thee' - the Lord gave them rest, and there's this continual cycle in the life of the Israelites: God blesses them, they rebel; God continues to bless them after some punishment, they continue to rebel - but what you're seeing here, is it not our lives?

Are we not the same? Have God's people ever really changed? When you just look at the story of God's grace in your life, how God has given you so many opportunities and chances, maybe even to be saved, maybe even to get right with Him - and every time you turn your back on God, God gives you His goodness over and over again and again! Rebellion, indifference, coldness of heart towards God, yet God is so faithful as we were singing at the beginning of our meeting. To think about this, that God was outside of these people in the Old Testament, but God lives in us now by His Holy Spirit - look at the blessings that we are blessed with in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, all the wonderful things that are ours, yet we still let God down! We still sin against Him!

Now here's the question: do you ever take time to reflect upon the goodness of God in your life? I tell you, when you're down there's one good exercise, and it's to take a time away - and could I encourage you even to do this - to take some time out. Just start to count the blessings of God in your life, the hymn says: 'Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord; Abide in Him always, and feed on His word'. In verse 3 you see that one fourth of the day, that is three hours, were spent in God's word. Then another three hours were spent in prayer and worship, that means three hours before God's word searching their hearts, and then three hours before the Lord worshipping the God of heaven! Imagine this: they were taking time out, do you know why? Because it takes time to get to know God, and it takes time to get to know prayer.

Nehemiah, if you remember, if I can take you back a wee bit, when he came to build the walls did he build them right away? No, what did he do? He spent four months reflecting on the exercise in uninterrupted thought. When the opposition came, what did he do? Did he take up the weapons to fight right away? No, he thought about it first, and prayed about it and reflected. What this book is telling us above anything is that Nehemiah was a man of prayer, and the revival of God's people, the walls and the city, and God's faith, was intrinsically linked to the people getting on their knees and praying! Can I challenge all of us here today: in the next month would some of you at least consider taking one day, one day off, and set aside all the normal daily tasks, and show the Lord for at least one day that there is nothing more important than fellowship with Him. That's what fasting is - you're saying: 'It's more important, Lord, that I pray to you today than eat, so I'm going to communicate that to You through fasting'. Take time to reflect on God's goodness - when was the last time you did that? Have you went back over the story of your life, the spiritual milestones of how faithful God has been to you all down through the years?

Here's a principle for revival: not just repenting, but reflecting upon God's goodness. The hymnwriter said: 'O, the pure delight of a single hour that before Thy throne I spend. I kneel in prayer, and with Thee my God, I commune as friend with friend'. Can I ask a very very pointed question: have you, as a Christian, in your lifetime ever spent one single hour in prayer? Imagine going to heaven never having spent an hour reflecting on the goodness of God when it is so manifold!

Repentance, reflection, thirdly: recognition. Very simple, in verses 33 and 38, they looked into the face of God, and they're saying: 'Lord, we are guilty, we have done it. Your word is correct, our consciences have pricked us and we know it is us'. They're looking into the face of God and saying: 'Yes Lord, you're right, I'm wrong' - and they've stopped arguing with God! The controversy with their God has stopped. I wonder are you arguing with God over something in your life? That's usually why there's no blessing in our lives, because we're arguing - it might even be about prayer: 'Lord, I just don't feel like it this morning', or I've a hundred and one excuses, 'I've to go to work, or I don't feel well, this, that and the other'. Are we arguing with God? Or have we got to that place in our lives when we can look Him - if I can say it reverently - eyeball to eyeball with nothing between, and say: 'Lord, you're right, I'm wrong, You have all my life and I surrender it all to You'.

Alan Redpath, in his book on Nehemiah, says that people in his pastoral ministry constantly ask him the question: 'What is the unforgivable sin?' - that's the thing everybody seems to want to know. His answer was

simply: 'One, the sin that you won't confess'. What is the unforgivable sin? The sin that you won't confess! Now we are cleansed as Christians, of course, there's no doubt - and there's no sin, in a sense, that is unforgivable, but what he is saying is that the sin that will hinder you in your life is the one that you won't uncover to God. Perhaps you've gone through an unthinkable 20 years, or 30 years, or 40 years of life covering up a sin, refusing to recognise it, refusing to repent of it - and the price has been paid in your life, because there is prayerlessness, there's barrenness.

If revival is to come a price must be paid, open sin against the people of God and the church of God must be openly confessed. Sin against a brother or a sister must be confessed openly. Sin against God must be confessed to them and to God. It would be in all our interests to do regularly, not just on special occasions, but in a regular time in our lives a spiritual M.O.T. Charles Grandison Finney, that great revivalist whose theology was a bit dodgy in places, but yet he was a man of God who was used of God in a mighty way, he exhorted his people to take pen and paper and right down in one column the sins of omission - the things that you ought to do that you have not done - and in the other column the sins of commission - the things that you have done that you shouldn't, and go through every facet of your life and write them all down and realise your guilt before God, and confess them, and as you have committed them individually, repent of them individually.

That is the price of revival, some people would think it's being morbidly introspective about things that God has already forgiven us, but do you know what it is? It is being obedient to God, it is repenting. Look at chapter 10 - I'm almost finished - verses 29 and 30, they put these spiritual sentiments into action. Chapter 10:29 and 30: 'They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes; And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, not take their daughters for our sons'. There was repentance, there was reflection, there was recognition of their sin, but finally there was restoration - obedience touched every part of their lives: their home life, their social life, their church life, because revival is not simply an emotional upheaval, it has to lead to action!

It was found in their home life, they restored the family altar - how many family altars are broken down, where the word of God is not read between a husband and a wife, between parents and their children? Revival starts in the home, where you bring discipline back into your own heart, your own ways, and the ways of your family. It affected their social life, in verse 2 of chapter 9 it says they separated themselves; and in chapter 10 and these two verses that we read, 29 and 30, they say they would not give their daughters unto the foreign men - there was no unequal yoke, there was no flirting with the devil, and with the world and the flesh and everything that's in it. They restored God's order in their home, in their social life, and even in their church life - look at verse 39 of chapter 10: 'For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the corn, of the new wine, and the oil, unto the chambers, where are the vessels of the sanctuary, and the priests that minister, and the porters, and the singers: and we will not forsake the house of our God'. There was a revival in their responsibility to the spiritual life of the people of God, and you know it was twofold: one was faithfulness in giving, the firstfruits of the crops were to be gathered and given to God, but not only was there to be faithfulness in giving, there was to be faithfulness in worship.

Now we know from the word of God that our worship can never enrich God, it can't make God better by worshipping Him - but one thing is sure in the Scriptures: if we fail to join God's people in worship, God says that we rob Him. Can a man rob God? 'Ye have robbed me in your tithes and your offerings, in your reasonable worship' - and I hear a false piety going about today that goes like this: 'Going to meetings doesn't make you spiritual', and that is true, it doesn't make you spiritual. But neither does staying away from them make you spiritual! It doesn't help you, and you will suffer leanness if you're not with the people of God. They recognised their sin, they'd neglected God's house, God's people - and they started to put their family

life right, their social life right, and their church life right.

Friends, this prayer reaches in those four directions - I don't have time to show you - but in verses 5 to 6 the people looked up and worshipped God, and adored and praise the Lord, and because of His greatness they repented of their sin. In verses 7 to 31 they looked back with thanksgiving on reflection of their past to what God had done. In verses 32 to 37 they looked into themselves at their present condition and situation, and then they asked a request from God to help them because they were helpless themselves. Then in verse 38 they looked ahead in great hope at what God would do, because they were going to break out in revival!

The pattern for revival of our lives, and chiefly our prayer lives, is repentance, reflection, recognition of our sin, and restoration of those things that are lacking. Here's my question to you: how is it with you?

'How long has it been since you talked with the Lord
and told Him your heart's hidden secrets.
How long since you prayed? How long since you stayed
on your knees till the light shone through?

How long has it been since your mind felt at ease?
How long since your heart knew no burdens?
Have you called Him your friend? How long has it been
since you knew that He cared for you?

How long has it been since you knelt by your bed
and prayed to the Lord up in Heaven?
How long since you knew that He would answer you
and would keep you the long night through?

How long has it been since you woke with the dawn
and felt that the day's worth the living?
Have you called Him your friend? How long has it been
since you knew that He cared for you?'

Put prayer back in its rightful place.

Lord, we repent of our prayerlessness, I repent of my prayerlessness. Lord, we recognise Thy goodness to us all throughout our past, and the many blessings that we have bestowed upon us. We also recognise as we reflect, how sinful we have been - but Lord, we pray that we will restore to Thee today those walls in our lives that have been broken down. We would answer that cry of the Spirit: 'I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, the goodness of God that He has shown toward you, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice'. Lord, may we offer up our lives today to be prayer warriors for our God, to bring God's blessing down upon our lives and our homes, our friends and our church. To the glory of the Lord Jesus we pray, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - June 2004
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Building For God - Chapter 12

"A New Call To Personal Holiness"

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Our Scripture reading is from Nehemiah chapter 10, we're still in this series 'Building For God', in Nehemiah's prophecy in the Old Testament. We've reached, this morning, chapter 10 - now as you see, although I've been in a foreign country for a couple of weeks, I'm still not proficient in pronouncing all these names in the first verses of this chapter! I'm going to refrain myself from the humiliation and embarrassment of trying to read them all, but I want to read the first verse and then move down to verse 28. So verse 1 - trying to remember all the ground that we have covered in this book so far:

"Now those that sealed", and let me remind you just now that that 'sealing' is speaking of a covenant that they all agreed - the word of God has been found again and read publicly, they have spent much time studying it and are now realigning their lives in obedience to it. They've discovered again the place of public and collective prayer, and now they're actually putting their names to an agreement and a covenant that they will do what they have said they will do. Now this is very novel, because often we - as you will find out even this morning - will hear God's word and say: 'Yes, He's right, the word of God that I've heard this morning, I know that that is true', and we say 'I would like to do that'. We go away with great intentions, but we don't really put our names to it in the sense that we commit ourselves absolutely that we will follow this through. This is what they're doing, they're signing their names, the names collectively of their families, and saying: 'We're going to do what we say with regards to obeying God's word'.

"Now those that sealed" - and here are their names - "were, Nehemiah", he wasn't above this public display before God of humiliation and dedication by putting his name first. That's where all leaders should be, they should be the first, leading the way and setting an example. Then the names that follow on right down to verse 27, and then we take up our reading at verse 28: "And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinims, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding; They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes". Now that's a very interesting verse, verse 29, it's talking about these people entering into a covenant and an agreement - but it describes it in this term: 'they entered into a curse'.

Now we have been conditioned in this day and age in which we live to only enter into things if they're a blessing, and if they will incur some kind of benefit to us. But what these people were actually doing is saying: 'Cursed be me, if I don't fulfil what I've just vowed before the Lord and signed with my own hand. I want to be cursed if I don't follow this through'. We can see the solemnity and the sobriety of this covenant that is being made here. Verse 30, they further agreed: "that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, not take their daughters for our sons: And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt" - now we'll explain that later. Verse 32: "Also we made ordinances for us, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God; For the shewbread, and for the continual meat offering, and for the continual burnt offering, of the sabbaths, of the new moons, for the set feasts, and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make an atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. And we cast the lots

among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, after the houses of our fathers, at times appointed year by year, to burn upon the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law: And to bring the firstfruits of our ground, and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, unto the house of the LORD: Also the firstborn of our sons, and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstlings of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God, unto the priests that minister in the house of our God: And that we should bring the firstfruits of our dough, and our offerings, and the fruit of all manner of trees, of wine and of oil, unto the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and the tithes of our ground unto the Levites, that the same Levites might have the tithes in all the cities of our tillage. And the priest the son of Aaron shall be with the Levites, when the Levites take tithes: and the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes unto the house of our God, to the chambers, into the treasure house. For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the corn, of the new wine, and the oil, unto the chambers, where are the vessels of the sanctuary, and the priests that minister, and the porters, and the singers" - and this is like a summary of all those verses that you've been trying to make head or tail of up to now - "and we will not forsake the house of our God".

I want to preach to you from this chapter under the title: 'A New Call to Personal Holiness', a new call to personal holiness. I want us to bow in prayer first of all, and take our hymn books - number 456 - and pray together audibly, if we can sincerely to the Lord, the third verse of this hymn. I'll lead you, and if you feel able within your heart, sincerely before God to pray this prayer, let us do it in a public fashion, almost to reciprocate the public fashion of the covenant that we find here in Nehemiah chapter 10:

More purity give me,
 More strength to o'ercome,
 More freedom from earth's stains,
 More longing for home.
 More fit for the kingdom,
 More used would I be,
 More blessed and holy,
 More, Saviour, like Thee'.

