

Introduction

We are made to love stories—and Nehemiah draws us into a powerful one. It's a true story, all about God's faithfulness to His people and the call for their faithful response to Him. As Nehemiah leads the returned Jewish exiles to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, it is clear God is watching over His people as He promised in His Word—and calling them to walk in the light of His Word.

To get into this story, we need context. The Book of Nehemiah is not just about a leader who masterfully accomplishes the rebuilding of Jerusalem's broken-down wall. Nehemiah's people and city have a history. These are the people to whom God has made promises that reach back to the beginning of the biblical story. The promises also reach forward, all the way to us today. The Book of Nehemiah tells a crucial part of the story of redemptive history—our history, as Christians saved by the promised Christ who in the fullness of time was born of this people's seed. Nehemiah's restoration of a worshiping people tells our story, for the Old Testament system of worship points straight ahead to our Lord Jesus, through whom we have access to God. We must take this story personally. I pray that during this study, whether done individually or collectively in small groups, God will help us get ready to take it in.

Running up to the study series you might find it helpful to read through the first 6 chapters of the book of Nehemiah in one sitting. It only takes 28 minutes to do so. This gives you the big picture of the story.

This book attempts to incorporate two elements. Firstly, is the knowledge of Scripture; we must listen carefully to the Bible. It is faithfulness to the ancient Word that prompts us to have a sensitivity to the modern world. In your readings and as you study the Word in your small groups, I pray that you will meet the God of Nehemiah. Secondly, you will see stories of people who live in Gillingham who are in the process of rebuilding contemporary metaphorical walls, and as you read their testimonies, I want to encourage you to pray for their frontline. Furthermore, I have asked eight people in our congregation to share something about their prayer lives as part of the "parkbench conversations" we have in our Sunday morning services.

These are the eight different ways of praying we will explore;

Naturalists: Praying Outdoors

Traditionalists: Praying through Liturgy, Ritual and Symbol

Ascetics: Praying in Solitude and Simplicity

Unction: Praying with a Burden

Prophetic: Praying through the gift of Prophecy

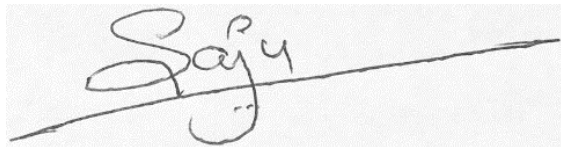
Enthusiasts: Praying with Celebration

Contemplatives: Praying through Adoration

Intellectuals: Praying with the Mind

These are by no means comprehensive but mere starters. I pray that as we immerse ourselves in the Word and explore various ways of praying that what we learn will nourish our prayer lives as we seek God's heart to rebuild, restore and revive.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Saju". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends across the width of the signature.

Rev Saju Muthalaly

Tips for Small Groups

Although you can use these notes for personal study, we encourage all members at St. Mark's to join a small group. They are the place we can build deep, long-lasting friendships to grow spiritually and to offer pastoral support to one another on a regular basis. Speak to Amanda Maskell or Pauline Jackson if you would like to consider joining one.

A small group is a dynamic thing. One week it might seem like a group of close-knit friends. The next it might seem more like a group of uncomfortable strangers. A small-group leader's role is to read these subtle changes and adjust the tone of the discussion accordingly.

Small groups need to be safe places for people to talk openly. It is through shared wrestling with difficult life issues that some of the greatest personal growth is discovered. But for the group to feel safe, participants need to know it's okay not to share sometimes. Always invite honest disclosure, but never force someone to speak if he or she isn't comfortable doing so. (A savvy leader will follow up later with a group member who isn't comfortable sharing in a group setting to see if a one-on-one discussion is more appropriate.) Have volunteers take turns reading excerpts from Scripture. The more each person is involved even in the mundane tasks, the more they'll feel comfortable opening up in more meaningful ways.

The leader should watch the clock and keep the discussion moving. If you've had a fruitful discussion, it's okay to move on without finishing everything. And if you think the group is getting bogged down on a question or has taken off on a tangent, you can simply say, "let's go on to the next question."

Finally, soak your group meetings in prayer—before you begin, during as needed, and always at the end of your time together.

