

# BUILDING THE CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH FOR TODAY.

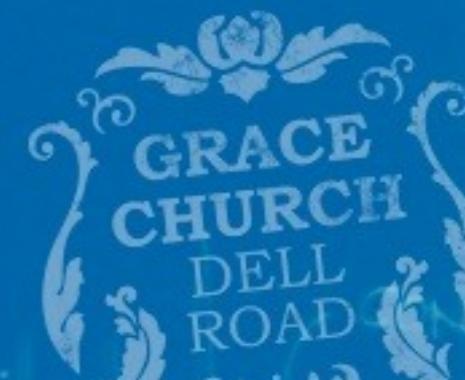


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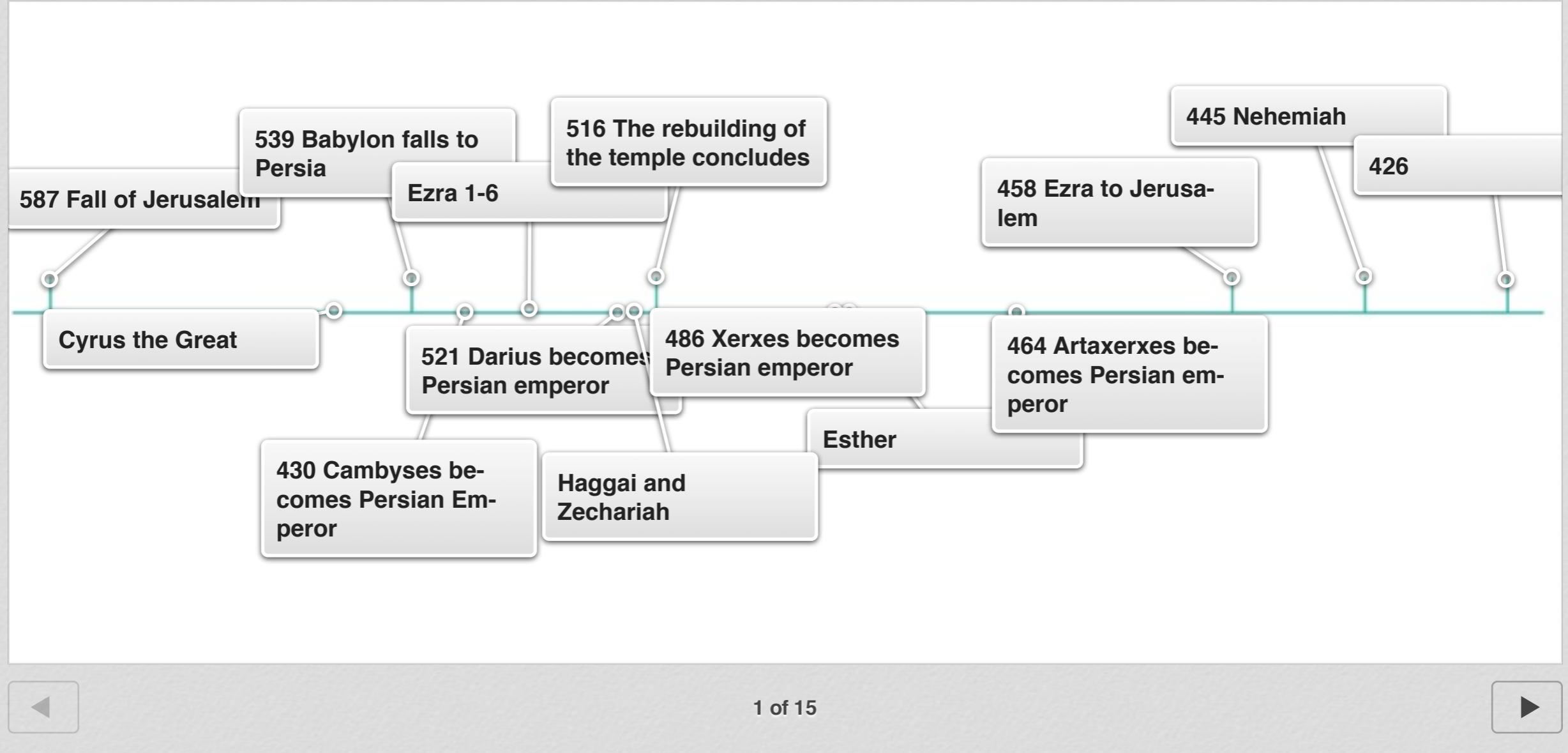
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R SECTION



Graphic 1: Timeline of events in Ezra Nehemiah



# History of Nehemiah

## Background

Nehemiah was probably written by the author of Ezra and possibly also 1 and 2 Chronicles. Extracts of Nehemiah are clearly from Nehemiah's personal records, probably letters he wrote to Babylon reporting on the success of his work.

Whilst the historical materials of Ezra/Nehemiah cover around 130 years of history, Nehemiah covers only the last 15 years from 445-430BC and is sorted almost chronologically but with a preference for developing themes and ideas.

Nehemiah sits at a crossroads in history. Over a hundred years before, in 587/6, Jerusalem had been ransacked by the Babylonian army as God had forewarned for the Israelite's failure to commit themselves to exclusive worship of Him. The Babylonians had a policy to remove the middle and upper-classes (particularly religious leaders) away from their homeland and cause them to serve in their capital city. This was a kind of cultural and religious decapitation that prevented any rebellion or backlash.

With the priesthood removed and the temple destroyed there was no hope of reestablishing temple worship. Besides which all the wealth of the temple had also been taken.

This desecration attacked the very notion of Israelite nationhood; the people were scattered; their land was occupied; their centre of worship lay destroyed. It must have seemed that the very promises God had made to Abraham in Genesis 12 had been torn up.

Yet the reign of Babylon was brief; defeated by Persia in 539 the new Persian Emperor (Cyrus the Great) ushered a change in foreign policy; permitting, even encouraging, vassal states to follow their own domestic deities. 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 records an astonishing prophetic proclamation made by Cyrus positively encouraging Israelite to return and rebuild the temple:

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*In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you—may the LORD their God be with them, and let them go up.' "*

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The first half of the book of Ezra charts the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem under the charismatic Zerubbabel. Around 50,000 exiles returned to Jerusalem (and surrounding area) at this time as the building work gathers hope. However the building work curtailed under opposition

It was not until a few decades later (described in the 2nd half of Ezra) in 458 that the reading and teaching of the law is re-established and there is a flourishing return to a fully functioning sacrificial system and priesthood.

Thus it appears that the people are on the cusp of a great turning point in history; no longer are the people scattered, no longer in their temple in shreds - not since the great days of Josiah in 622 had there been such a revival and thirst for God and his word. Nehemiah records the efforts of (principally) Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and therefore re-establish security and safety to what had been little more than a Persian outpost transforming the trickle of a return from exile begun 100 years before.

When Christians read Nehemiah, our temptation is to regard it as little more than a ‘blip’ at the end of the Old Testament, a brief moment of restoration, but we must not underestimate the importance of Nehemiah and the anticipation and excitement the people must have felt as they wondered what God might do next.