Amen. Brian Edwards, who has written a book summarising much of the revivals that have taken place in our modern history, and also outlining for us the intrinsic factors that brought - from a human level - those revivals to nations and communities of God's people across the world. In his book he really highlights those features to show us that if we want, in the most pure desires, to see revival in our own lives and in the lives of our churches today, we need to put these issues into place. Of course we've been seeing that in recent weeks, we looked at the subject of the word of God, and how it must have primary place in our lives and in our churches. We looked at the issue of prayer, and how we need to be in personal prayer, and together as God's people we need to be engaged in special times of prayer as well as our weekly times of prayer. But in this book on revival that I would encourage you to read, by Brian Edwards, he talks about holiness - and, as it were, he gives a new call to personal holiness which is exactly what Nehemiah is doing in chapter 10, and all the people as they unite together in this public covenant that they signed together. Brian Edwards says this in this call: 'God looks for men who will be willing to surrender anything and everything, so long as their life can be kept clean' - did you get that? I'll repeat it and continue the quotation: 'God looks for men who will be willing to surrender anything and everything, so long as their life can be kept clean. Without exception, those whom God uses in revival are men and women who fear God and sin, and nothing else. They take seriously the command 'Be holy, for I am holy, says the Lord'.

Now you can read any account on revival that you like, historically, factually, they will show you that there has always been a revival in holiness, a new call to personal and corporate holiness among God's people, before that revival came. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and that great evangelist of the awakening

of the 1700s, the eighteenth century, declared in 1734 these words - I quote: 'My one aim in life is to secure personal holiness, for without being holy myself I cannot promote real holiness in others'. Isn't that striking? Do you know what's more striking? That was four years before his conversion! Oh, we know we can't have true holiness without true salvation, but here was a man who even in an unregenerate state knew that God blesses holiness, and without holiness - the book of Hebrews says - no man shall see God.

David Brainerd was a missionary among the American Indians, a pioneer missionary and a holy man of God, and he recalls the time when among those North American Indians, one night before a pagan heathen festival they were about to have, he went into the woods to be alone with God and to plead with God for their souls. His experience during that night is recorded, and reveals the kind of man that God can use in revival. This is a challenge to us all, listen to this quotation of his account: 'All things here below vanished', as he was in prayer, and he says, 'there appeared to be nothing of any considerable importance to me but holiness of heart and of life, and the conversion of the heathen to God. All my cares, fears and desires which might be said to be of a worldly nature disappeared, and were in my esteem of little more importance than a puff of wind. I exceedingly longed that God would get to Himself a name among the heathen, and I appealed to Him with the greatest freedom, that He knew that I preferred Him above all my chief joys'.

Can we say that this morning as God's people? That we prefer God above all our chief joys, specifically the pleasures of sin? Duncan Campbell, who you've heard me mention many times, who was used of God in those revivals in the Hebrides, specifically the Isle of Lewis. He describes his own experience of surrendering fully to Christ, all the keys of his life were handed over to the Lord, and the Lord came in and blessed him in a wonderful fullness that was used later on in his life. The story of how this happened was, he was in the Great War, and he was riding on horseback. He was shot off his horse and was seriously wounded in the battle - it was the last cavalry charge of the Great War. While he was lying there on the battlefield, a Canadian trooper was riding back to his base, and he lifted him and carried him on horseback back to the casualty clearing station. There, as Campbell was lying upon his back and reviewing his life, perhaps thinking he was about to die, he saw how empty his life had been even as a Christian. He testified that there on his back he prayed Murray-M'Cheyne's prayer - these words: 'Lord, make me as holy as a saved sinner can be' - and God came in a very miraculous way into his life.

Have you ever prayed that prayer? Could you ever pray that prayer? 'Lord, make me as holy as a saved sinner can be'. There were 84 men in chapter 10 of Nehemiah that put their signature to such a covenant as that, because they wanted God and the people to know that they were serious about obedience, holiness, and obedience in action to God's word. Some have called this 'the declaration of dependence upon God'. They were putting their names to this covenant that said they were going to follow God, and follow right through to the end whatever it cost. Twenty-two of these names in verses 1 to 8 were priests; in verses 9 to 13, 17 of the name were Levites; in verses 14 to 27 there are 44 different leaders of the people who are mentioned - names that all represent families in Judah! Not just individuals, but each name that you read here represents families, you can see that in verse 28: 'their wives, and their sons, and their daughters, everyone having knowledge', everyone who was at an age of understanding in spiritual matters was counted underneath all of these names.

Now we have seen in past weeks that reading God's word is extremely important, and we need to get back to the Book - that was the message in chapter 8 of Nehemiah. Then we saw how important praying is personally and as a church, putting prayer back in its place. You need a revival of God's word, you need a revival of prayer, if you're going to have a revival spiritually speaking and see the lost won. It's also a blessing - and I would encourage you to write down intentions that you have in the spiritual life, even get a spiritual record daily of your dealings with God, it often helps to write agreements down that you have before God, and vows that you make before Him - although as a dispensational people today we are not a covenant people - in that sense it's good to write down your intentions. But the fact of the matter is, we can

do all those things: we can read, and pray, and write things down - but the most important thing of all is total obedience to God's word, and God's will, and holiness. Holiness!

You might say: 'Well, what is holiness?'. Before we sang our first hymn this morning, I mentioned that 'holy' simply means 'to be different, or 'to be separate', 'to be unique' - there is no one else like God, that is why we worship Him as such, because He is other, He is transcendent, above us and beyond us. So what we are saying is that holiness in our context in the earth is to be different from everyone else around us, to be separated from the run-of-the-mill worldling. Incidentally, I alluded to the declaration of independence, Chuck Swindoll illustrates this fact: that in the US Declaration of Independence, the people that signed it established their country's independence, but then at the end of the signing there are these words - a commentary on it, I quote it to you: 'It merely states intention and a cause for action', but the Declaration of Independence had to be converted into fact by force. They could declare independence from Britain and the British Empire, but the fact of the matter was that the United States had to go to war and put their force behind their incentive - action needed to be taken.

I ask you again: how many times do we hear God's word? How many times are we stirred? How many times are we blessed? But we walk away and we do not obey what we have heard from God's word! Now listen, chapter 10 of Nehemiah tells us that this declaration that these people signed, these families signed, affected their whole lives, every area of their lives. Here's my simple application and question to all of you today, and my own heart: does my, does your Christianity affect your whole life? It ought to if it is true Christianity at all. I love the quips of Vance Havner, that Southern American Baptist preacher, and here's one of his quotes that says so much and it's so contemporary to our age, he says: 'Most church members live so far below the standard, that you would have to backslide to be in fellowship with them' - isn't that staggering? Most church members live so far below the standard, that you would have to backslide to be in fellowship - 'We are so', he goes on to say, 'sub-normal, that if we were to become normal, people would think we were abnormal'!

So these people in Nehemiah 10 dedicated publicly that they were going to obey God's word, and not only did they dedicate publicly, they dedicated specifically in areas of their life that they were going to go through with God whatever it cost. Generally speaking it affected their whole attitude to God's will, they were saying to God: 'We're signing this to say that you're going to obey Your word - whatever it says, that's what we're going to do'. But specifically they outline three areas of their life where they were going to be obedient, hitherto they had not been. Here they are, and how they apply to all of us here today: one, the home; two, the society in which they lived; and three, the worship in which they were engaged. One, the home; two, the society in which they lived; and three, the worship and place of worship where they were engaged in adoring the Lord.

Let's look at the first, the home. In Nehemiah 10, what they're saying as they sign this covenant is: 'Our behaviour, specifically in our marriages, is going to come up to scratch from this day on. Our homes are going to be a different place'. Look at verse 30, where they say this: 'We would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, not take their daughters for our sons'. Now when Israel became a people before God, a chosen, a covenant people; they were given the law and God commanded them that their relationship with Him should be uncontaminated by the pagan influences of the nations round about. They were to be a beacon of light, they were to be a testimony to the nations around who were worshipping false gods, therefore they weren't to commit spiritual adultery with those nations if you like. If you take a very quick recourse right throughout Israelite history, you will see that their Achilles heel was their intermixing and marriage with other nations, whereby they came to worship foreign gods of pagan lands. Put very simply, they exchanged their sons and their daughters with these other nations, and therefore what came with it adhoc was an exchange of religions - they began to worship each other's gods. Eventually what happened was that there was a diluting of the fidelity of the worship of Israel's God, Jehovah, and you were seeing erected images right throughout the whole of Jerusalem and Judea, and they were worshipping false gods even under the

name of Jehovah to keep everybody happy - their wives, and their sons, and their daughters, who were marrying into these other nations.

Now you might say: 'That's a terrible thing!', but you wouldn't be reading too far in the Old Testament to find out that great King David fell foul of this very sin. He married outside of the religion of the Jew, and Solomon his son did the same, and we find that both of them fell in this very area - and they haven't been the first, nor the last, to fall. We have it in the Scriptures in the New Testament, this principle that is given to us all: 'Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers' - now that's very clear! Believe it or not, that verse was not specifically to do with a man/woman relationship - we apply it in that way, but it was to do with any association or lack of separation in the believer's life from the world. Anything! You can apply it to business, you can apply it to the home, you can apply it to relationships between a man and a woman, you can apply it to ecclesiastical relationships between churches and religious organisations - in fact, do you know what you can apply it to? You can apply to the relationship between a husband and a wife - they can be unequally yoked together! What do I mean? One of the partners is seeking God with all their heart, and the other is holding them back! That is as much an unequal yoke as anything.

The question is: how is it in your home? This principle needs to be stressed today, perhaps, more than ever when the frontiers of light, as one has said, and darkness are being increasingly blurred, when people no longer know or want to believe something is right or is wrong. Do you realise that holiness affects our homes? It affects our marriages, it affects our relationships with our children, with our parents, with our spouses, with all - holiness, separation, saying: 'I'm not going to behave in my home', we're not talking about legalism now, but 'We're not going to behave just the way everybody else behaves because they behave that way'.

The home, what follows on from that, and it's still applicable to us, is the society. Behaviour specifically to them, in chapter 10, on the sabbath and the sabbatical year - but what God's word is saying here is that if your marriages and your families and homes are not going to be affected by worldliness, that will in turn be affected by how you relate to the society in which you live, what your relationship is to the world around you. Charles Swindoll has said that for Israel to be holy in an unholy world, they had to learn to resist the powerful urgings psychologists today call 'herd instincts'. 'Herd instinct', you know what it is - like people crossing the road in East Belfast like a herd of cows, they all seem to go in crowds - herd instinct, following the crowd, going with the crowd, going with the fashion. The pressure is upon all of us to conform to our peers in order to avoid ridicule, and rejection and persecution. The question is: how hard is herd instinct bearing on your life? What are the pressures from herd instinct in your life? Do you feel that you have to do this thing because everybody else is doing it? Do you feel that you have to give in to society pressures, even Christian pressures, because it is the thing to do and you would be the only one not doing it?

There was an experiment taken by Ruth Berenda (sp?), who I think was a psychologist among adolescents - I think I might have told you this before, but it bears repeating for illustration - she followed the study of adolescents and how they behaved to their peers. She and her associates brought 10 adolescents together into one room, and told them that they were going to be studied on their perceptiveness - in other words, how well they could see. To test this ability they got three cards together: A, B and C, and consecutively they drew lines on these three cards A, B and C, and they were going to ask these 10 adolescents which was the longest line. Unknown to one of those adolescents, the other nine had been tipped off at the beginning to say that the second longest was the longest, not the longest. So have you got it? Maybe you haven't! There's 10 kids all gathered together in one room, there's three cards with different lines drawn different lengths, and one of the children is ignorant of the fact that everybody is going to say the second longest is longest, and he's in the dark, he's ignorant to the fact. So they played this prank on the poor soul - he was probably psychologically damaged after it all! - and the experiment began, and the nine who were in the know, they all put their hands up for say card 'B'. This young lad would look around him, and the sweat would start to

break, and then he would start to get deeper in his breathing, and then he began to put his hand up just because everybody else did. Now this test was performed in many places with many adolescents, and 75% of those one individual kids in the dark put their hand up because of the pressure of those around them. Isn't that astounding? The herd instinct, you do it because everybody else does it and you feel under pressure.

Now you might apply this to the world, but the fact of the matter is that the church in which we are living as Christians is operating on herd instinct - Christians seem to judge their standards today, and choose their principles, and what they should do and shouldn't do, by what other Christians do, not by what the word of God says! Can I say that when churches start saying: 'Such-and-such are doing this, therefore we ought to do this', we are in trouble! Not that everything that everybody else does is bad, but that we ought not to operate on the standards of other individuals, on a herd instinct mentality. Now we can sometimes, in our conservative wing of evangelicalism, we can give ourselves a pat on the back and say: 'Oh, we're great, we're winning on this one, we do that. We don't listen to what others say, we say that we obey God's word'. But you know, you can pride yourself in right position so much so, and say that you're directed by the word of God, when in reality you are not individually subject to God's word - that means personal holiness is not in your life! You've got all the right views, you dot all the right i's and cross all the right t's, but where is personal obedience to God's word in your life?

