

Nehemiah 2.11-18

Repairing the Walls

Amington (Online)

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Build, build, build (3)

Nehemiah

I like Nehemiah. He wasn't perfect by any means, but he was good at listening to God, and having the courage to follow where God was leading him.

Nehemiah lived in the middle of the fifth century BC. His family had been exiled 150 years earlier – and they had risen through the ranks in Susa (the capital of the Persian Empire) so much so that Nehemiah was the king's cup-bearer. This was an important and trusted role – second only to the princes in the king's own family.

Jerusalem itself had been sacked and burned by the Babylonians – its people carried off into exile. Although some had now returned, the protective walls surrounding the city still lay in ruins, by the order of Artaxerxes, the very king Nehemiah served.

In chapter 1 Nehemiah heard about the state of Jerusalem, and prayed that God would give him the opportunity to do something about it. Not three months later he had his chance...

Despite his great fear at asking the king to reverse his own decree, Nehemiah explained the situation to the king – the king didn't even question him, he simply asked how long he'll be gone for!

And so off he went, with a battalion of soldiers and letters to the governors of the region....

Identify

Our reading starts as Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem. He had left the soldiers behind – presumably with the governors – and hadn't told anyone yet of his plan to rebuild the walls.

The first thing he builds shows his great wisdom: nothing. He builds – nothing. He must have been desperate to get cracking, but the first thing he builds, is nothing. He builds not a thing.

After three days – settling in? getting to know the leaders? – he heads out at night to inspect the walls, to assess the situation, to see where the gaps are, where the remaining strong parts are, **to identify what needs to be done.**

It's so easy – and so tempting – to be a flurry of activity, being ever so busy, doing good things. It can make us feel useful and needed.

But the thing is, even if something is a Good Thing to do, doesn't mean it *should* be done. There is absolutely no point fixing the gate in the wall over here, if over there is a gaping hole.

Maginot Line

During the 1930s the French built the Maginot Line: concrete fortifications and weapons installations built along the border between France and Germany. The intention was to deter and slow a German invasion. The Line was invulnerable to aerial attack and tank fire, and even had underground railways. Troops could be garrisoned in the bunkers, with dining areas and even air conditioning to keep the troops well cared-for.

The problem was, there was a gap, in the Ardennes Forest. So what did the Germans do? They went around the wall, through the gap in the forest, encircled the Allies, and forced the retreat to Dunkirk. Their attack started on 10 May 1940 and within five days the Germans were advancing well into France. Even in 1944 when the Allies invaded France and now the Germans occupied the wall – the Allies simply went round it.

Activity – even good activity, activity doing good things – can give a false sense of security, if we're focused on the wrong place.

First, like Nehemiah, we need to identify the gaps and then we can make sure we build and repair where it's most needed.

Gaps

Obviously we're not talking here about us building a physical wall around ourselves – I'm taking Nehemiah's example spiritually. We need to identify the gaps and low points in our faith, that make it easier for the enemy to attack us.

Ultimately God is our protection, and there is nothing the enemy can do to snatch us out of his hands. But the enemy's attacks, little by little, can make us stop trusting in God's protection, can tempt us away from God – and then we're in real danger.

These gaps and low points start so small and innocuous. Often they begin with a difficult or challenging experience, like we all face. Pain, grief, frustration, sadness – if we don't deal with the negative emotions we all experience, they can grow into something much worse, like bitterness, anger, despair. The gaps grow larger, and the enemy prods and pokes them, trying to get in, trying to tempt us out and away from God.

Gaps also come when we stop doing the things we need to, to keep us close to God. We don't feel like it, so we stop. We stop praying, we stop reading the Bible, we stop sharing our faith, we stop caring about the poor – we stop because it's hard and we don't feel like it. And so the gaps start to grow. Eugene Peterson puts it like this:

Worship is an *act* that develops feelings for God, not a *feeling* for God that is expressed in an act of worship.

Peterson, A Long Obedience In The Same Direction, p48

Worship in this sense is not singing in church on Sunday; worship is a whole life lived for God. Following Jesus together, following him every day, in every way, is a decision, an act of will.

So how do we repair the walls? It's not complex but that doesn't make it easy: do the things we should, and don't do the rest. But we'll come onto that.

First, like Nehemiah we must *identify*: we need to work out where the gaps are, individually and together in our church family. It's tempting to go straight to building – but *first* we must *identify the gaps*. So will you join me in inspecting the walls, as Nehemiah did?

It starts with prayer and reflection – and if you spot a gap we need to repair as a church family, please let me know!