Nehemiah breaks into roughly 2 halves each with a different emphasis.

1:1-2 Hanani (Nehemiah’s brother) introduces us to the main concern of the book of Nehemiah; the state of Jerusalem as a ruined, empty city.

Part 1: (chp 1-6) which charts the building of the walls and all the external opposition Nehemiah encounters. The major concern of part 1 is God’s faithfulness in the face of opposition.

Part 2: (chp 7-13) Hanani appears again; this time entrusted to help with part 2 of the project; the repopulation of Jerusalem. The major concern is whether the people will be faithful to the word of God at the centre of their worship.

# Major themes of Nehemiah

## 1. The God of all nations

Given the wider historical context Nehemiah bears testimony to the rule of God as the King of *all* Nations and his faithfulness in keeping covenant promises.

Given the condition of Judah following the destruction of 587BC and the very real efforts made by the Babylonians to wipe out Israelite existence from the earth it is surprising to see how dramatically Israel bounces back. It is a revival reminiscent of the Exodus miracle from Egypt under Moses.

It is clear, all the way through the text that whilst Nehemiah is a shrewd political operative; the cause for his success is down to God. It is this belief in God's global reach that makes Nehemiah confident and bold in the presence of Artaxerxes; even to the point of asking him to overturn previous foreign policy (compare Neh 2:6 with Ezra 7:27)

It is his rallying cry in the face of opposition in 4:14:

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*4:14 Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your people, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.*

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This confidence is shared by the people working with Nehemiah, when the project is finished ahead of schedule, Nehemiah writes about the response of their enemies:

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*6:16 When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realised that this work had been done with the help of our God.*

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We see this growing confidence in the people's confession in Nehemiah 9:

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*9:6 You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.*

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Perhaps this kind of confidence doesn't surprise us, since we are used to reading this kind of global language in the Psalms. But many of the Psalms were written in Israel's heyday; Nehemiah's confidence comes when the people are oppressed and scattered, when it seems arrogant to claim that their God is the God in control of the heavens and earth. Because each nation had its own parochial god, the Israelite commitment to their

God must have seemed extraordinarily arrogant and naive, since their nation (and therefore god) had been defeated and its capital city lay in ruins.

## 2. The importance of walls to protect the people of God

It's very easy to 'spiritualise' the message of Nehemiah, many churches have used it on the brink of a building project! However, contrasted with the work completed in Ezra that establishes the temple and reading of the law, we might wonder what great achievements rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem really represent. And what do they represent to a contemporary Christian? If the walls are not the walls of a church building then are they the protection offered by the mercy of Christ?

### • Protection

In Nehemiah's day the walls of the city were essential to its strength, its ability to protect itself and its independence. A well defended city could repel an invader for months whilst armies could be summoned. It is this strength, symbolised by a city's walls, that makes the permission given by Artaxerxes all the more astonishing. We can see from the response of Nehemiah's enemies that rebuilding the walls without the king's permission would have been regarded as a great act of treason,

since this would only be done to create a new regional centre of power.

### • Separation

The walls were not just used in times of war but were vital even in peace times as a means of differentiating different social, ethnic and religious groups to establish who belonged and who did not. With the walls built, Nehemiah can set about rebuilding Jerusalem ensuring a significant degree of religious control

amongst those who return. By the end of the book we see the importance of the walls of Jerusalem as a form of spiritual quarantine (13:19) where Nehemiah is able to use the repaired walls and gates as a means of protecting the godliness of the city. Repopulation

**FIGURE 1.1** Showing the reduced size of the rebuilt Jerusalem compared with the city in David's time.



Another feature of Nehemiah that might confuse us are the important lists of names in chapters 3, 7, 10 and 12. We will see the unique significance of

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each list throughout the series but its noticeable that Nehemiah is vitally concerned in differentiating between people who belong to God and those who do not as the city is repopulated.

### **3. The importance of scripture to protect the people of God.**

The story of the rebuilding of the walls is complete by chapter 6. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 are central to the message of Nehemiah since they deal with the reading of the law, the response of the people of God and the establishment of worship for God's people.

What is behind the movement of the people and their spiritual revival is more than a jingoistic triumphalism in response to seeing the walls going up, but a deep movement in their hearts in response to hearing the book of the law being read. Chapter 8 in particular deals with both the reading and explanation of the law but also its profound effect. The effects of the reading of the law rumble through the next 4 chapters. In chapter 9 the people come before God to confess their sins, their present situation and their need for him. Chapter 10 outlines a type of covenant agreement where the people agree to live in marked separation from the people of God. This marks a significant transition in Nehemiah as the people are differentiated from the surrounding nations not by their walls, nor even by their possession of the law

but by welcoming the effects of that the law into their religious, cultural, civic and economic life.

### **4. The providence and protection of God**

Two of the most significant pressures on the people as they build are (1) the opposition from people who are threatened by the survival of Jerusalem and (2) the failure of wealthy Israelites to deal with their poorer brethren with equity in accordance with the law.

In each case we see Nehemiah both seek the Lord and a pragmatic solution. Within Nehemiah there is neither a self confidence that works apart from God; nor a passive 'let God and let God' attitude.

4:9 illustrates this point to the threat of opposition from the outside...

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*we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.*

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In chapter 11 we also see Nehemiah, without prompting from God, cast lots to solve the problem of repopulating Jerusalem. It's a canny solution, since it prevents the onerous demand of

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repopulation falling on a small number of families whilst also ensuring a good social and cultural mix for the good of the city.

## 5. The glory of God in Christ in comparison to Nehemiah

In many small but significant ways Nehemiah represents a high point for the people of God; temple worship is established, the people will never again repeat the sins of previous generations with pagan idolatry in the temple etc.

It's worth asking to what degree Nehemiah is a great leader because in many ways he is a wonderful type of Christ...

- He weeps over the state of Jerusalem during a time when many had grown used to its oppression (1:4)
- He leads his people with incredible integrity (5:15-19)
- He drives out those who wrongly use the temple for their own purposes (13:8-9)
- He is continually opposed by those who should have known better (6:17-19)

In many ways Nehemiah leaves an astonishing legacy, but particularly so for a man who never served as a prophet, priest or

king in the manner of other Old Testament heroes. His personal integrity is also remarkable; not once is he embroiled in a scandal or moral failure.

What he wants to be remembered for at the end of the book sounds rather understated; a *purifier* and *provider* for God's people (13:30-31) yet this legacy is significant. At no point in 2nd temple archeology have any pagan remains been found; the purity of the people had been protected. His resurrection of the law (along with Ezra) had a significant effect on the people and probably preserved the law, ensuring that we have the Old Testament in the form we have today. He was a very effective purifier and provider.

Yet his legacy is also limited. He was also unable to secure, even in his own lifetime, a lasting spiritual revival (in the same way that Josiah's reforms were short-lived in 622BC). His success was limited because, just as some mourn when they see the temple (Ezra 3:12), so at the end of the great confession of Nehemiah 9 comes a confrontation with their present weakness...