Nehemiah 1:1-4 - A Dislocated Heart

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

Discussion Questions

- What did you think of the 24/7 Prayer Encounter earlier in the month? How did God speak to you? In what ways is your prayer life renewed as a result?
- Think of a recent situation in your life that caused you to go to God immediately in prayer. Share what happened as a result of your prayer and action.
- Read the whole of Nehemiah 1.
- Nehemiah was a man who felt passionately about an issue. Who was Nehemiah? What impression of him as a person do you get from this first chapter? What was Nehemiah's burning issue? Why was it so important to him?
- What did Nehemiah do about his passion? What cost was he willing to pay?
- What are you passionate about, if anything? If you can't think of anything, why do you suppose that's the case?
- How can you follow Nehemiah's example as you deal with things you're passionate about?
- What is one thing you can do this week about an issue you feel passionately about?
- What do Nehemiah's actions tell you about his character? How would you describe Nehemiah's relationship with and attitude toward God?

Nehemiah 1:5-11 - A Broken Spirit

Then I said:

“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king.

Discussion Questions

- Why did Nehemiah “remind” God of the promises that he had made to Moses?
- Why would Nehemiah’s position have been an asset in improving the situation?
- What is the relationship between “prayer and action”? In what ways can we learn from Nehemiah in the way he prays and acts?
- If God knows all our fears, desires and needs, why does he want us to pray about them?
- In what ways has prayer changed your attitude towards a difficult situation you were facing?
- What ingredients of Nehemiah’s prayer do you want to add to your own prayer life?
- Set aside time to pray specifically for a task or situation in your life where you are seeking God’s guidance and help.

Nehemiah 2:1-3 - A Radical Faith

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

Discussion Questions

- What is faith? See Hebrews 11.1 for one definition.
- Bearing this verse in mind, who do you consider to be a person of great faith? Why?
- What can we learn about godly leadership from the fact that Nehemiah started praying in December (Kislev; 1:1) but approached the king about Israel in April (Nisan; 2:1)?
- Nehemiah had a passionate desire to return to his people and rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Carrying out this dream required faith. What was the evidence of Nehemiah’s faith?
- In what ways had Nehemiah backed up his faith by being prepared for a moment of opportunity?
- Share with each other areas of life where you are having to exercise faith.
- What are some bold requests you have made in the past that you have seen God answer?
- In what ways have the testimonies of others about prayer helped you trust God?
- Pray boldly for each other.

Nehemiah 2:4-8 - A strategic plan

The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

I also said to him, “If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?” And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.

Discussion Questions

- What logistical things did Nehemiah need to see happening in order to accomplish his dream?
- Why did Nehemiah have to exercise his faith by waiting?
- What risks was Nehemiah taking by asking the king for approval to leave his post?
- Nehemiah trusts in God’s Word—ultimately in God’s promises to bless his people and through their seed, to bless all the nations. That trust shaped his action. How does God’s grace in the life of this ordinary man personally challenge you to take action today in light of God’s Word?

Nehemiah 2:9-16 - A Personal Commitment

So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

Discussion Questions

- Find and reflect on the references to “hand” and “hands” in Nehemiah 1–2. What truths does the narrator of the book of Nehemiah want to be sure to emphasise?
- What characteristics of Godly leadership do we see in Nehemiah throughout chapter 2?
- What can we learn about working with a difficult authority from Nehemiah's interaction with the king? What makes it so difficult to honour and be patient with a bad authority figure? How can we practice patience and honour in such situations?
- What groups of people did Nehemiah challenge? Why?
- How did Nehemiah deal with his enemies' ridicule?
- What are some of the challenges you are praying about?
- What do you need to do to be ready to help make the answer to one of those requests happen?

Nehemiah 3 - A United Team

Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zakkur son of Imri built next to them.

The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired the next section. Next to him Meshullam son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs, and next to him Zadok son of Baana also made repairs. The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.

The Jeshanah Gate was repaired by Joiada son of Paseah and Meshullam son of Besodeiah. They laid its beams and put its doors with their bolts and bars in place. Next to them, repairs were made by men from Gibeon and Mizpah—Melatiah of Gibeon and Jadon of Meronoth—places under the authority of the governor of Trans-Euphrates. Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section; and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, made repairs next to that. They restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. Rephaiah son of Hur, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section. Adjoining this, Jedaiah son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house, and Hattush son of Hashabneiah made repairs next to him. Malkijah son of Harim and Hasshub son of Pahath-Moab repaired another section and the Tower of the Ovens. Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.

The Valley Gate was repaired by Hanun and the residents of Zanoah. They rebuilt it and put its doors with their bolts and bars in place. They also repaired a thousand cubits of the wall as far as the Dung Gate.

The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of Rekab, ruler of the district of Beth Hakkerem. He rebuilt it and put its doors with their bolts and bars in place.