I think it was Harry Ironside who said: 'Is it not the fact that to many the voice of the assembly says this, or says that, because sometimes the voice of the assembly has been louder than the voice of God in the holy Scriptures? Sometimes the tradition of the elders have, in critical times, been more relied upon than 'thus saith the Lord'. We too can give in to doing things just because everybody else does them, and not question our individual obedience to God's word. Take for instance the truth of separation. We believe in holiness, and we believe in separation in the sense that we should be separate from the world religious system, or if you want to say the World Council of Churches, or churches that are dabbling in the world or compromising with ecumenism and so forth. But many of us are satisfied with being separated ecclesiastically - we're free from this, free from that, and free from the other - ecclesiastically we're like that, but socially how separated are we? In our lives, personally, how different? And let me say this: some of the folk that we lambast in so-called established churches are more separated, socially and morally, than many of us! They're more holy personally, individually.

Let's do a very quick check of some matters that would assess our holiness. How does the spirit of the world come into our home? How does the spirit of the world come into our assemblies? How does the spirit of the world come into our marriages, our finances, our businesses, our careers, our occupations? Is the spirit of the world manifest in the entertainments that we enjoy? Just think about it for a moment: is it right to go here, there, and everywhere? That's the question, here's the question: what spirit is in that place? Is it the spirit of the world or the Spirit of God? What about the clothing we wear? Often the ladies get a hammering with this one, but that's because we are weak as men - that's why the ladies get the hammering, because the weak men can't control their emotions and their hormones at times, and that's why there should be modesty with sisters with regards to their clothing - not fashion, not what the world says or what it doesn't say, but what God's word outlines for us as holiness becoming the saints of God.

What about the company we keep? What about the music that we listen to? It doesn't say in the Bible: 'Thou shalt not listen to this, that, or the other' - but is what we are doing in this word, in our society, is it adding to our holiness or is it marring the lines of distinction between God's people and the world? Because here's the real issue here: conformity to the world among God's people adds to the loss of distinction - the two go hand-in-hand. When you conform to the world, people can no longer see that you're one of God's people, and that is what happened to the people of God here. Their day of distinction was the Sabbath day, and they just bought and sold like all the other nations, and the lines of distinction were being blurred in verse 31. So they had to make a decision that they were going to be different, they weren't going to set out the stalls on the

Sabbath day. I'm not going into a tirade on the Sabbath, because we don't have time, but you know that it was a creation ordinance that one day in seven should be an ordinance of rest. Then when the law of God was given to the Jews through Moses it was established that that day would be a sign of the covenant between God and themselves, and it would be a distinctive thing that would show their covenant relationship as being different than the nations of the world. So it wasn't just a benefit to rest one day in seven, it was a spiritual thing that would show to other nations that they were God's people and they worshipped the true and the living God.

Now the Bible nowhere tells us that the Lord's day, Sunday, today, is the Sabbath. We are not Sabbatarian in that sense of applying rules and regulations of the Old Testament to New Testament truth, the Lord's Day is different. But let me say this: what we have done, I believe, is marred the lines of demarcation because there's a principle in the Lord's Day as well that tells us that we, meeting today on the first day of the week, are a new people of a new covenant, and we are distinct, we are different. If you want to know how to celebrate the Lord's Day, look at how the Lord celebrated it, look at how the apostles celebrated it, and ask: are we celebrating it, or are we marring the distinctions between us and the world? Are we going with the crowd?

He didn't just talk about the demarcation of the Sabbath day, he talked about the Sabbath year, the seventh year, which was the year of rest for all the crops. They weren't to till the ground, they weren't to plant it - and do you know what this was speaking of? It was speaking of faith. Now how do I know that? Well, simply this: if you were a farmer, and God told you in the seventh year that you weren't to plant any seed or take any reaping, you would have to have faith in God to believe that you were going to have your breakfast on the table every day, wouldn't you? You know as believers we read books and hear preachers that talk about living by faith, as if it was something to be done by a missionary or an itinerant evangelist, when we as God people were to live by faith every day of our lives! You might have income that is second to none, but this is the question that we need to ask that is intrinsic in holiness: are we looking to God for all that we have, and are we thanking God for every good and perfect gift, for it comes from Him?

It affected their homes, it affected the way they related to society, and thirdly and finally, and very quickly, it affected their worship. This follows on from what I've just said about the Sabbath year, because they were to give of their produce to the house of God, to the temple, to the tabernacle worship. In verse 32 we read that they were to support the temple worship with their finances and their resources, and verses 33 to 39 the gifts and sacrifices that they were giving were to support the ministry of Levites. They couldn't support themselves or farm, so people would take tithes now and again, like a welfare tax for the people of God who were serving the Lord, and it was given to them. Now Israel's place of worship is mentioned nine times in these verses, and it sums everything up in those last couple of words I read in verse 39, this was the principle they were to espouse in holiness, a new call: 'We will not forsake the house of our God'. The dwellingplace of God was not to be in tatters or forsaken!

Now let's be careful here, because we do not believe that God dwells in temples made by hands, or even church buildings made by hands; we are the church, we are the temple of the living God, living stones, built up as a holy people unto the Lord. Therefore we are God's house, and we are not to neglect ourselves, the presence of God in us! We ought to support the ministry of the gospel, we ought to support financially the work of God, we ought to look after the welfare of God's servants - but let's bring it into the New Testament age. What did Paul say in Romans 12 verses 1 and 2? 'I beseech you therefore brethren', by what?, 'by the mercies of God', thanking God for the good things that you have been given by Him - all those things ought to lead you to repentance! 'I beseech you therefore, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service: And be not conformed to this world', as J. B. Phillips says, do not be pushed into its mould, 'but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may do that good and acceptable, perfect will of God'.

Well, we're back at the start, aren't we? That total surrender to the obedience of God's holy Word - how you are you there? Giving your body - are you neglecting the house of God? You, and your dedication to the Lord, it can all be summed up in that. If we're ever to see a revival of God's work in this place, or in any place, there has to be a revival in personal holiness in our homes, our habits, in society, and in our worship.

I've shared this with you before, as I close, but I'm going to do it again because it's so powerful - and you'll probably not remember it anyway! In the Isle of Lewis revival, which I mentioned about Duncan Campbell, before the awakening the men of God in that place knew that they were in dire straits spiritually speaking. They lived in a place that had once experienced the refreshing of God's Spirit and the presence of the Lord. But their spiritual vitality had grown cold and indifferent, and in view of the situation it was shared by the Free Church Presbytery of Lewis that they should make a declaration as God's leaders in that place. In the Stornoway Gazette, the newspaper, and in the West Coast Advertiser, publicly - just like Nehemiah - they expressed their deep concern. This is the quotation of it, I'm not going to comment on it, I'm going to leave it with you - you mightn't agree with them all in everything they believed, but nevertheless they were men of God.

Listen: "The Presbytery of Lewis, having taken into consideration the low state of vital religion within their bounds, and throughout the land generally, call upon their faithful people in all their congregations to take a serious view of the present dispensation of divine displeasure manifested - not only in the chaotic conditions of international politics and morality, but also and especially in the lack of spiritual power from Gospel ordinances, and to realise that these things plainly indicate that the Most High has a controversy with the nation! They go on: 'The Presbytery affectionately plead with their people, especially with the youth of the church, to take these matters to heart and to make serious inquiry as to what must be the end should there be no repentance! They call upon every individual, as before God, to examine his or her life in the light of the responsibility that pertains to us all - that haply, in divine mercy, we may be visited with a spirit of repentance and may turn again unto the Lord whom we have so grieved with our iniquities and waywardness'. Amen.

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Building For God - Chapter 13

"In Honour Of The Ordinary"

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Nehemiah chapter 11 this morning, and if you're a visitor with us we've been going through several weeks - with a few interruptions lately - thirteen weeks I think in total of this prophecy, Nehemiah. We've entitled it 'Building For God', and we've been learning many many spiritual principles, not just applying to individual Christians, but also to a group of God's people like this. We're looking this morning from chapter 11, and a little bit from chapter 7 going back a few chapters, at the honour of the ordinary - or 'In Honour of the Ordinary', so that is our title today 'In Honour of the Ordinary'. We'll just read a few verses at the beginning of chapter 11.

It reads: "And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities" - now we'll tease that out in a moment or two to understand it, but just note that some of the rulers of the people dwelt in Jerusalem, which infers that many of the rest didn't, so the rest of the people then cast lots to decide who would go back to live in Jerusalem. Verse 2: "And the people", that is, the whole people, "blessed all the men", and women, "that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem". So in verse 1 there's a group who cast lots to see who would dwell back in Jerusalem, and now in verse 2 were seeing that there is a group of volunteers who willingly, of their own volition, decide that they will go and dwell at Jerusalem.

Verse 3: "Now these are the chief of the province that dwelt in Jerusalem: but in the cities of Judah dwelt every one in his possession in their cities, to wit, Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants. And at Jerusalem dwelt certain of the children of Judah, and of the children of Benjamin. Of the children of Judah; Athaiah the son of Uzziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalaleel, of the children of Perez", and we'll end our reading just there at verse 4.

Now that may seem a bit obscure, but just remember that my title this morning is 'In Honour of the Ordinary'. Now let me give you a background first of all from chapter 7, turn back a few chapters with me. We'll read again from verses 1 to 4: "Now it came to pass, when the wall was built", the wall of Jerusalem, "and I had set up the doors, and the porters and the singers and the Levites were appointed, That I gave my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the ruler of the palace, charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man, and feared God above many. And I said unto them, Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot; and while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them: and appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house. Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein" - note that - "and the houses were not builded".

Now let me just remind you of the situation so far: the city of Jerusalem had been without a wall for 160 years. If my calculations are correct, the Jews spent 70 years in captivity, and then an additional 90 years passed by before Nehemiah came on the scene, exhorting them by the word of God to build the wall again in Jerusalem. So for more, approximately, than 160 years Jerusalem was without a wall around her, and in fact she was little more than a pile of rubbish, a city of debris, a huge rubbish dump, and hardly anyone lived within her. She had no wall, she was destroyed both politically, nationally and religiously in the sense of that particular city, and she was an open prey to all her enemies. Now to add to that problem, after Nehemiah had rallied the people together, started to build up the walls, exhorted them to fight for the cause of God and to

give their resources to the building of the walls and the rebuilding of Jerusalem again, the people built for themselves their own houses outside Jerusalem.

So what you have now is a ready-made city, the city is no longer filled with rubbish, it is a beautiful city, the wall has been built - but the people have built beautiful, equally beautiful houses for themselves in the suburbs outside the city wall, and they're now refusing to move into the city of God. Most of the Jews had forsaken an urban life in the holy city. Now just imagine for a moment the upheaval that this must have been for some of them to begin to move from the suburbs into an urban life in the city of God. Look at verse 1 of chapter 11: "the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities". We know that two rulers of the people went, they moved from the suburbs into the city of Jerusalem. Then they decided that one out of ten would also move into the city to begin the great exodus from outside inside. Then in verse 2 we noted: "the people blessed all the men that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem". So here is a group of unknown people who willingly offered themselves - they put their hands up and said: 'I'll go! I will go for the cause of God, and I will be one to pack my bag and leave my lovely luxurious home outside Jerusalem, and go into Jerusalem and live for God'.

The Bible says the people blessed them for it, 'Well done! You're tremendous, that's a great work you're doing, it's a great sacrifice that you're making. Praise the Lord for you, and I wish you God's speed as you go'. We don't really know the names of most of the people that volunteered to move into Jerusalem, but the fact of the matter is, one thing that I want us to dwell on today, one spiritual principle that would be very easy for us to gloss over and miss in this chapter, particularly in verse 2 is: the significance and the worth of what we do for God, even when it is unknown and our names are unknown. You see the worth of what we do for God is not determined by who knows about it, or who praises us for it, but it is determined by our faithfulness in it - the faithfulness in which we execute our work, even when it and we remain unknown and obscure.

Now this is so important: here's a group of people, we don't even know their names - we know some of their names, but later on we'll see that we don't really know who they are, and there's another group of 822 people who were involved in temple worship and we know about none of them whatsoever. What we are seeing is that these people, even though no one knows about them in scripture, God blessed them, the people blessed them for their sacrificial voluntary giving when it cost them everything. Now let me apply this contextually to our situation today in our contemporary world, and even our contemporary church, because today - I would have to say, even myself at times - we judge the Lord's work, and we are motivated in the Lord's work by fame, by popularity, by who knows us, by who recognises us, by who pats us on the back, by the renown that we have in Christian circles - we judge and measure the value of our contribution to the Lord's work by how well we are known and how well our work is known, who has heard about it. There's a grave danger here, because the Lord Jesus told us Himself in the Sermon on the Mount that perhaps the greatest works are the works that are unknown and unnamed.