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36 “But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

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And whilst the outward activity of temple worship continues for centuries to come the religious vitality of chapters 8-10 is not sustained. Nehemiah ends with a significant degree of sadness because, despite success, there is again, (in chp 13) an escalating cycle of sin and a breach of the promises made in chapter 10.

For us there are 2 particular encouragements reading Nehemiah;

Living after Jesus we have witnessed the glory of God walking on the earth and the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham in Christ (see John 1:14). Many of the discouragements experienced by Israel as a nation are not discouragements that we have to confront. This is partly because the people of God is no longer geographically or nationally defined. We can be amazed by what God has done for his people, especially the way that God's promises have become worldwide in their delivery.

Where God's people were once reduced to a list of names written in Nehemiah 10/11 now there is no way of recording the size of his people in our generation. We could say that the walls of Jerusalem have come down, not because they have failed to protect the people of God but because there is no hope of walls now containing the people of God.

Similar to the people of Nehemiah's day; we are living between the times, experiencing a now-and-not-yet of God's blessing similar to Nehemiah's day. There is much for us to learn from

their experience; seeing the dangers of spiritual hypocrisy contrasted with a great concern for the word of God to define the holiness of God's people at a time when we appear weak, vulnerable and at risk from attack.

And for us as Christians there is cause for great encouragements as we notice some of the profound differences between their situation and ours. Whereas Nehemiah can't change the hearts of the people and the building project is doomed until their hearts are reformed, Nehemiah's reforms do keep the people holy, but ultimately once they are separated from an understanding of the Grace of God they lead to the creation of the Pharisees. Nehemiah is a lesson about the limit a godly man can achieve, even with the blessing of God, in the age before the out pouring of the Spirit.

Christians have much more confidence about fulfilling the call to be involved in building God's kingdom since we have the Holy Spirit changing us from within. We are not, therefore, doomed to repeat the sins of apostasy and spiritual neglect of Israel.

# How Nehemiah changes Grace church?

## Nehemiah encourages us to mourn for the state of our churches, our city and our country.

Recently, I was considering (with excitement) what might happen if we saw a movement to plant a gospel-preaching church (of Grace church's size) in each of Birmingham's 150 districts and what a great success we would consider that to be. What moved me was the realisation that even this kind of dramatic progress from our present situation would have seen only 1% of our city won for Christ. When we read of Nehemiah hearing of the distress of Jerusalem in 1:3 he was not comforted with the partial return of 50,000 people. Spiritually he was devastated at the size of the task that faced him. It is right for us to properly mourn the state of our city and our country; and to have a par-

ticular concern for the state of our churches. We need to understand the spiritual responsibility that we bear, in our generation, to carry the gospel to future generations. And we should mourn the state of our churches if Christ is not preached, God is not honoured, sinners are not won. If we are not grieved and moved by this we need more of Nehemiah's prerogative, his lack of satisfaction with the present situation and his prayer life. And not just about the state of the church on it's own - but the state of the church as it reflects on the glory of God.

## Nehemiah encourages to have confidence in our God.

If we share his concern for the state of God's people then we also need to share his confidence in the faithfulness of God to keeping his promises. Nehemiah challenges us to have a much greater confidence in the power of God to change circumstances on a global scale. If we are moved by the spiritual desolation of our nation (even our churches) there are only 2 possible responses:

Unbelief and apathy, being overwhelmed by the size of the task which betrays a lack of confidence in the power of God's spirit to transform people's hearts.

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A renewed confidence in the God of the Bible with a determination that, regardless of the outcomes, we are called to play our part in gospel faithfulness and the scale of the job God has called us to is no excuse for making no attempt. It merely exposes our anaemic view of our God.

In our own day, it is not merely the presence of other religions that makes us nervous about speaking of the exclusivity of our God, but also the lack of confidence many Christians have in God.

Nehemiah's prayers and actions encourage us to work hard to seek and expect spiritual reformation of our churches and our own lives as the power of the word of God defines our identity.

## **Nehemiah encourages to see our work differently.**

Compared with the 'spiritual' leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra the main focus of this moment of history is Nehemiah; a governor/political leader. We might have expected a politician would be less significant to the plot of Israel's history than a Prophet, Priest or King. What is so encouraging about Nehemiah is how ordinary his role really is; his job title in today's working world would probably be 'project manager'. And yet in how he works he is a type of Christ for us.

Quite often we imagine there to be a strong dichotomy between our 'secular' work and 'sacred' ministry and believe the worth of ministry far outstrips other kinds of work. The book of Nehemiah challenges that approach because we see how Nehemiah's confidence in God affects the very practical building of the walls. We also see the enemies of Israel seeking to disrupt the spiritual reformation of the people through very ordinary means; without ever articulating the real motive for their opposition; the establishment of temple worship in Jerusalem. Nehemiah helps us to connect the 'secular' and 'sacred' and see how the God we worship defines how we do the work he has called us to complete.

## **Nehemiah helps us to prioritise the word of God as the defining feature of the people of God.**

Whilst we must be wary of spiritualising the applications of Nehemiah (see note on walls above) - it is right to see the application of the walls to church membership and protecting the church from the means to destroy itself from the inside.

When the walls are complete in chapter 6 the rest of the book shows us their real strength; providing a ministry context where the reading and application of word of God is at the centre of

the life of Israel, transforming their personal and national life. The walls provide the essential means of separation for the people of God.

For us, the means of separation is no longer walls; nor is it a sense of nationhood, or even a strip of land. In many ways the walls have come down as the people of God has grown to include people of all tribes, tongues and nations.