Remember He was castigating the Pharisees for their alms-giving, blowing a trumpet and doing it in public, and He was teaching His disciples not to do the same. He said in Matthew 6 verse 1: 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven'. The greatest works, He is saying, are the silent works, the quiet works, the unknown works, the works perhaps that remain unknown for ever, that are totally obscure. Our problem is that we have been conditioned to believe the opposite. Ever since our childhood, even from a toddler up, we are taught that fame is success. If you're going to be successful, people will find out about it, and then people will know your name and your skills and so on; so success equals fame. If you're good at anything, people will talk about it, people will come to you, and there's a sense in which that is right and it's not inherently sinful - but we have been conditioned to believe that achievement therefore is to be known, worth means you will be

known. As babies and toddlers we get praise when we do something right, we get praise as students at school when we do well, not when we fail. Therefore in life we are conditioned to strive to be known, for to be known is to achieve and to succeed - therefore to be recognised means that you must be worth while in life.

Now the problematic fallout of that is the converse, that if you don't achieve recognition, if you don't get famous, if you're not known for success, then you conclude: 'Well, I must be inferior. I mustn't be worth anything, I'm worthless' - and you can get what psychologists call an inferiority complex. 'I feel worthless, I'm useless. I have underachieved in my life, I don't have what's necessary to be a highflier' - and do you know what we can actually do as Christians? We can transfer that mentality into the spiritual realm, and we say: 'Because what I do for Christ and for God is unknown, and it seems to have little success, well I'm useless, I'm worthless' - a spiritual inferiority complex!

Now let me define what I'm talking about: have you ever heard a Christian say 'What could I ever do for God? Look at me, I can't preach, I can't sing, I'm no good teaching children, I'm not an upfront person, I'm not a platform person. I get nervous to do anything publicly, what can I do for God?'. Now we're not talking now about excuses like Moses made to God, when he said that he couldn't speak but the Acts of the Apostles tells us that he was mighty in word and in deed. Those were excuses, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about genuine feelings of inadequacy, a feeling that 'I'm really useless, I am useless. I'm insignificant, I'm small in God's whole programme, I'm not like you who preaches from the pulpit'. Therefore you think: 'Well, then I must be worthless, there's nothing that I can do for God'.

Now this will happen to you if you evaluate your worth by what you do, how famous it is, and who knows and praises you about it. If that's your motivation factor, you will get a spiritual inferiority complex. Let me illustrate it a bit more: it's no accident, is it, when people meet you perhaps for the first time, and they say first of all 'How do you do?', and then probably the next question that comes not too far behind it is 'What do you do?'. 'How do you do?', and then 'What do you do?'. We fall into the trap, don't we, because we define ourselves by the company that we work for, or the church that we preach for, whatever the organisation that we are affiliated with. Then that person, in a psychological equation, he values us or she values us by what we have just said. Therefore if you work for a company that is famous or known, you're worthwhile, you're a somebody - but if you're unemployed, what are you? We don't believe this, but this is the way our minds work - we're a nobody!

We judge ourselves by what we do and by who knows about it, that's why scientists attribute much of the trauma associated with retirement to a sudden loss of identity. 'I don't work for the company any more, so I'm a nobody. What do I do if I don't have that name over me?'. We do this in other realms - rarity determines value as far as we are concerned, diamonds are valuable because they're rare; the Prime Minister is valuable because there's only one, the same with the President in the States; rare stamps are valuable; rare animals and paintings are valuable. The common, as far as we are concerned, is not valuable; the ordinary is worthless. Now listen, God's mentality that is revealed within His revelation is this: the ordinary are to be honoured when they do My will! The significance and the worth of what you do for God is not determined by who knows about it and who praises you for it, but by the faithfulness by which you execute your work even when you and your work remain unknown.

Now let me show you this from God's word - but don't forget that, whatever you do, as we go along. Here is the first thing that I want you to notice: God ordains the ordinary for His work, God ordains the ordinary for His work. When God by election chose the Old Testament people of Israel in Deuteronomy 7:7, He said these words: "The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people". 'You Israelites, don't get a notion about yourselves, that you're something more special than the other nations of the world - I didn't choose you like that, I chose you for grace, unmerited favour. There was nothing in you that commended yourself to Me. I didn't choose

you because you were a mighty nation, I chose you for the opposite: because you were weak, you were feeble, and so that my glory would shine forth in you and all the nations of the world would see Me and not see you'.

Now grace, in the New Testament, is little different on that score. Because when you look, and turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 25, Paul says: "The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence". I think it was Lady Huntingdon who said that she was thankful it didn't say that 'not any' who were noble were called, of course there are noble people called, but that is not God's normal way of working. He works through the despised things, the weak things, and when we look at the Bible we see many many examples of this: David and Goliath - who was it that slew the giant? It was the boy named David with a few small stones. Who was it that God spoke to when He could speak to another in the nation in that time of great need? It was to Samuel, 'Samuel, Samuel'. Who was it that the Lord turned to to do the miracle of the 5000 feeding? It was the boy with just five loaves and two fish. Look at the disciples! What a motley crew they were! That's who the Lord Jesus turned to, not the philosophers and the theologians of their day.

Take one disciple as an example - many have christened him 'ordinary Andrew'. Did you ever read much about Andrew? Andrew is universally regarded as the average man, ordinary Andrew, he's sort of in the background somewhere with regards to the disciples. He was the first of the twelve to follow the Lord Jesus, but we don't really see him as a prominent apostle. He's not included in the inner circle even though he was first to come to Christ - Peter, James and John, that was theirs. Andrew regularly was identified as the brother of Simon Peter, did you ever read that? 'The brother of Simon Peter', but Peter is never identified as the brother of Andrew! Everybody knew who Peter was, but who's Andrew? You can just imagine them saying 'Who's Andrew?', and they would reply: 'Well, that's the guy that always hangs around with Peter. You know Peter the great preacher? Well, he's always tagging along - I think he may be Peter's brother, but he's nobody really important'. He wrote no epistles, there are no miracles recorded from Andrew's life, he was not an eloquent preacher like his brother Peter - yet nevertheless God used him mightily. He was the first who came to Christ of the disciples, and he became an evangelist - he was the one who brought Peter to Christ! Look at the many who Peter brought to the Lord Jesus!

Now we don't believe in tradition completely, but sometimes there is the weight of truth in some of it - and tradition records that ordinary Andrew became a patron saint of no less than three cultures. Eusebius, the church historian, says that he was the first missionary to go to the north of the Black Sea, and so the Russians claim him as their patron saint. Another tradition makes him patron saint of Greece, for it says that he was martyred there on an 'X'-shaped cross, where he hung for three days praying for his enemies. Finally you know that the flag of Scotland is that white cross, that white 'X' on the sky blue background - and tradition has it that a monk brought Andrew's relics to Scotland, and the Scots were led into victory by an 'X'-shaped cross flying in the sky. We don't believe that, but the fact of the matter is: here is one who was ordinary, but God took his life and there are nations of the world that are claiming him for their own, because God honours the ordinary, God takes the ordinary, God uses the ordinary to do extraordinary things. I wish I had time this morning to show you some of the beautiful qualities in Andrew's life that were not found in Peter's or any of the other disciples - yet they're the type of qualities that we don't shout about.

One of the supreme glories of the New Testament gospel that we espouse and proclaim is this: the ministry goes forth the most through weakness. Weakness is the opportunity for God's power, our ordinary-ness for His extraordinary-ness. Do we follow this principle in our lives? Do we portray these principles in how we

operate as a church and individual Christians? Listen to Oswald Chambers, what he says about this, and I think this is mighty: 'God can achieve His purpose either through the absence of human power and resources, or the abandonment of reliance upon them. All through history God has chosen and used nobodies, because their unusual dependence on Him made possible the unique display of His power and grace. He chose and used somebodies as well, only when they renounced dependence on their natural ability and resources'. Do you get that? If you're a nobody and you've got nothing going for you, praise God because God can use somebody like you! But equally, if you've got something going for you, do you know what you need to do? This is probably a harder job than the nobodies: you need to resign those resources to God, and surrender them as nothing - because they are nothing without Him. In that emptiness He will come in in His fullness. God ordains the ordinary for His work, not supermen, not great men, not statesmen, ordinary men and ordinary women!

But let's see secondly that God honours the unknown for their willingness, God honours the unknown for their willingness. Just before we left to go on Beach Missions, I think it was anyway, they commemorated here in our nation the 60th anniversary of D-Day. You would have seen it on the television or in the newspapers, many veterans and respectful bystanders gathering around cenotaphs and burial grounds around cities and old battlefields on the continent of Europe to remember those who laid down their lives for our freedom. Some people would have attended services near what has been called the tomb of the unknown soldier. You may not know this, but the tomb of the unknown soldier is where an unnamed soldier who was found on the battlefield - nobody was able to identify him - was taken and was buried in a strategic place as a representative of all those unknown people and known people who died in World War I specifically. Those graves have become, to this day, memorials of all who have died in conflict - the war-dead right across the world. You can find it in France beneath the Arc de Triomphe, in the USA at Arlington National Cemetery, and here in the United Kingdom at Westminster Abbey - but what it is seeking to do is remind all of us, through one man who died unknown, no one knew what he did, how he died, who his family was, what he had achieved in his education, his reputation, his career - but although he was unknown, he died for us! That is there so that we will not forget, lest we forget the willing unknowns.

Now chapter 11, if you like, is the Flanders Fields of the Bible - the unknown heroes of the Bible, the crosses of the unknown, the obscure, the forgotten people. Verse 2 says those who offered, volunteered themselves to move from the suburbs into Jerusalem - the Hebrew word is 'nadab' (sp?), which means to 'impel, incite from within'. They had this generosity and this willingness within their breast - it's used of those who built the tabernacle in Exodus 35 - they sacrificed through whatever means they had for God's work, they grouped together in strength, skilled men in craftsmanship used their skills, the women in embroidery used their fingers, those who were able to weave weaved. They did what they could, they gave of their substance, they gave of their talents, they gave of their time for the service of the Lord. Do you do that? Do you give of your substance? Have you given to the Lord's work today? Do you give of your skills? I'm astounded at times when men of God and people of God charge the church of God exorbitantly to do something for them! Is that right? Do you give your crafts, your talents? Do you give your time for the work of the Lord? What do you do for the Lord? Maybe you're sitting here thinking, 'Well, what I do for the Lord isn't much. Even if I was to do something it wouldn't count, it would be insignificant' - God's word is saying this: the greatest work of all was done by people like you, people who could do little but did it with all their heart!

I want you to see, before we finish this message today, five groups of willing people who are unknown. The first is in verse 2, the unknown who volunteered to move. Do you see if the Lord was to put His finger on your heart, and say: 'I want you to leave Belfast', or wherever you live, 'and I want you to go to the backends of beyond and be a witness for Me, and you may see no fruit all of your life like many pioneer missionaries did' - would you go? Would I go? These people went, and all the Israelites blessed them - this is what happened: 'That's great, you're going, praise the Lord. We'll give you thousands to go, we'll send you, we'll pray for you - but don't ask us to go!'.

Then there was the second group in verses 10 to 12, and we read just at the beginning of verse 12: 'And their brethren that did the work of the house were eight hundred twenty and two'. Those people who worked inside the temple of God - think about this workforce! Eight hundred and twenty-two people in the one temple, and these people, none of them named specifically, all working for the Lord, many jobs to do. People would have taken them for granted, I'm quite sure - some who would have dusted, some who would have lighted the lamps of God, some who would be running errands continually for the animals and cleaning - you name it, things were being done continually, 822 people doing it! But God recognised it, God honoured it, because it was done faithfully! There were those who worked in the temple - what are you doing? Do you dust this place? Do you clean the toilets? Do you set up the chairs? Do you know that that is a mighty work in the eyes of God? A mighty work!

There was a third group who worked outside the place of worship, verses 15 to 16 - in other words the maintenance of the exterior, the beauty of the temple, the grounds around the temple. There were other works like judging and counselling people. My friend, isn't this marvellous? There's a work that any man or woman can do, whatever their skill may be: there's a work for Jesus ready at your hand, just a work for you the Master has planned! They maintained God's house, they judged and counselled people.

Fourthly there was a group in verse 17, and what a group this is, led by one man - verse 17: 'And Mattaniah the son of Micha, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, was the principal to begin the thanksgiving in prayer'. Here was a man who would stand up and lead the people of God in prayer, and I think it was chiefly him who was responsible on a human level to keep the temple alive before God, and keep the worship going! That's your job, some of you - do you do it? Are you priests before God, bringing up the people of God continually?

Then there's a fifth group of people in verses 22 to 23, a fifth group: 'The overseer also of the Levites at Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micha. Of the sons of Asaph, the singers were over the business of the house of God'. There was a little group of people who sang the praises of God in the temple of God with all their might - can you sing? You maybe can't sing on your own, but can you sing at all? Now I know some of you can't! But the fact of the matter is some of you can, and some of you can do something for the Lord - but this is the point: don't strive for praise! 'Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise: Thou mine inheritance, now and always'. Be content to remain unknown and obscure, faithfully doing what God has called you to do no matter how small you think it is - it doesn't matter! 'Whatsoever you do', Paul says, 'do it heartily unto the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive a reward of your inheritance, for ye serve the Lord Jesus Christ'.

Here are some practical principles for you today that will help you to realise the honour that God gives to the ordinary. First of all: your gift makes you valuable, if not necessarily popular. Your gift makes you valuable, if not necessarily popular. Do not evaluate popularity with worth. Every one of us, God's word says, has a gift - 1 Corinthians, we studied it in great detail not so long ago, chapter 12 verse 21 says this: 'And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness'. That means we all have a gift, because we're all a member, and we all have something to do - but those gifts that you cannot see, that are hidden, are the more honourable ones in the eyes of God! Your gift makes you valuable, and I tell you: it's more valuable, perhaps, if no one sees it. Don't judge your worth on popularity.

The second principal: every labour done in love is remembered by God and is never forgotten. No one might see what you're doing and how well you're doing it, but God's word says in Hebrews 6:10: 'For God is not

unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister' - I will not forget you! Thirdly, our final rewards will be determined on the basis of personal faithfulness, not public applause. I'll tell you: there's going to be some surprises for you, and some surprises for me.

You've probably seen her name and forgotten it a hundred times, yet her words probably are known by heart by most of you. She's one of God's willing unknowns. She wrote the hymn 'Just as I have without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me' - her name was Charlotte Elliott. At one time in her life she felt very bitter towards God about the circumstances that she was in. She was an invalid from her youth up, and deeply resented the constraints that her handicap brought upon her. In an emotional outburst on one occasion when a minister visited her, she accused God and expressed those feelings to this man whose name was Dr Caesar Mallon (sp?). He listened very carefully to what she had to say, and he was touched deeply by her distress - but he insisted to her that her problem should not be levelled at the feet of God, but she should divert her attention from what she had wrong with her to what she actually most needed, and that was God's salvation in her heart. So he challenged her to turn her life entirely over to God, to come to Him just as she was with all her pains, with all her problems, and even with all her bitterness and anger.

Of course, like many people, she resented what he had shared with her, and she thought that he had given it to her in a most callous way - but God spoke to her through him. Eventually she committed her life to the Lord Jesus, and each year after that on the anniversary of her conversion Dr Mallon wrote Charlotte a letter encouraging her to continue strong in her faith. But even as a Christian, like many of us, she had her fears, she had her doubts, she had her struggles - and on one day, one particularly sore point, she felt unable to come to God. She felt her inability to effectively get out and serve God because of her handicaps, and the fact that she was an invalid. Her brother was an evangelist, and at times she resented the successful preaching and evangelistic ministry, and she just longed herself that she could be used of God - 'That I could get out of this chair and do something for God, my health is preventing it, why is this, O Lord?'. Is that you?

Then in 1836 on the 14th anniversary of her conversion, while alone in the evening, at 47 years of age Charlotte Elliott wrote her spiritual autobiography in verse. One of the prayers was like an outpouring of confession to God from her heart, the feelings, countless feelings that maybe you and I can identify with at times. It's in the third stanza of that hymn 'Just As I Am', and it goes like this:

'Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt.
Fightings and fears within, without:
O Lamb of God, I come, I come'.

That was her hymn. Many years later when reflecting upon the impact of his sister, the Rev Henry Venn Elliott said of Charlotte - listen carefully: 'In the course of a long ministry I hope I have been permitted to see some fruit for my labours, but I feel far more has been done by a single hymn of my sister's: 'Just As I Am'.

Are you one of God's unknowns? Only eternity will reveal what your work has done for Him. Paul said: 'Take it away Lord!'. God said: 'My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness; for when you are weak, then I am strong'.

Has the Lord been speaking to you? Where are you? Are you resenting something that you have not gotten because of your service? Honour that is not due you, that you feel should be? Crucify it now with Christ, put it to death, live on for Him - and let us all imagine what a place this would be if all that we could do, we did with all our might.

Lord, for Thy sake let us win renown with Thee not men, and then to take the victor's crown, and at Thy feet to lay it down. O Master, Lord, let us all come, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - August 2004
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Building For God - Chapter 14

"A Praise Service To Remember"

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We're almost finished this series entitled 'Building for God' in the prophet Nehemiah. We're looking at chapter 12 today, not all of chapter 12, we're going to skip out - to make it easier for me - all these difficult names. But we're going to begin our reading at verse 27, skipping through a couple of verses as we go along. We're beginning to read at verse 27 - now if you haven't been here, just to say that Nehemiah's chief work was before God to build the walls of Jerusalem again, and to build Jerusalem up as a holy city for the Lord. We've reached the point, almost at the end of this book, where the walls have been built. Last week we saw how he tried to encourage the people to move from the suburbs of Jerusalem outside the city wall, into the city. We saw how many unknown people, unknown to us today, their names aren't recorded in the word of God, were used of God and volunteered their services to move - to pack their bags and leave, and do God's will and come into the city.

Now what we're seeing today from verse 27 on is the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem, the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem - and I've called the title of this message 'A Praise Service To Remember'. Verse 27: "And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps. And the sons of the singers gathered themselves together, both out of the plain country round about Jerusalem, and from the villages". Go down to verse 30: "And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall". Then Nehemiah says: "Then I brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall, and appointed two great companies of them that gave thanks, whereof one went on the right hand upon the wall toward the dung gate" - and then down to verse 35 - "And certain of the priests' sons with trumpets; namely, Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph" - then down to the end of verse 36, all these people - "with the musical instruments of David the man of God, and Ezra the scribe before them. And at the fountain gate, which was over against them, they went up by the stairs of the city of David, at the going up of the wall, above the house of David, even unto the water gate eastward. And the other company of them that gave thanks went over against them, and I after them, and the half of the people upon the wall, from beyond the tower of the furnaces even unto the broad wall; And from above the gate of Ephraim, and above the old gate, and above the fish gate, and the tower of Hananeel, and the tower of Meah, even unto the sheep gate: and they stood still in the prison gate. So stood the two companies of them that gave thanks in the house of God, and I, and the half of the rulers with me". Don't have the end of verse 42, just this sentence: "And the singers sang loud, with Jezrahiah their overseer. Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced" - now if you mark your Bible, it would be good to mark this statement, "so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off" - isn't that remarkable? So that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off..."And at that time were some appointed over the chambers for the treasures, for the offerings, for the firstfruits, and for the tithes, to gather into them out of the fields of the cities the portions of the law for the priests and Levites: for Judah rejoiced for the priests and for the Levites that waited. And both the singers and the porters kept the ward of their God, and the ward of the purification, according to the commandment of David, and of Solomon his son. For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chief of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving unto God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah, gave the portions of the singers and the porters, every day his portion: and they sanctified holy things unto the Levites; and the Levites sanctified them unto the children of Aaron", and we end our reading

at verse 47.

The title is: 'A Praise Service to Remember'. I think most of you would agree with me that looking out into the world around us, there is very little happiness - or at least, you would have to say, there is very little true happiness. Yet happiness is the most sought after commodity, yet also the most elusive. Everyone wants it, but it seems that very few can achieve it - and some would go as far as to say that happiness is almost extinct in our modern age. Now maybe you're sceptical about that statement, and you're doubting that? Well, the next time you're in a traffic jam, look at the driver's face beside you - or maybe even look in the mirror in front of you, and you'll see how happy people are in this rushing world! Perhaps the next time you're in a cafe, look at how the man and wife at the table beside you behave toward one another and talk to one another, or perhaps don't talk to one another! Listen to how the child speaks to or even about its parents, or vice versa, listen to how parents talk about their children or talk to their children.

All you have to do is go into a newsagents tomorrow morning and look at the various headlines in our newspaper, and you will see that there is an appetite today for bad news - there's very little good news about, nothing to make us happy, it would seem. When you consider the economic scene around us, it does not promote our happiness. Houses and property have never been more expensive. You look at the moral scene round about us, crime rates are at an all-time high. You look at sin round about us, and you see that people are delving into sins that wouldn't even have been mentioned a generation or more ago.

One person has christened this age as the 'aspirin age' - the aspirin age. Everybody has a headache! It seems that no one is happy, no one is really content or at peace, and our hospitals have never been worse - but yet they are filled with people, I'm told almost 50 percent of beds are occupied with people whose ailments primarily come from a mental or emotional cause. This is the world in which we live: we have all the mod cons, all the technology imaginable, yet men and women's hearts are failing them for fear and very few people could really call themselves truly happy. Now surely the world would be forgiven for thinking that those who claim to be God's people on earth should be different from all that - do you not think that's reasonable? That Christians, or God's people if we encompass those in the Old Testament, should be a happy people? Yet the fact of the matter is, if we're honest with ourselves and honest with others, we of all people get the reputation of being more sour-faced than all the sinners of the world put together! Isn't that the way we're perceived?

In fact, religion in general is seen as something that is depressing! 'Why would I want to become religious?', people say, 'Why would I want to become a Christian? All those do's and don'ts - I'm depressed enough as it is without taking on Christianity!'. One religious pilgrim on one occasion called Hagar (sp?), was climbing up a holy mountain and he cupped his hands and shouted to someone up the mountain, he didn't know who, 'What is the secret to happiness?'. The answer came back 'Celibacy, abstinence, fasting, poverty' - and Hagar didn't like the answer he got, so he shouted back: 'Is there anybody else up there I can talk to?'. That's the way people feel about religion and specifically, whether we like it or not, Christianity - we've got a reputation of being dour, of being depressing, and certainly not of being the epitome of true joy and true happiness.

The German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche said scornfully about Christians of his day, listen, I quote: 'I would believe in their salvation if they looked a little more like people who had been saved'. Isn't that scathing? Do we look like a people who have been saved? Oliver Wendell Holmes said: 'I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers'. Isn't that the way we are at times? We think that holiness is portrayed in this dour, depressing, dark manner. Vance Havner, whose quotes many of you I'm sure will love, says: 'When one recalls that we are to rejoice in the Lord always, and then looks in on the average Sunday congregation, he realises that something has happened to us since Pentecost. Something has happened to us - what is it? Many of us have lost our joy!'

David could pray in Psalm 51: 'Restore unto me the joy of my salvation', and whilst we cannot lose our salvation per se, we can and many of us have lost the joy of it all. Gypsy Smith, that great evangelist, used to say that you could not get a 'Hallelujah' out of some Christians if you squeezed them through a wringer. It's a real problem! Now it's not only a problem for our own well-being, because everybody wants to be happy, everybody wants to feel happy and joyous in the Lord - but here's where the big problem comes in a wider sphere, looking at it panoramically: it affects the perception of our message among those who are in the world. If they do not see a joyous people, they ask themselves: 'Why should I believe and imbibe such a Gospel as that?'

Phillip Brooks, the puritan, put it like this - and I think he said it well: 'The religion that makes a man look sick certainly won't cure the world'. We betray the good news of the gospel if, when people see us coming towards them, all they can think of is bad news. There's something wrong with our Christianity - Billy Sunday, the evangelist, put it like this: 'If there is no joy in your religion, there is a leak in your Christianity somewhere'. Is there a leak in your Christianity? I'm not talking about an airy-fairy, happy-clappy, some kind of emotionalism that ignores the stark realities of life and the tears that you shed on a regular basis, we are talking about a joy that is different than the happiness of this world, a joy that transcends even the darkest experiences that you might go through as a child of God.

One commentator said that 'the Christian is a man of joy, a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces'. You've heard about the little boy who thought the horse in the field was a Christian, and his Mummy asked why, and he said: 'Look at the long face on it' - that is the perception that we get among the people in the world. As we read the Bible, in the New Testament specifically, we see that Christianity is the most encouraging faith, it is the most joyous faith, because it's the least repressive faith - or at least it ought to be - in the whole of our world. While there are sorrows in Christianity, while there are many stern disciplines that we have to come to grips with, the end of the Christian faith is resurrection not burial - a rising again to new life. Christianity is a feast and a festival, not a funeral.