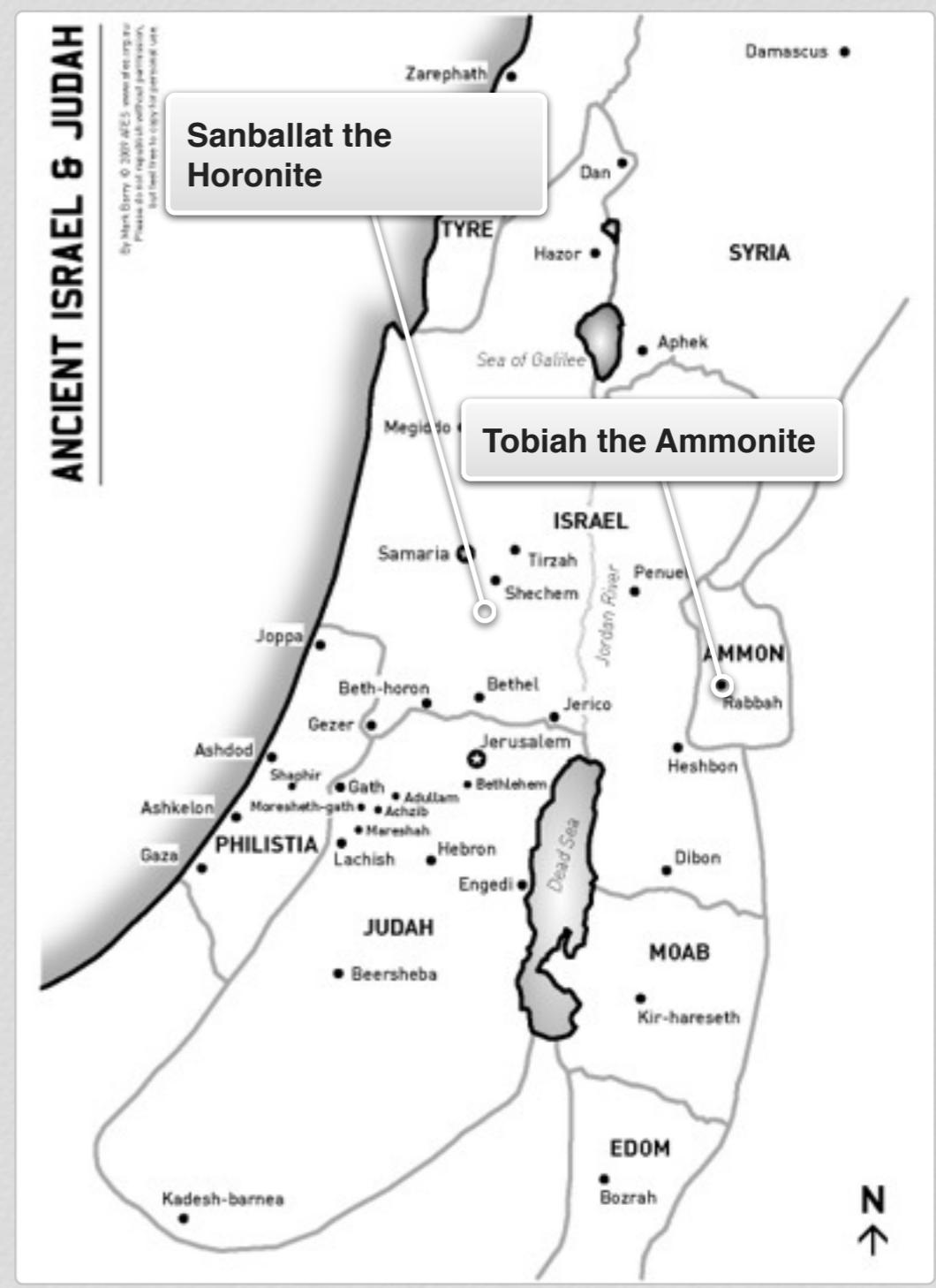
However that is not to say that there is nothing that now marks out the people of God. Where once it might have been walls, now it is the presence of the Holy Spirit.

As we read Nehemiah we see the effect that the word of God can have on transforming the cultural, religious and personal lives of the people. Similarly in our day we can expect to see the same effect on our churches; not because we have walls to protect us but because have the presence of the Holy Spirit altering our desires.

## Nehemiah helps us respond to opposition.

The 2 main instigators of opposition for Nehemiah (Tobiah and Sanballat) where likely governors of adjoining provinces with Israelite backgrounds (see 13:4-9) and had strong connections

Graphic 2: Map of Israel



Graphic 3: The Babylonian Empire as defeated by Persia in 539AD



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with Jerusalem enjoying some political support from within Jerusalem's walls.

It is not difficult to extrapolate from this that the primary opposition to Nehemiah's rebuilding didn't come from the secular Emperor in Suza but from the very people he might have expected to receive support from; those with a Jewish heritage.

Nehemiah's strong opposition, his resoluteness to continue working, even under death threats (see 6:5-15) is an example to us of both his commitment to the cause and his willingness to self-sacrifice.

We see the opposition come in various forms throughout his life and ministry and there are various lessons for us about handling opposition, often the strongest enemies of genuine and lasting gospel growth can be nominal Christians; people who claim to be part of the covenant people but living without the word of God at the centre of their life.

## **Nehemiah helps us to recognise strong and godly leadership**

Recently there has been a movement from the United States, reflected in some parts of British Evangelicalism, to emphasise

a new kind of 'strong' leadership style that is often described as a return to biblical masculinity.

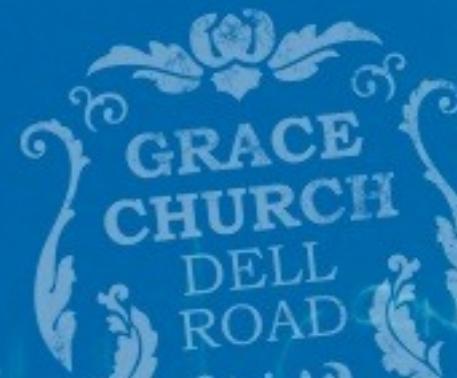
This is, in many ways a welcome shift from the shy and feeble church leadership of previous generations. However this approach might also be exploited as a pretext for bullying or even exploitation. Nehemiah gives a brilliant example of leadership in a way that honours Christ. These include:

- The way he is moved to action by a significant vision centred on a concern for the glory of God.
- His willingness to personally suffer and confront enemies.
- His determination to pray without being passive in his own responsibility.
- His personal integrity particularly with his use of personal finances.
- His concern for those who were being exploited and his willingness to confront the exploiters.
- His efficiency and effectiveness in rebuilding the walls.
- His priority for the word of God to be read and the work of the priests to be re-established.
- His concern for protecting the holiness of God's people.

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# The purpose of Community Groups

Community group leaders are discipleship midwives, you help people to grow and their understanding of the gospel flourish. You also get to see first hand how God the Holy Spirit is shaping and growing his people.

## Our foundation

Our foundation as a church is the God of the Bible is real which means it is essential that we:

## Know



Know what the Bible teaches. We believe that faith comes through hearing and to really grasp who God is and what he has done our brains are engaged in understanding. This is why we study the Bible as a central part of our community group meetings together.

## Believe



Believe what the bible teaches. Our faith is not primarily about what we know factually but also believe in our hearts to be true. This is why our community group discussion often tracks the sermon series - because we don't just want to know but also to apply. Many of the questions that follow in this study guide are directed beyond our knowledge - to our core beliefs.

## DO



Do what the bible teaches. If our faith isn't dead then it doesn't stop with our study or our words - it must be lived out in our community. This is why our bible discussion needs to end with applications - talking about the tangible differences the gospel makes to everyday life.

## Our purpose

Our purpose as a church is to help people love Jesus more and more and our community groups are the linchpin in this as we learn from one another, talk through what we are learning and invite each other to pray. The end result of all our discussions is

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that we might love Jesus more and more. This is our prayer for this series.

## Our values

*Our values are welcoming, honest, growing, engaging.*

Not all our values are developed in every ministry - but community groups play a vital role in nurturing:

### Honesty

As we take time to seriously consider how the bible applies in your life. We don't just do that in mid-week meetings as we discuss the bible but also throughout the week as we open our lives up in front of each other to see each other's sin and maturity in the details of everyday things. Community groups are a safe place to share ideas, struggles and temptations and to be gently challenged to have our eyes fixed on Jesus.