Whilst we do not believe that we are to be like ostriches and stick our heads in the ground, and pretend everything is OK, and when our hearts are breaking we're to smile and sing choruses, and tell people that we're as happy as the day is long, that is not what we're talking about. Whilst we're not to ignore the stark realities of life, neither are we to be the personification of the Grim Reaper, and look as if we have no joy within our hearts at all! What does that do for the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

As we look at Nehemiah chapter 12 we see that although things were hard - and you remember some of them had to pack their bags, and leave their luxurious homes in the suburbs and come into an urban life in Jerusalem for God, and it cost them everything - although things had been difficult, they'd been fighting, and building for a long time with great opposition - when these walls were finished there was joy. When it came to the day of dedication for these walls, there was celebration! I want to tell you this morning that that celebration ought to speak to us as the children of God of the joy that ought to be ours as God's people today. Is it ours? Well, let's see, let's look at it in a bit more detail.

The first thing I want to leave with you is the precursor to happiness, the precursor to all true happiness. Now this is important, before we get carried away and start dancing down the aisles: holiness precedes happiness. Holiness precedes happiness! If you look at verse 30 of Nehemiah chapter 12, you will see that Nehemiah called for the priests and the Levites, and they purified themselves, and they purified the people, and they purified the place, and they purified the walls. You've got to understand, if you want to be happy as a Christian, if you want to have the joy of the Lord, you've got to be pure - because holiness precedes happiness. They didn't just say: 'Oh, the walls are built, let's have a party and a great celebration!', but the

first thing that was done before all the joyous festivities was that the priests came, they were cleansed, the people were cleansed, the walls were cleansed, the gates were cleansed.

One businessman was asked on one occasion: 'What is the secret to happiness?'. His answer surprised the man, he put it very simply: 'The important thing is to be content with one's lot, provided it's a whole lot!'. That's the way people live their lives today, isn't it? 'Provided it's a whole lot, I'll be happy. A whole lot of money, a whole lot of fame, a whole lot of success, a whole lot of education, a whole lot of pleasure, food, drink, sex, luxury, amusement' - you name it, the world's perception is that to have a whole lot means to be happy - but the Bible says that happiness equals holiness. To not have the things of the world, the material things, the things of pleasure which are sinful - God's word says if you want to really be happy, you need to be holy. So, before they celebrated, they were purified. Charles Swindoll put it this way: 'Moral carelessness and borderline sin give laughter a hollow ring'. Have you a hollow ring in your laughter? Is it because there's sin in your life, there's compromise, there's backsliding in your heart? You want to really be happy, and you see others who are happy in the Lord, and you say: 'There's something wrong with me, I just don't seem to have what they have' - but you're not prepared to face up to sin that's in your life! You're not prepared to let go of the thing that is making you downcast!

The Psalmist said in Psalm 24: 'Who shall ascend unto the hill of the Lord? Him that hath clean hands and a pure heart'. In Psalm 16 he said: 'Thou wilt show me the path of life, and in Thy presence is fullness of joy, and at Thy right hand are pleasures forever more' - but at God's right-hand it's holy! If you're going to get there and enjoy all those pleasures that God has for you, you need to be holy even as the Lord is holy. The value of a dedicated wall is valueless without a dedicated people. Do you understand that? We can build 20 churches and they can be the most state-of-the-art architecture that you've never seen, but if we don't have a dedicated people what's the point of a dedicated building? A building set apart that we might say is holy in the sense of what it's used for, but what's the use of anything holy if we are not holy? The precursor to happiness is holiness.

Now here's the second thing I want you to see, and this is my main thought today: the expression of their happiness. This is wonderful, this shows us the vibrancy of it all, how they express the Lord in their lives. It was done twofold: by celebration, and by singing - by celebration and by singing. Now if you were to cast your mind back to when they were in exile, or even remember our Psalm 137 where it says: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion'. This is the reply of God's people: 'How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning'. They were out of God's city, they were away captive by a godless nation in the Empire of Babylon, and they couldn't sing, they had lost their song - but now we see them, and praise God Nehemiah has delivered them from it all. He has brought them to a place where the walls are built, where they're back in the city, and now the joy of the Lord is their strength.

What a wondrous turnaround this is! Now they take the opportunity that they are given to publicly thank the Lord for the work that He has accomplished. As they stand at those walls and witness Him, they lift their hands and their voices and hearts to God in joy and adoration. The passage says that they sought the Levites from their places, and the Levites brought them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication of the wall 'with gladness'. Do you see that word 'gladness'? I think it's verse 27 of Nehemiah 12, it literally means 'gaiety, mirth, pleasure and delight' - they were filled with the spirit of joy and celebration. It goes on to say that they praised God with hymns of thanksgiving, and songs that were accompanied with cymbals and harps and lyres. So this great company of people were gathered, and then it says that the sons of the singers were assembled from the district round about Jerusalem - verse 27 and verse 28: 'And the sons of the singers gathered themselves together'. These were specialists in the field of praise and worship in the Old Testament,

and so they got these people together who knew what they were doing, and they said to them: 'Lead us, lead us in the happy celebration toward our God, and let us' - and this isn't a sin by the way - 'let us enjoy ourselves praising and magnifying, and celebrating what the Lord has done for us'.

Can you imagine the scene in your mind's eye for just a moment? I don't know, someone has said perhaps there was a ladder up to the walls, and Nehemiah leads them. He cries: 'Come on you people, everybody let's get on the wall', and by their dozen all the people get on the wall. In verse 31 we read that the first great company, or as some versions say 'choir', proceeded to Nehemiah's right toward the gate at the bottom of the city, the refuse gate. Then in verse 38 it says that there was a second group, a second choir, that proceeded left - and he says, Nehemiah, that when he followed them, the half of the people on the wall, Ezra went with the first choir and Nehemiah went with the second choir. So can you see it? There are these two great companies of choirs, one led by Nehemiah, one led by Ezra, and they're marching round the walls in separate directions, and they're all coming to meet at the temple, they're coming to a great crescendo of praise and worship to God. As they're going along they've got cymbals, they've got lyres, they've got cymbals and all sorts of instruments praising and magnifying the Lord.

Groups of singers, all sorts of instruments, a spirit of hilarity - what must it have been like? I'll tell you, it was a praise service to remember that certainly wouldn't resemble today's average church service, would it? Verse 43, look at it, this is the one I asked you to mark, the last section: 'so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off'. Now note that it doesn't say the music was heard afar off - I'm sure that the music was - but it was the joy, because music isn't just about music, music is expressive of the joy that is in the Christian's heart. I'll tell you there's hardly, if any, a Christian that I know that's on fire for God that doesn't love to praise the Lord with music and a song in his mouth. For miles away the people knew that God's people were in God's city, and that they were thankful to God and praising the Lord for all that He has done.

One person has put it like this: 'They weren't ramrod straight to attention, and they didn't walk step-by-step like pallbearers, tightlipped and straightfaced'. If you were near Lisburn yesterday you would have heard the pipes of the European pipe band competition, and as soon as you rolled the window down no matter how far away you were, there were that many pipe bands that you could hear them squealing! This is what it was like in Jerusalem, people all around about could hear the great praise, the great shout and glory that there was in the people of God worshipping the Lord. Can you imagine what it would be like if every single Sunday, when we praise the Lord, we were like that? Can you imagine? Vance Havner, who I mentioned to you earlier, said: 'Today's church member who yells like a Comanche Indian at a football game, sits like a wooden Indian in the house of God on Sunday'. It wouldn't be hard to get out of your bed on a Sunday morning if you praised the Lord like this, would it?

Now let me tell you physically what was involved. Verse 28 says that there were songs of thanksgiving, for music is one of the most expressive ways to communicate happiness - do you know why that is? One writer has put it like this: 'Music short-circuits the senses with a direct pathway into human emotion'. You know when you hear a tune that you know well and you love, it touches your heart right away, it almost goes past the mind. Music is a tremendous way to praise the Lord. Now I'm not overemphasising music as opposed to the words, but the fact of the matter is Paul said: 'Do not be drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord'. There's something spiritual about music, music conveys something spiritual to others, and it communicates something spiritual to us.

If you look at verse 42, it says that they sang loudly, and it says that they sang clearly - that's very important. They weren't dead in their singing, but neither did they waken the dead in their singing! Verse 36 and 46, it says they did it decently and in order. If you look at verse 36, you see that they used the instruments that were prescribed by King David to worship the Lord. It wasn't just a free-for-all praise the Lord as you like.

And in verse 46 it says that they followed the teachings of Asaph with regards to this, and the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that in the house of the Lord, that is the church of the Living God, all things are to be done decently and in order. But you know sometimes I think that some people think 'decently and in order' is a euphemism for 'deadly and in boredom' - they enjoyed themselves worshipping the Lord! Do we enjoy ourselves? Some of you don't look it when you're singing some of the hymns! You're nearly afraid! There's like a bondage on us that we can allow ourselves in our spirits to let ourselves go towards the Lord in a worship and praise and adoration that is due to His name.

Verse 40 says they took their places, and that was the families as well, they were all united together - verse 43 - in family worship. Verse 43 also says that they made sacrifices unto the Lord, verses 44 and 47 say that they dedicated money. It wasn't just all one-way that they got a great blessing from this great celebration, but they gave unto the Lord - but this is the point that I want you to get: the expression of their happiness was celebration and singing, there was an atmosphere of happiness that should surround all of God's people when they get together, even us! Well, does it?

The precursor to happiness is holiness, the expression of happiness is celebration and singing, and the third thing I want you to notice is really a question: the reality of the desertion of happiness - have we stopped smiling? Have you stopped singing? Where is your song this morning? You know a smile and a song affects absolutely everything. We give lip service to this, but the Bible teaches in Proverbs 17 that a joyful heart is like a good medicine. Proverbs 15:13: 'A joyful heart makes a cheerful face: but when the heart is sad the spirit is broken'. Now imagine what a difference it would make to our church and our fellowship if we had such joy like this, if our singing and our song and celebration was like the children of Israel here in Nehemiah's day! It would be like a winsome magnet that would draw people in, because it's something that the people don't have! They would be remarking: 'Listen, look, look at the joy that those people have. I have to go and see what it is!'. What a difference would it make to our witness as individuals! Spurgeon said that holy joy will beautify you, it will change your actual appearance in people's eyes if you walk around with a smile rather than a frown.

The King of a particular country travelled often, but one day a man living near the palace remarked to a friend: 'Well, it looks like the King's home tonight', and he said: 'How do you know that?'. The man replied, pointing up toward the Royal House, 'Because when the King is home the castle is all lit up'. We sang as children: 'There's a flag flying high in the castle of my heart', there's joy, there is meant to be joy there! It's meant to show in our faces! What a difference it would make to our church, to our own personal witness - what about our friends? Anne Frank, who was of course in Holland during the war, and was hiding as a Jew from the Nazis and wrote the diary of a young girl. She says in it this quotation: 'Whoever is happy will make others happy too'. This was a girl in great sadness and difficulty, yet she knew this much: whoever is happy will make others happy too. It is contagious - you know and I know that when we're a bit down, we want to be around individuals who smile and who sing rather than those that make us feel worse!

In fact not only does it affect our church and our witness and our friends, but I want to tell you it affects absolutely everything. Your disposition of joy will affect everything - Thomas Carlyle said: 'Wondrous is the strength of cheerfulness and its power of endurance, the cheerful man will do more in the same time and will do it better and will persevere in it longer than the sad or the sullen' - you'll even do your work better, and maybe work for the Lord better, if you've joy in your step! Well, Iron Hall, have we stopped smiling? Have we stopped really singing? Really praising the Lord and coming to the house of God with His people, and really enjoying ourselves as we bring to the Lord an offering that is worthy to His name - do you think He takes pleasure in an offering that we don't even enjoy?

Well, if you want to know the secret to happiness, true happiness, it's got to do with fourthly your focus, your focus. True happiness is not dependent on your outward circumstances, but it is dependent on your inward

focus - what you are focusing on. It is not your position in life that makes you happy, it is your disposition of heart that makes you happy. Let me show you this, turn with me to John 20:20 very quickly, and it's just this part of the verse that I want you to notice - remember, the disciples thought that the Lord was gone, and this is the word of God: 'Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the LORD'. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the LORD - that is the secret of Christian joy, it turns upon those two words. Look at it: 'Then...', and 'When...' - 'Then were they glad, when they saw the Lord'. Notice what it doesn't say, if you're focusing on yourself and how you are as a Christian, and what's going wrong in your life, 'Then were the disciples glad when they saw themselves'? No! When they saw the Lord! 'Then were the disciples glad when they saw their circumstances'? No! They were still under threat of death whether Christ had risen or not! We don't even read that the disciples were glad when they saw a particular piece of doctrine that they rejoiced in - no! They were glad when they saw the Lord!

You've got to stop looking to yourself, you've got to stop focusing on your circumstances, you've even got to stop focusing on some little doctrine that gives you a buzz, you've got to look to Christ and you will have true joy - for you will be glad only when and as you see the Lord, for joy is not the absence of trouble but it is the presence of Jesus. Where is your focus today? Could the absence of Christ's presence in your life point to the absence of joy in your faith? James Guthrie went to the scaffold because of his faith in the Lord Jesus, Jock Purvis telling his story writes of this man and his life, that James Guthrie ever kept through his busy life his own personal fellowship with Christ in the fresh joyous bloom of his new birth, as if he had been but a young convert. All through his Christian experience he had the joy that he had right at the very beginning when he was first saved, and now he's going to the gallows, how would he feel? Purvis goes on to tell us: 'Waking about 4am on the day he was to be executed, Guthrie spent time in personal worship and was asked by his friend James Cowee (sp?) how he felt. 'Very well', replied Guthrie, 'this is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it'.

Do you have a joy like that? Are you a Christian, or are we a church, that started out in revival fires and is now living in the smoke? We've lost our vibrancy, we've lost our life, we've lost our joy, we've lost our attractiveness to those in the world who don't have true happiness in Christ, we've even lost our song. You know how to get it, don't you? Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the LORD.

Father, forgive us. We ought to be a happy people. Yes, we're going through sorrows and toils, tribulation and tragedy at times, but we ought to have the joy of the Lord as our strength. We ought to have that smile of God in our hearts that transcends life's darkest experiences. Lord, if You've not received the praise that You are due from all our hearts, forgive us. If You look down upon us and see a people that are not happy to be here, Lord forgive us and make us a people whose worship and celebration is heard abroad - that not only is the Lord in this house, but the Lord is in our hearts, and the joy of the Lord is on our countenances. Help us Lord, bring us from our backsliding and show us the way ahead, that we may again have that joy in our step, focusing on the Lord, that we may be glad. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - August 2004

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Building For God - Chapter 15

"Grasping The Nettles Of Sin"

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Now if you would turn with me to Nehemiah's prophecy chapter 13 just for our reading. It's quite a long portion of Scripture, but it's important that we read it all, so do turn with me. This is our final - if we get through it today - our final instalment in this series 'Building For God', studying in this prophecy of Nehemiah. Let me also say that it's good to see George Murray out with us, he was out with us last week and I forgot to say how good it was to see him back with us after his sickness.

Let's begin at verse 1 of chapter 13: "On that day", and we believe that Nehemiah is talking about the day of the dedication of themselves unto the Lord, where they took the covenant to the Lord. You remember they heard the law of Moses again, and they were convicted of their sins, and they rededicated themselves to the Lord. So verses 1 to 3 are specifically talking about that day in the past that has happened chronologically where we are now in chapter 13. "On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever", and you can read about that in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 23 I think it is. "Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing. Now it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude" - that's all who were not Israelite, were not Jewish. "And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto Tobiah: And he had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded to be given to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests. But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king: And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff to Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense. And I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given them: for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field. Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together, and set them in their place. Then brought all Judah the tithes of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasuries. And I made treasurers over the treasuries, Shelemiah the priest, and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah: and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah: for they were counted faithful, and their office was to distribute unto their brethren. Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof. In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath. And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that

there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy. In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin. Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives? And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites. Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business; And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good".

Now this morning's final message, hopefully, on 'Building For God' in Nehemiah is entitled 'Grasping the Nettles of Sin'. You've heard that expression, I'm sure, 'to grasp the nettle'. Sometimes maybe you get shouted at from time to time, and you're told you just need to 'grasp the nettle'. That painting needs done, that papering needs done, that garden needs weeded - you just need to grasp the nettle, go and do it. Maybe there's a difficult phone call needs to be made, and someone says to you: 'Just go and make that phone call, grasp the nettle'. It is a description of doing something that is difficult, uncomfortable, but is necessary - it should be done, it ought to be done, even though we procrastinate about it at times.

Now if you're a Christian for any length of time you will know that it's no easy thing to be a Christian. Yes, the burden of our sin rolls away and we take upon us the yoke of the Lord Jesus - but I'm sure that none of us here today would say that it is easy to be a Christian. I think the reason why that is, is that there is a lot of grasping of nettles to be done as a child of God. Once we get saved, well that's only the beginning of our pilgrimage, and the Holy Spirit right throughout our life as a Christian points out more and more things, it seems, the longer we go and mature as a child of God, there are more things that He shows us that need to be dealt with, nettles that need to be grasped.

One of the greatest nettles is that obvious nettle of sin. The puritans had a description for grasping the nettles of sin, they called it the 'mortification of sin'. You'll find some puritan books, I think there's one by John Owen, the great puritan, 'The Mortification of Sin' - and it simply means what it is to put sin to death in our lives, and to use the victory that is in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ in order to overcome sin in our experience through temptations. Now I hear some of you saying in your minds - not literally, by the way - but I imagine that you're saying: 'Well, sure my sin was dealt with at the cross of the Lord Jesus, in His death I died'. Well that is true, but the Bible still teaches us that we have an old nature. A lot of people do not understand this at the very beginning of their Christian experience, and are distressed because they still have an inclination within them to sin. They don't understand, they think they're maybe not saved at all because they feel like sinning at times. The Bible teaches us that even though we're saved and given a new nature in the Lord Jesus, we still have an old nature, and we are called upon specifically in the book of Romans 6, 7 and 8 to reckon ourselves dead unto sin daily, to daily appropriate the work of the cross as we take up our cross and follow the Saviour.

Of course, the New Testament instructs us to feed the new nature with righteousness, and therefore the

opposite is to starve the old nature from sin and to not lead ourselves into temptation. So what we understand is that really the Christian life is the beginning of starting to grasp certain nettles and pull them out of our lives. Now the problem with this is, the Bible is absolute in its call for obedience. The New Testament is ruthless towards sin, absolute obedience is called for - you don't need to turn to it, but if you think of the words in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:29 and 30 - the Lord said: 'If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out'. Don't patch it up, pluck it out! 'Cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell'. You've got to be ruthless with sin - 'if in doubt, cut it out' is the doctrine of the New Testament!

When we come to Colossians chapter 3 we get the same teaching from the apostle Paul, verse 5: 'Mortify therefore', put to death, 'your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him'. You have an old nature within you, but you're not to feed that nature, you're not to live in it as you used to before you were saved - you have a new nature and day by day you've got to mentally and spiritually put that on by faith.

Christianity is a call to obedience, and therefore it is a call to absolute holiness before God. Now this is something that we struggle with at times, we don't believe we can achieve absolute holy perfection down here on earth, yet it is to be strived towards - there's no doubt about that. Matthew 5 and verse 48, in the Sermon on the Mount again, the Lord Jesus said: 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect'. The Old Testament saints were told 'Be holy, even as I the Lord am holy'. Romans 12 verse 1 says: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service'. So the clarion cry of the New Testament, after that which is 'repent and believe the gospel', is a call to obedience at all costs! I would call it a 'violent obedience'. Violent! Cut out sin! Grasp the nettles, weed it out of your life!

Now the problem for us is, especially in this age in which we live, many are soft on sin. The government is certainly soft on it, the church is soft on it - when you get hard on sin there's a cry of 'Legalism!' or aggressiveness. We as individual Christians, if we are honest with ourselves, we'd have to admit that we have come to a place in our lives where we often compromise with sins, sins that we feel are not great sins but little sins. You've heard that expression of 'sleeping with the enemy', and that in fact is what we are doing when we tolerate any form of sin in our lives - we are committing adultery with the world and everything in it! Marcus Dodds said that we as Christians, instead of putting to death sin, we deal with sin as a man would disarm his son - we don't want to kill it, we just want to disarm it! We treat sin like a family member or an old friend, and when it knocks on our door we allow it to lodge a little while.

That's exactly what happened in Nehemiah's day: that great enemy of God and God's people, Tobiah, was actually given a lodging chamber in the house of God, in the temple of God. That's what we're like with sin at times, isn't it? We give it a little room, not all of our lives, but a little space to have charge and to have sway. Instead of decapitating it we only give its hair a trim, and eventually its hair grows again to tempt us. You know what it's like when you go away on holiday for a fortnight, and you come back having left the garden, all of a sudden it's like a jungle, the weeds have grown everywhere. It's an onerous task to think about taking them all out, but it's got to be done, if it isn't it will get worse. Some nettles just have to be grasped and pulled out!

Now the story we have before us today is that Nehemiah reports back to the King, he's done his job; we have built the walls together every week, and we celebrated last week how the walls were built, and we gave praise and acknowledgement to God for His goodness. But we found in chapter 13 and verse 6 that he went back to report to King Artaxerxes. In chapter 7 and verse 2 we find that he left his brother Hanani in charge over the city of Jerusalem, he was to govern. So the government of the city was in the hands of his brother - and if we could quip a new saying: 'While the Governor was away, the people began to play'. Now this is hard to imagine for us, because we were here last week and we thought about the great celebration and joy that was in the heart of God's revived people. They had a new wall, they had all moved - or most of them - back into the city of Jerusalem, and God was receiving glory in His holy city - but now what happened? We have moved from such a mountaintop experience into this valley of backslidden degradation and depravity!

So quickly can we move from victory to defeat, to discouragement and to failure. Oh, there's a lesson in this for us all: none of us, none of us can take it easy and relax as a Christian. Even in the very midst of revival fires, the enemy never quits - in fact, we would have to say that if anything he goes up a gear when our spiritual path begins to climb higher and higher for God. The enemy is ever with us until we get to glory, and if you want to be more spiritual you've got to be prepared to be in more fights with the evil one. The weeds of sin that Nehemiah had recently plucked out of these people's hearts had now found root again in their lives when Nehemiah was away. Verses 1 to 3 spoke of that, where we thought about them cleansing the people on that day of dedication, they separated the heathen wives from among them in obedience to Deuteronomy 23. Now here's a lesson: they did that in verses 1 to 3 of the day of dedication, and what do we find by the end of this chapter in verses 23 to 31? They had committed the same sin again!

What a lesson in the psychology of sin we have here. Can you see it in your own life? Sin has a habit of repeating itself, especially when we fail to deal decisively with it and pluck it out, root and everything. In fact even the priests had sinned in this way. What the people had done was they had stopped keeping the covenant that they'd made with their God in chapter 10 verses 28 and 29. Every single thing that they had said they would do, they went back on it all! Now I don't know whether your mind goes back, like mine does, to Moses. You remember he left his people down at the bottom of Sinai, he left the people's charge in the hands of his brother Aaron. He went up to receive the law of God, and we read in Exodus that on his return the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play, and we read an almost identical situation in Exodus 32:25-29. He had to reprimand the people, he had to judge the people, and do you remember what he did? He told all those who were with him and with God to stand with him, and those who were not were to be slain there and then - it didn't matter whether they were brothers or sisters, or children or parents: kith and kin were all to be wiped out because of their disobedience to God's law.

God's word teaches us that leaders need to be courageous and face sin honestly, and judge it, but it teaches us that it is necessary for every child of God to do this. We're all called upon to grasp the nettle of sin and pluck it out. As Charles Swindoll says, 'We're told to take sin by the throat, deprive it of air, and cast it out'. Well, the question is: is that how you deal with sin in your life? This passage teaches us that if reforms are necessary they should be implemented whatever the cost, whatever people think. Our obedience to God's word in the church and in our lives is to be absolute, and it is to be a violent obedience to God's word - that is the minimal requirement of the kingdom of God, and discipleship to our Lord Jesus. He said: 'The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence', we are persecuted against, but He went on to say, 'and the violent take the kingdom by force'. Are you a violent Christian in the right sense?

Well, let's see how Nehemiah, the great reformer, deals with sin. Let me just say as a postscript to that, the presence of these sins in our lives or our church are signs of spiritual declension in our age, and the need for God to move by His Spirit in all of our lives. Let's go through them all quickly - one: compromise was kicked out. Compromise was kicked out, verses 4 to 9. Tobiah was given, by the High Priest of the day, Eliashib, a little chamber within the temple - the word here is that Eliashib was allied to Tobiah. The sense in

the Hebrew, perhaps, is that he was related to Tobiah. So this was someone in his family, and he decided: 'Well, he's suffered for what he's done, Nehemiah has given him a bit of a licking. Well I'll give him a chamber, I have the power to do it, in the temple of God'. Provisions were granted to him, actually provisions that really belonged to the Levites and those who were working in the temple. Now when Nehemiah heard about this, after he came home after just a short space of time away, he lost no time at all in throwing Tobiah and all his goods out of the temple, and then having the temple cleansed and sanctified for its proper use.