### Welcoming

One of the things about church life that the world outside Grace Church finds curious (sometimes attractive) is that church functions like a family where everyone is welcomed, valued, serving and involved in each others lives. Sunday mornings need not (should not?) be the first point of contact for most new people to

Grace Church. If we've got genuine Christian community then what we've got in community groups is really special (and is deeply gospel centred) and needs to be cultivated and shared with other people. The purpose of our socials should be to get to know new people better.

The aim of our bible discussion goes beyond getting the answers as a knowledge test but inviting each other to ask "do I believe this" and "how should I live it?" And I hope, therefore that many of these questions are as relevant and thought provoking to the non-Christian as the Christian.

# Nehemiah 1:1-11

## Read the passage

### Introduction

Nehemiah's concern for the Kingdom of God is so noticeable when he receives the news from Jerusalem - because the desperate situation in Jerusalem is not new! Whilst there may have been some recent attack in 1:2, the reality is the walls of Jerusalem have been in tatters for over 100 years.

The cause of Nehemiah's woe is a spiritual realisation of the disgrace of his people and the impact on the glory of God.

We also see his awesome prayer, which is in part, a model for us of how to pray in line with the glory of God. The starting point of his prayer is the greatness of his global God - which might sound arrogant for such a downtrodden nation.

Nehemiah's petition is grounded in the covenant keeping aspect of God's character regardless of the failures of previous generations.

By v11 there is a growing sense that Nehemiah is burdened to mention this to the emperor (something not to be done lightly).

The passage ends with a mention of the responsible position Nehemiah has; it is but a hint of the providence of God, similar to the story of Esther, that God has placed Nehemiah as cup-bearer to the king. The job also indicates something of Nehemiah's character; he must have been well trusted and be well known for his faithfulness to the King.

### Questions

What is it about the news that Nehemiah receives that elicits such a strong reaction from him? What does that tell us about Nehemiah's priorities? Is that surprising given that Jerusalem has been in tatters for over 100 years?

Why do you think he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed?

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Are there things over which you have wept, mourned, fasted and prayed?

Is there a difference in the priorities of Nehemiah's prayers and our prayers?

Can you give some examples of the things that ought to drive us to weeping, mourning, fasting and prayer?

Why aren't those things a priority for us? What might this tell us about our concern for the glory of God?

Look at Nehemiah's prayer, why does Nehemiah:

Address God as the 'great and awesome God'?

Remind God of his covenant promises?

Confess the sins of his ancestors?

Why does Nehemiah need to remind God of his covenant promises?

Is it ever appropriate for churches now to engage in public corporate confession of collective sin?

Nehemiah's concern is to see God glorified through his people. How is Jesus the fulfilment of Nehemiah's desire? (see John 1:18)

## Scenarios

Millie has been a Christian for a long time but she struggles to pray on her own. Generally she only prays for things about her circumstances; her work, her life situation and her friends. She is struck by the difference between her prayers and Nehemiah's and wonders what motivates Nehemiah to pray these kinds of things. What advice would you give Millie to help her pray for the glory of God?

Philip gets very angry and upset about when circumstances in his life don't go his way, and he often tells you about the things that frustrate him in life. You are concerned that he doesn't seem as concerned about the spiritual life of the church. How

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can you encourage him to see things with a concern for the  
glory of God?

# Nehemiah 2:1-10

## Read the passage

### Introduction

Nehemiah, moved by four months of prayer, his composure broken by his burden for the glory of God makes an audacious request; asking the king to overturn a previous edict (see Ezra 7:27) to rebuild Jerusalem. The significance of this request could create an alternative seat of government in the region and could therefore be seen as an act of treason.

Against expectation God grants his request, a point not lost on Nehemiah (2:8) and he asks even more audaciously for further resources to complete the building project.

Already, at this early stage, there is also a hint of the brewing opposition in the form of Sanballat & Tobiah; men who were likely governors of the surrounding districts, men who have most to lose from a resurgent Jerusalem.

### Questions

Given the responsibility of Nehemiah's trusted position, what does that tell you about his personal integrity? Would you be trusted with the life of your employer? Why? Why not?

Have you ever shown any grief for the glory of God in front of non-Christian friends, family or employers? Why? Why not?

If you had been in the same situation as Nehemiah would you have been so bold to explain your emotional state?

The request Nehemiah makes might be similar to us requesting our government to fund the planting of churches in North Africa. Why might we be cynical about the possibility of this happening? What does that say about...

our view of God?

who our enemies are?

how we are viewed within our society?

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Nehemiah is in many ways a type of Christ; giving up a position of safety and security embarking on a bold and courageous mission for the sake of God's glory (see Phil 2:5-8). Why does taking brave decisions require deep faith in God?

What prevents us from taking risks with the opportunities God gives us to speak to our friends about Jesus?

What does Nehemiah's request teach us about being willing to take risks for the Kingdom of God?

## Scenarios

Martha is shy but well trusted. Her job in the council involves her organising Birmingham Council's Christmas celebrations and she wonders whether she could involve churches in the Christmas parade. She is extremely nervous about talking to her boss to fight the corner for churches to be involved. What do you think she ought to do in the light of this passage?

Philip works on the checkout at Farm foods. He doesn't think his work is in anyway significant to building the kingdom of God. How would you help him to think differently about his work?

Emily knows of Grace church plans to church plant, and she is partly attracted by the fun of starting something new but she is terrified that it means saying goodbye to some of her longest standing friends. She's not sure she's ready to take the chance knowing it involves a good deal of personal risk. How would you advise her?

# Nehemiah 2:11-3:32

## Read the passage

### Introduction

Nehemiah travels the 800 miles from Suza to Jerusalem without mentioning the journey at all. When he arrives, he covertly surveys the walls by night and gets his first glimpse of the size of the task that awaits him.

It's noticeable that the people who "leaked" Nehemiah's plan are his own people and those in contact with neighbouring peoples. But he can't be outwardly opposed - his paperwork is in order and he enjoys the protection of the king.

The appeal to build that he gives to motivate the people is 2-fold:

The glory of God and them as a people

The providence of God in providing protection and resources.

The people gladly respond and begin to rebuild. In the background however is growing opposition. There is a touch of irony as the detractors accuse the Israelites of working without the king's consent, actually undermining the authority of the king they insist they are serving.

We might have expected the clerics to keep themselves distant from the building work (manual labour was general despised by the clerical classes) but the high priest and priests are amongst the first to get going - motivated by a deep conviction about the importance of the task. Most of this chapter is filled with people of influence humbly getting on with the job.

### Questions

From the range of people listed what do you think we learn about their collective dedication to the building project?

When Jesus called us, he called us to not be individual believers but as part of a church family (Read Rom 12:4-8). Why is it a priority in the New Testament that everyone in the Kingdom of God uses their gifts and plays their part?

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What's the motive behind those who don't get involved in the building work? Why does Nehemiah include this detail in 3:5?