We think: 'Wayhey, Nehemiah! Good man!', and we give him a metaphorical pat on the back and say, 'Well, you're a great guy, you're so swift, you're so decisive in all that you do'. That's how we look at that when we look back at these Bible stories, when we think of David decapitating the personification of sin in Goliath, we think that's tremendous: 'I want to be like David!'. But I'm sure that in Nehemiah's day, and even in David's day, there were people who said: 'Now Nehemiah, do you not think you're overreacting a little bit? I mean, can you not live and let live. He knows his mistake, he realises what he has done, can you not in this sense turn the other cheek? Do you not think you're overreacting and being a little bit unreasonable?'. Now watch Nehemiah, he was not interested in winning a popularity contest or in public opinion polls, all that he was interested in was cleaning out the evil that affected God's people's capacity to listen and obey God's word - that's all that concerned him: their obedience to God's law. If there was something in the way of that, it had to be put out right away!

Now when initial symptoms of problems in our life - I'm talking about sinful problems - begin to disappear, do you think: 'Well, I think I've overcome that thing, it's not the problem that it used to be'? You let your guard down, don't you? You let Tobiah come and have a chamber again in your life, and you forget what sin did in the past. This is what Eliashib did, he had forgotten what Tobiah and Sanballat had done to the people of God. This is the psychology of sin: we have a tendency to forget how we feel when we sin, and what sin does; and then we commit it again, we feel all those feelings again and the awful ramifications of what we have done - and we think to ourselves, you do it as well, 'Why didn't I remember what it was like?'. We are ignorant of his devices - can I ask you today: is there a compromising companionship in your life? Are you compromising on God's word? Are you turning a blind eye to sin, and you're trying to rationalise it and reason it in your life? Can I ask this fellowship: are you allowing the enemy into our church in any shape or form, because you're not willing to face and confront sin? Even though it's uncomfortable, you're not willing to grasp the nettle? Compromise was kicked out, Tobiah was kicked out of the temple and everything that he owned, and the place was cleansed.

The second nettle that was grasped, was bank books were spiritually balanced. In verses 10 to 13 we see that the Levites and the singers were not being paid, they were being fed by the temple offerings - now we don't know why that was, perhaps Tobiah was eating some of it - but we read that they had to go back to their fields and their farms and actually work for their own supply. So they left the job of serving the Lord and they went back to farming. Now this is interesting, before we apply this, verse 10 says: 'And I perceived', other versions say, 'I discovered'. As we go through this passage we see that Nehemiah says occasionally 'I saw', 'I looked and I saw' - this tells us something about Nehemiah's leadership. He was looking, he was vigilant, he had his eyes peeled, he was looking for sin in God's people, he was looking for an opportunity to encourage not to censure, but to build people up in their most holy faith. Are you looking out in your Christian life? Charles Swindoll says: 'A leader keeps his eyes open', all Christians should keep their eyes open, they should listen, they should watch. He goes on to say: 'Most wise parents I know are always looking at and listening to what their kids are doing. They listen carefully to the music that comes from each room, and they find out what's going on behind any door that stays closed'.

This is what Nehemiah did - perhaps it was the outrage of finding out what Tobiah was doing in the temple of God that made him want to look under the beds and behind the closets of all the people of God in Israel and Jerusalem. He wanted to search deeper, and he didn't have to look long, for when you look at verse 10

you see that the Levites were not being supported. The tithes that should have been taken to support them weren't being taken - they had ceased, and the Levites had gone back to the farms. Now there was silence where there used to be ministry for God. What did Nehemiah do? He grasped the nettle - verses 11 to 14. He grasped the nettle, and he told the people that they would have to sanctify their wallets again because the work of God was suffering through a lack of finance.

Now I have preached enough on giving from this pulpit, and I don't make any apology for doing it for it's in God's word, and I'm not going to stop preaching things that are in God's word no matter whether it's uncomfortable to some of you or not. The fact of the matter is that one of the hardest things for a man to allow to be sanctified in his life is his wallet. I don't know whether they're lighter than all the rest of the parts of you, but for some reason when we baptise people their wallet seems to float at the top - it doesn't get sanctified. I'll leave it at that, just to say that God's servants and God's work must never suffer because of a lack of finance: missions must never suffer, evangelism must never suffer. God's servant Haggai had to come to the people of God in that day in chapter 1 verses 4 and 9, and say: 'Look at your cieled houses, your beautiful luxurious homes, and look at God's house - it's suffering!'.

Bank books needed to be spiritually balanced, compromise had to be kicked out, and then thirdly God's time had to be redeemed. We see this in verses 15 to 22, Sabbath sanctity had to be restored. They had profaned and secularised God's day. Now the Sabbath was not only in God's law, but it was part of the covenant that these people had signed. If you look at chapter 10 and verse 31 you see that it was part of what they had agreed: 'if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt' - they had signed this and agreed to it. One writer has described them in this fault like this: 'They were people who could hear a bargain from a mile away, but who were tone deaf to God's commands concerning the Sabbath'. Is that what we're like in this age? We could hear a bargain a mile away, but we can't tune into God's word!

Well, Nehemiah hadn't forgotten God's law or the covenant that the people had signed. In verses 17 to 22 we see Nehemiah taking violent obedience in his hands. He made sure that these people were put out of Jerusalem, the gates were locked at sundown on Friday night to sundown on Saturday night after the Sabbath. Then when he found out that these travelling traders were camping outside the walls of Jerusalem, he went to them and he said: 'If you don't move, I'm going to have you thrown in jail' - and they went! Ruthless and violent in his obedience to God's word!

Now let me say that the Lord's Day today is Sunday, it's not the same as the Jewish Sabbath as we understand it in the Old Testament. But we do feel, and as we read the New Testament Scriptures, that God's people set aside the Lord's Day to glorify Him, to worship Him, to praise Him, to come around God's word. Now our culture today requires some people of necessity to work on the Lord's Day, but we have to declare in an age of compromise that it is better by far for workers, and for the nation, if God's people are allowed to honour God's day. We're living in a day when the nation doesn't honour it, and God's people don't honour it any longer. Can I be more specific? Well, a Christian should not use Sunday as a day to go for shopping, as a day to earn money, as a day for doing anything that can wait - whether it be work or play. It's not God's law, it's the principle of worshipping God with the Lord's people on the Lord's Day, to glorify Him - those things can wait if the Lord's first in our lives. Leaders, we are meant to make an example, in verse 22 we find that the Levites were failing on keeping the Sabbath day, and they were the ones who had to start it all over again and set the example. Now we don't want to get into all this situation of Sabbatarian rules, do's and don'ts of the Sabbath day. You've got to meet out that thing in your life under these principles in your own way and before your own conscience, but Sunday ought to be special in the heart of every child of God - it ought not to be an opportunity for getting doubletime.

God's time was redeemed, bank books were spiritually balanced, compromise was kicked out, fourthly and finally: contaminating influences were quarantined - verses 23 to 30. There was an unequal yoke, and there were four things that were banished. Now this is perhaps the most difficult and dangerous of all the problems that Nehemiah faced. The people had begun to intermarry with other nations and other religions, and it wasn't the problem of just mixing their blood together, but it was the problem - as we see in verses 23 and 24 - that they were mixing languages, and therefore beliefs. Look at verse 23: 'In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people'.

This was the problem - 'What was the problem?', you might say, 'Being bilingual?'. No, it was this: they were raising a generation of children who could not speak or understand the language of the Scriptures, a generation of people who were departing from God's word. This problem threatened to wipe out the ability of God's people to hear the voice of the Lord! Do you get it? I wonder have we as a people, or as a young people, or in our homes have our children been deprived of the language of the Scriptures? I'm not talking about Jacobean English, I'm talking about the principles of God's word laid down in holy writ. I'm talking about the laws of God to train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he shall not depart from it. The standards and principles of God's word - are we grasping the nettle? What are we giving our young people? We're giving them education, we're giving them mod cons, we're giving them everything that our money can buy, but are we giving them the Scriptures? The world will give them all that - and pray to God that they don't hamper after it - but are we grasping the nettle?

Now you look at how Nehemiah grasped this nettle - do you know what he did? He used physical violence - I'm not condoning this, you'll be glad to know, so don't be afraid of me at the door! But it says that he contended with them, look at verse 25, he cursed them - he cursed them, that's not swearing, that is calling down a curse...'and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God' that they wouldn't give their daughters or their sons to other peoples. Now desperate times here called for desperate measures, and Nehemiah had to get violent in obedience to God's word. In the New Testament, of course, there's no ban on marriage between different ethnic groups - no matter what anybody says - all peoples and tribes and nations are in this new covenant of grace in our Lord Jesus Christ, and I don't see any rules or regulations prohibiting people marrying with one another whatever their colour. What we have here within God's word is the principle that we find in the New Testament of what is called an 'unequal yoke'. That is where two animals were ploughing together in a field, and they had a yoke over the two of them, and an unequal yoke would be one animal that was bigger than the other. In the spiritual sense what we're talking about here is a Christian and a non-Christian, or a Christian and an unsuitable Christian! There can be all sorts of reasons why a person is an unsuitable Christian, but here's one: if they slow you down in your ploughing, that's a sure sign that they're unsuitable.

What we take out of this is not only an unequal yoke, but all foreign things that influenced these people: the fads of the world, the cultures and practices of the world, which are not all intrinsically evil but if in any way they hinder us understanding and obeying God's word, and raising up a new generation of people who will follow and obey God's word, they are to be cleansed, they are to be quarantined. What we find today is God's people rationalise these things. For instance, they start to go with a person that's not a Christian, and they rationalise that they will lead that unsaved partner to the Lord - but it rarely works, and what you have is what you find here: the children, when there are children that come along the way, begin to follow the unsaved partner and his ways and worldly fashions, rather than the one that is saved.

Churches are doing this today, they try to 'gospel-ise' things to attract sinners. They try to marry the church and the world, when both these things - an unequal yoke or foreign influences - what they do is a prostitute the message that we espouse and the testimony that we cherish. That's why James said to those believers in chapter 4 and verse 4: 'Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity

with God?'. He pointed them in verse 26 and 27 to Solomon, and he said: 'Have you not learned from the mistake of one of your greatest kings?'. My friend, have you not learned from the mistakes of other people that tampering with evil, flirting with the world, allowing contaminating influences to come into your life unquarantined and unquestioned is the road to no-town spiritually. I ask you today: what Delilah is there in your life at present that is sapping your spiritual strength? Whether you admit it or not, it's happening!

Alan Redpath said: 'If you would live godly in this world you will have to break the heart of someone, believe me'. Very frequently in order to obey the will of the Lord, the heart you break is that of someone near to you, perhaps it's the heart of a father or a mother, or some member of your family, your sweetheart - that is what Jesus said would happen. He did not come, Luke 12, to bring peace into the world, but to bring a sword between family members and between all sorts of relationships. Redpath ends like this: 'Better to break anybody's heart than break the heart of God!'. I'm not underestimating the harshness of these words, but what Nehemiah was saying about the state of God's people in his day, it was not a time for half measures. The state of God's people today is the same: we need to grasp the nettle of sin, we need to confront it. We read in verse 15, verse 17, verse 21, verse 25, verse 28 that Nehemiah confronted the sin, he grasped the nettle. He was a man of action for the things of God, he had a zeal like the Psalmist in Psalm 69:9: 'The zeal of Thine house hath consumed me' - he was on fire for God's glory!

So he warned the people, he admonished them, he reprimanded and contended, even struck out, even pulled out hair. He made things difficult for ungodly people, he was courageous he was tenacious in everything that he did - he was a great general for God on the front line of the battle! He was a tireless worker, he was a great builder for God. Are you? It's significant that although he was a man of action, the last verse - and three verses, 22, 29 and 31 - find Nehemiah on his knees. Prayer changes things. He prayed to the Lord: 'Remember me, O my God, these people may forget me' - it's interesting that this book doesn't end on a note of victory, but it shows us the awful sinfulness in people's hearts. God would not forget him, but here's the question I ask you - you may be praying prayers to God: 'Lord, change me. Lord, do this; Lord, do that' - and if Nehemiah testifies anything to us today in our modern age it's this: the Lord is saying, while you're on your knees, 'Get up and do something about it! You do all you can, and I will do all you can't'.

All of us can be sure that if we build for God, the Lord will remember us - if no one else remembers us, the Lord will remember His own.

Lord, forgive us when we commit like sins to those of Your ancient people Israel. Lord, we need forgiveness more when we consider the blessing that we have in the New Testament, that we don't come to a temple made with hands, but we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He lives within us, You live within us, yet there are times - God forgive us - that we choose our own sinful ways rather than Thy holy way. Lord, revive our hearts, and if we have not done so yet, may we rededicate and covenant ourselves before our God to follow Thee in obedience absolutely, and even if necessary violently, that the word of God may be done. Amen.

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