What are the God given responsibilities that we carry that we find difficult and wish we could walk away from? Why does God call us to do things that we aren't always gifted or find easy to do?

Often we (unhelpfully) divide up parts of our life that are 'spiritual' from those that are 'temporal' and give special value to our ministry roles. How do the actions of the Priests and the high priest change how we ought to see the ordinary things in life?

What do we see in Jesus' ministry that teaches us about how to be involved in Kingdom work that is often costly and hard?

How do Nehemiah's motivations to serve challenge our motivations for the things we're involved with at Grace Church?

## Scenarios

Mario has recently come to Grace Church from a large church where all the ministries in the church were run by paid professionals. It was slick but the congregation weren't encouraged to be actively encouraged in discipling one another and pointing each other to Christ. How might you help him think through a more biblical model of service? How might this change his involvement in Grace Church?

Lydia gets frustrated by the fact that no one seems to notice all the hard work she puts in at Grace Church serving in Creche and helping out with the tea and coffee. Not only do people appreciate her she isn't that sure that these things don't really seem to be achieving anything. How does this chapter help her to see her work through God's eyes?

# Nehemiah 4:1-5:19

## Read the passage

### Introduction

The passage starts with growing ridicule from Sanballat and Tobiah probably because they feel helpless and see the speed with which the repairs are going ahead. The real heart of opposition isn't just surface frustration: it's a realisation that the gospel is a threat to how they live. Sanballat probably had a significant army at his disposal - but he couldn't use it because Nehemiah had official sanction from the king.

Nehemiah's response to these threats is both prayer and remarkable persistence. We see in v9 Nehemiah avoids either self-reliance or passivity. Just because God is with you doesn't mean you don't suit up for the fight.

The other growing threat in this chapter come from within; discouragement and fatigue (4:10-11) & gossip/propaganda, (v12) that demoralises because of the very real threat.

Nehemiah responds with more perseverance and planning (v13-23) with people placed in most vulnerable positions with weapons. Nehemiah's "Remember the Lord!" speech (v14) is very like Deuteronomy 20:1-4, designed to address the issue of fear and it is immediately effective in 4:15. What drives Nehemiah's confidence is that (v20) "Our God will fight for us."

In the context off great difficulty in chapter 5 we also start to see the commitment of the people to this project. This also creates and opportunity for disunity:

- 1: Families who may have owned no land and yet had to eat;
  - 2: Those mortgaging their land, farms, and/or homes in order to get food,
  - 3: Those borrowing to pay the king's taxes (v4-5). Some of their family members were in debt-slavery because of this hardship.
- This costliness leads to anger (5:6) because what point is there for the building project if the people are already failing to live as a genuine covenant community with people being exploited?

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Nehemiah responds by directly challenging those who are in power. and demands a genuine change of heart.

In contrast to the unscrupulous lenders of 5:5 this passage also exposes Nehemiah's financial integrity. This marks out his integrity in contrast to both the wealthy of Israel and the other governors and establishes himself as a type of Christ; a leader who serves not exploits.

## Questions

From the whole passage what do you think motivates Tobiah's and Saballat's anger?

What do you make of Nehemiah's prayer in v4:4-5? Do you think Christians should pray this kind of prayer? You might find it useful to read both Rom 12:17-21 and 2 Thess 1:6-8.

When Jesus was opposed, what was his response (Luke 23:34)? Why is opposition to the mission of the church to be expected? What ought our response be? What can we learn from Nehemiah's response in 4v9 and 4v19-20?

Where do you most expect opposition to come from? Where do the different threats to the building project come from in chapters 4 and 5?

Do you recognise the threat of fatigue in the ministry roles God has given you? How can you overcome that fatigue?

Do you think Nehemiah is right to get so angry in 5:6? What is similar with the indignation Jesus has in Matt 21:12-13? When the people of God exploit one another; what does that say to those on the outside about what we really love?

Nehemiah is a wonderful example of a leader who desires integrity in 5:14-19. Why does the behaviour of our leaders (especially their relationship with money) matter so much? What does it expose about the heart? (See also 1 Peter 5:2)

How do you use the power that you have, over your children, employees, friends? What does this tell you about the degree to which you really have embraced the gospel?

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Who are the people we might be likely to exploit? Either by misusing their time, energy or financially?

Younger christians?

Leaders?

Mission partners?

just as tired. What would you suggest to her to point her to her mission in Christ?

## Scenarios

Ed is under pressure at work. When he started the job he was convinced that it was the place God wanted him to work but everyday feels like a battle ground. The guys in the office talk about sex so explicitly he often feels awkward. His boss is frustrated that he won't 'massage the numbers' to clients to boost their earnings. When he tries to explain why he's concerned to be ethical his boss just scoffs at him and humiliates him in a meeting. What does Nehemiah 5 & 5 says to Ed?

Helena struggles to be a mum - she knows that being a mum is a God given ministry and she knows some people are jealous of her life. But she feels fatigued by the mission. Being a mum is hard; her children push her to breaking point, she never feels competent, and she feels guilty for saying it - but sometimes she wants to give up. Even her recent holiday left her feeling

# Nehemiah 6:1-19

## Read the passage

### Introduction

As the walls near completion the strategies to discredit or intimidate Nehemiah are at their most intense. There is a big emphasis on fear throughout the chapter (see v9,13,14,19).

V16 is the culmination of the first part of the book marking a wonderful victory for God and his people.

In v1-9 Sanballat seeks a "consultation", a bit like a Mafia boss, but Nehemiah perceives what's going on and persists building, ignoring Sanballat's threats realising the heart of the threats.

The interjected prayer in v9 exposes the true nature of Nehemiah's strength! It is precisely because he relies on THE King

that demonstrates that he doesn't believe he is a King (as accused).

Shemaiah's intent in v10-14 is to get Nehemiah to be discredited. But Nehemiah again discerns what is going on and it is Shemaiah, not Nehemiah who is discredited.

V15-16 are an astonishing witness to the work that God has completed. Part one of Nehemiah's mission is now complete and it is so evident that even the enemies can see that God has prevailed!

The building now complete part 2 of the book begins from v17. We generally think of Nehemiah being about the building of walls, but from now on the focus is on the spiritual health and purity of the people as the city is repopulated.

### Questions

What are the different threats to Nehemiah that we see in this passage? What do you think they are each designed to achieve?

How is Nehemiah different to Adam and Eve in Gen 3:1-5?

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When Jesus is threatened by Satan in Matt 4:1-11 what is his consistent response? What does this teach us about how to handle threats from enemies?

What are the typical threats that Christians receive to keep us from completing the work God has given us? What is your normal response to intimidation?

Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to weigh someone's motives; what helps us discern the truth in situations like this?

V15-16 marks an brilliant victory for God's people; the ruins that have laid waste for 150 years have been repaired in 2 months! Yet this victory is tiny in comparison to the victory won for us in Christ and the millions of Christians around the globe. How should we reflect on Christ's completed work on the cross for us?

Even though the building work is complete the threats and intimidation continues - what is different in Tobiah's tactics v18-19? Why might this be a particular concern to Nehemiah?

Why might enemies inside the church be more dangerous from those outside (see 2 Tim 2:17)?

Why won't we be surprised to meet enemies of the church working within the church? See 1 Tim 4:1

## Scenarios

Francesco always has an opinion on everything. Recently he's been angry at the community group leaders because of the timings of Sunday mornings. Behind their backs he starts to spread some gossip about them to discredit them. As he's talking to you you know you need to challenge him but he's such a strong character. What will you do?

# Nehemiah 7:1-8:18

## Read the passage

### Introduction

Once again Nehemiah's brother Hanani pops up (as he did in 1:2), this time to help in the real 'building project'; the repopulation of Jerusalem. The problem is introduced in v4; the city is built but it's empty.

The lists of names become important in establishing 2 things:

1. The continuity with what had gone before. With the names and the family lines -
2. This is an account of real history - we are witnesses a relatively small gathering of people all with a different role to play.

### Questions

Why do you think Nehemiah lists all the names of the people in chapter 7?

What does generosity of the people in v70-71 tells us about how the people saw the importance of the project.

Is Nehemiah unnecessarily harsh when prevents people in v64-65 from acting as priests?

The emphasis in chapter 7 is having the appropriate people (with the necessary pedigree) restored to the city. Why is it essential that Jesus was the perfect son of God in a way that Israel failed to be?

Ezra had likely been in Jerusalem for some years (probably 13); why has it taken so long to get a gathering of the people like this?

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Now that the people have walls to keep them safe - how does their attitude and concern for the word of God play in keeping them safe?

Why is it vital that everyone (8:2) are able to hear the word being read, and why is it vital to have people explaining it (8:8)

The walls might have offered the people a false comfort; after all it was their disobedience (not lack of walls) that lead to the destruction of Jerusalem in the past. Why is a deep and profound response to the Word of God the thing that will actually protect the people?

Why should we rejoice that we have a saviour who is perfectly obedient to God's Word?

What does this passage expose about what genuine faith and repentance looks like?

Why is Ezra's response in 8:10-11 surprising?

What did 'the joy of the Lord is our strength' mean for them? What does it mean for us this side of the cross?

## Scenarios

Sam is feeling really low at the moment. Through the teaching at church and his own bible reading he feels God has exposed some deep rooted patterns of sinful thoughts and behaviour. He feels and broken and grieved and can't see a way forward. How might these chapters help you counsel him?

# Nehemiah 9:1-37

## Read the passage

### Introduction

The people, moved by the reading of the word and having reflected on the ways that God had called and preserved the confess repentance - in a way identifying with the sins of their forefathers (similar to how Nehemiah had done in 1:6-7). In so doing they and commit themselves to a new obedience. First came the reading of the torah, and then confession and lastly worship.

There is a progression through their prayer (v6-38) from creation (v6); the call of Abraham (v7-8); the Exodus (v9-12); and the reception of the law at Sinai (v13-14); their wanderings in the wilderness (v15ff.); the conquest of the land (v22-25); the Judges (v26ff.). It reads like an O.T. highlights reel!

The emphasis throughout is God's faithfulness to his covenant promises and God goodness to undeserving humanity.

The prayer ends with a rather depressing summary of Israel's present condition. Far from being a high point of return the people are in a mess: the word has been found, Jerusalem is being repopulated, the city is secured, the temple reconstructed. Worship is continuing. Yet the people are severely oppressed.

There is no freedom and the nation is still in shame.

### Questions

As the people look over their past; how can they reflect on both the justice of God and his grace?

Why is it vital that our present experience and expectation of God is tied to his self revelation in history?

Read 1 Peter 1:10-12; what does all the story of Old Testament history actually point us towards?

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What is the response of the people as the Old Testament history is read out? As we read through the Bible what sort of response should we expect to have?

Is that our typical response to reading the Bible? Why? Why not?

Why are the people still without hope at the end of chapter 9? In what ways do we still experience the ‘not yet’ of God’s kingdom and continue to experience distress?

Why is it important to be realistic about these sufferings when we cry out to God?

## Scenarios

Naomi feels very bitter with the way her life has gone. Nothing has gone the way she expected and she feels that God is against her. How you might encourage her to lift her to the big picture of God's dealings with his people?

Nathan is a pessimist about the state of the church in the UK. As far as he's concerned a passage like this describes it's situation very accurately. The glory days are gone and we are in disgrace. He thinks that we need to prepare for the church to disappear in this country as a judgement on our sins. He questions the wisdom of wasting our energy and resources church planting given the inevitable end of the church in this country. How might you challenge his attitude through this passage?

# Nehemiah 9:38-10

## Read the passage

### Introduction

Having been moved by the word of God - the response of the people is to make a covenant with God and one another - the kind of commitments you would make to a marriage partner!

The seriousness of the covenant is underlined as it is sealed in the oath (v29) calling down judgment on themselves if they do not keep their oath.

The covenant is sealed by the names (v1-27) including both the leadership and the laity:

v2-8: People with civil responsibilities

v9-13: People with religious responsibilities

v14-27: The remaining family representatives are mentioned.

The focus of the covenant is on the separation of the people (v28). Dale Ralph Davis identifies 3 types of separation...

There is a negative separation: "from the peoples of the lands."

A positive separation: "to the law of God."

And a social separation: "their wives, their sons, their daughters."

A proper sanctification stands at the heart of how the people of God are to live in this world.

The specifics of the covenant relate to worship (primarily) in v30-39 - its interesting that the covenant promises are not vague but precise and express a desire to break with the sins of previous generations - this is holiness seen through religious, civil and personal arenas of life:

Marriage (v30) No more mixed marriages - there has to be a commitment to holiness.

Sabbath (v31) No more using foreign labour to get rich on the Sabbath - notice the concern to obey the heart of the Sabbath seen by re-establishing the jubilee.

Money for their worship (v32-33) for the long term establishment and maintenance of the temple people were committed to financing their place of worship.

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Offerings (v34-39) Everyone would bring their tithe of crops and wood. This would be particularly costly to the priests - yet is one they willingly endured.

The major concern is mentioned in v39 “We will not neglect the house of our God.” This is not just because they want a sparkly place to worship - but because they realise that the presence of God in their midst is not something to take for granted.

## Questions

It should be obvious from the building on Dell Road that the ‘house of God’ is not something that Christians now build in the same O.T. pattern! However Christians are involved in a building project; to build the church. What does this chapter show us about how to build a healthy church?

Are there areas of life where our faith feels very intrusive?

Are there areas of your life where you think God should ‘stay out of’?

What role do you play in discipling other Christians and witnessing to non-Christians? Do you regard that job as something vital?

In what ways do you find it hard to live out your faith in ‘everyday holiness’?

Why is living a distinctive Christian life not something to be ashamed of?

How does our unholiness undermine the authenticity of our claims to be followers of God? See 1 John 5:1-2.

## Scenarios

Trevor loves playing football. You’ve played with him a bit and you’re amazed at how he transforms on the field into a beast. He becomes violent, highly aggressive and his language becomes bluer than the sea! All his mates joke how Trevor gets ‘possessed’ when you put a ball in front of him. You question Trevor about this and he just laughs it off - saying; if I’m going to win these guys for Jesus then I need to become one of them.

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Annabel is relieved as she reads this passage. She's been worrying for some time that she just doesn't get on with the other mum's at the school gate. They seem a bit too 'chavvy' for her (her words) and just talk about their sex lives and celebrities. Reading this passage she feels justified in cutting herself off from them - after all that's what holiness looks like isn't it - separation?

# Nehemiah 11-12:43

## Read the passage

### Introduction

11:1-24 covers the vital ground of the 2nd half of the book; the **repopulation** of Jerusalem. It's likely that the leaders already lived in Jerusalem so the purpose of the lot-casting scheme, was to ensure a broad cross section of the community would live within the city (about 1/10th of the population of the people).

Jerusalem was supposed to be the jewel of Israel and yet the present situation was a far cry from the vision of all nations streaming to it as depicted in Isaiah 2. There are not even enough Jews living in it to make it secure. The city is only as strong as its people - not its walls!

Nehemiah doesn't force anyone to come in, but casting lots ensures that no-one can bear a grudge against Nehemiah - instead it is God's decision who returns.

Living in the city was costly (see the bleak conditions in 7:1-4). If the tallies are summed (v6,8,12,13,14,18,19), we have 3,044, so that, including wives and children ,so probably a population between 10,000-12,000.

We see the role of the Benjamites (v7-9) to rule and bring structure and order in the city. The possession of the land is significant - because it extends much wider than it had done before - this is the first sign that Jerusalem is once again a regional force that can support a wider range of territories (11:25-36)

The worship of chapter 12 (v1-26) is all about the continuation of priestly worship from the time before the exile; see

12:1-7 the priestly families & Levites at time of Zerubbabel & Joshua (536 B.C.)

12:8-9 the Levitical families at the time of the return.

12:12-21 Priests during Joiakim's time (2nd generation)

12:22-23 These are the contemporary Levites

12:24-26 Levites in Joiakim's time and following

This is all stressing the importance of continuity... basically, you have two historical generations of priests and Levites here, 12:1-9 over against 12:12-21,24-26 (with emphasis in vv. 24-26 on praise and guard duty). So we have people who are still serv-

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ing in the worship of sacrifice and praise and in the mould of previous generations of priests.

So we begin to see everything established for a re-ordered people of God: city (11:1-24); land (11:25-36); temple/worship (12:1-26).

## Questions

Why was the repopulation of Jerusalem such a big deal? What would have made it difficult?

Why does Nehemiah use lots to decide who lives in the city? Do you think it is a good way of making decisions?

What role should 'chance' have in our decision making?

In the time immediately after Jesus the continuity of temple worship is clearly and decisively broken (in AD 70). How does that change our relationship with a single earthly city? You might want to look at John 4:21-24 and Heb 12:22-24

This image of a rebuilt city gives us a tiny picture of what heaven will be like. Why do you think the image of a city is key to the Bible telling us what heaven will be like (see Rev 21:22-27)

What are the features of the heavenly city that are different from Nehemiah's Jerusalem?

If our building project isn't to rebuild a physical Jerusalem - what do you think God calls us to build now 2 Peter 2:4-5?

How does that change our approach to church buildings?

How does that help to understand our present mission?

Our mission is very different to Nehemiah because the ministry of the Spirit doesn't call us to gather in an earthly city - but sends us out into the world (See Acts 1:7-8). Do you see your daily role in life as being on mission? Why, why not?

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Why is it appropriate to be optimistic and have an expectation that the global church should be growing and the people of God to be increasingly populated?

How might that kind of optimism shape how you see your role tomorrow morning with friends and colleagues in the kingdom?

Who can we pray for - that you might have opportunities to witness about Jesus?

## Scenarios

Michael is brilliant at getting to know people. You wish you had his people skills. Michael is wonderfully confident at chatting to people, until it comes to mentioning Jesus. He insists is not that big-of-a-deal since he's not called to be an evangelist. Besides, he says, God calls who he wants - none of my friends seem to be called. What do you say?

# Nehemiah 13

## Read the passage

### Introduction

By 12:47 Nehemiah's mission seems to be going rather well. Until other problems again seem to creep in:

**Compromise:** (13:4-9) Elishab (probably connected to Tobiah through marriage) gives Tobiah a big room in the temple. Nehemiah needs to sort this out when he returns. Its not dissimilar to Jesus storming the temple.

**Neglect** (13:10-14) - the promise of 10:39 is almost completely forgotten within a couple of years, their hearts are cold.

**Sabbath, work and money** (13:15-22) - again one of the features that should keep them distinct - time to rest in God is going neglected.

**Disunity** (13:23-27)

The book of Nehemiah finishes in a discouraging way as we begin to see the inauthenticity of their covenant faithfulness. It seems that money and convenience still draw the people of God away from their primary mission.

For us it encourages us to consider what makes for a genuine 'religious experience'? Is it that we were moved once at a conference - or is it seen in everyday (seemingly boring) holiness? The people in Nehemiah had a rousing religious experience, but without the power of the Holy Spirit it gives way to compromise in no time at all. We need to treasure 'boring' everyday holiness as the mark of genuine renewal by the Spirit's power.

### Questions

Why does Nehemiah make such a big deal of Tobiah's role in the temple? Why does this symbolise serious disobedience? You might want to see the similarities with Matt 21:12-13.

What would be a comparable situation in the church today? Is this about who is allowed to use our church building - or more about who is considered to be an authentic member of the church? See Acts 5:3-6

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In what ways are you tempted to give up obedient Christian living in the ‘ordinary’ things of life; e.g. work, parenting etc?

Given the promises the people made in chapter 11 about not intermarrying - what causes the change of heart now?

Are you as committed to fighting sin on your life as, say, studying the bible?

Why does it matter that our holiness is more than just ceremonial but everyday practical?

How do we need to do battle with sin as a church family? Paul warns the church of the dangers of being influenced by pagan practices in 2 Cor 6:14-15. In what ways is Grace church at risk of being influenced away from godliness?

How does the bible alert us to sins that we were previously blind to?

What keeps us from altering one another to the dangers of ungodliness?

## Scenarios

Leo has been in your community group for a few years. You get on well with him and he is one of your closest friends. However you’ve noticed that he talks a lot about money. He occasionally makes comments that make you think he ties people’s worth to how much they earn. He also always has a new car, a flash lifestyle - but you know that’s he’s pretty cynical about giving his money away. You want to challenge him about it - but you feel it might risk your friendship - besides; is it really that serious?

Henrietta has been in your community group for a long time. She’s had a number of serious boyfriends but is in between relationships at the moment. She tells you that she’s been flirting with a guy at work. He isn’t a Christian but she feels quite tempted to pursue a relationship with him - afterall, in her mind, its not a sin to go on a date!