The Fountain Gate was repaired by Shallun son of Kol-Hozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah. He rebuilt it, roofing it over and putting its doors and bolts and bars in place. He also repaired the wall of the Pool of Siloam, by the King's Garden, as far as the steps going down from the City of David. Beyond him, Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of a half-district of Beth Zur, made repairs up to a point opposite the tombs of David, as far as the artificial pool and the House of the Heroes.

Next to him, the repairs were made by the Levites under Rehum son of Bani. Beside him, Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, carried out repairs for his district. Next to him, the repairs were made by their fellow Levites under Binnui son of Henadad, ruler of the other half-district of Keilah. Next to him, Ezer son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, repaired another section, from a point facing the ascent to the armory as far as the angle of the wall. Next to him, Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the angle to the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest. Next to him, Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired another section, from the entrance of Eliashib's house to the end of it. The repairs next to him were made by the priests from the surrounding region. Beyond them, Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs in front of their house; and next to them, Azariah son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, made repairs beside his house. Next to him, Binnui son of Henadad repaired another section, from Azariah's house to the angle and the corner, and Palal son of Uzai worked opposite the angle and the tower projecting from the upper palace near the court of the guard. Next to him, Pedaiah son of Parosh and the temple servants living on the hill of Ophel made repairs up to a point opposite the Water Gate toward the east and the projecting tower. Next to them, the men of Tekoa repaired another section, from the great projecting tower to the wall of Ophel.

Above the Horse Gate, the priests made repairs, each in front of his own house. Next to them, Zadok son of Immer made repairs opposite his house. Next to him, Shemaiah son of Shekariah, the guard at the East Gate, made repairs. Next to him, Hananiah son of Shelemiah, and Hanun, the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another section. Next to them, Meshullam son of Berekiah made repairs opposite his living quarters. Next to him, Malkijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and the merchants, opposite the Inspection Gate, and as far as the room above the corner; and between the room above the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and merchants made repairs.

Discussion Questions

Nehemiah 3 paints a beautiful picture of God's people fully engaged, working side by side to rebuild the Jerusalem wall. The task required all the people, with their various skills. Similarly, every Christian has a ministry and particular gifts needed for the building up of the church.

- What ministry has the Lord given you during this season of your life, and how are you using the gifts he has given you? Give thanks for a couple of people whom you're glad to have beside you.
- Has God ever put you in areas of service where you did not feel equipped or did not like the job? What was the result of that scenario?
- How did Nehemiah determine who would work where?
- What work is God giving you to do? (Your work might include things you have been doing for some time, and/or something new. If you don't know how to answer this question, it could be something to pray about.)
- What goes through your mind when you think about what God has given you to do or what He might be giving you?
- Pray for each other's frontline and workplaces.

Nehemiah 4 - A Courageous Soul

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?”

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!”

Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem’s walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.”

Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.”

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”

Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.

From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day." Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

Discussion Questions

How do Godly leaders battle discouragement? Jesus was weary unto death (Matt 26:38). Elijah prayed that he would die (1 Kings 19:4). Even Moses asked that God would take him (Num 11:15). It is impossible to live life and not encounter discouragements. Chapter 4 could be called the discouragement chapter. Nehemiah encounters many discouragements while leading the rebuilding project of the Jerusalem wall. In fact, after the wall was halfway done, all the discouragements and attacks got worse (v. 6-8). Sanballat and Tobiah corralled an army to attack the Jews while they were working, but, by God's grace, Nehemiah inspired the Israelites to defend themselves and to continue working on the wall. What discouragements did Nehemiah experience in chapter 4?

- What can we learn about battling discouragement from Nehemiah's responses?
- The rebuilding work met with serious opposition, as Nehemiah 4 vividly portrays. What stands out to you about the way God's people responded to this opposition? What are some unhelpful ways they might have been tempted to respond, but didn't? We too face serious opposition as those who identify with Jesus Christ. The New Testament everywhere affirms the cost of following Jesus in a hostile world. Read

1 Peter 4:12–19. How does this passage encourage you toward perseverance and joy in the work of ministry?

- In what ways have you seen or experienced the increase of spiritual attacks while doing the will of God?
- Why is it important to bring criticism and discouragements to God first in prayer?
- Who do you share your discouragements with? How often do you use corporate prayer as a remedy for discouragement? How effective is it?
- In what ways does the enemy try to make you stop or slow down in doing God's work by bringing discouragement? How can we practice being more devoted to the ministry God has given us even when facing discouragement?
- What kinds of opposition do we as believers face today?
- How do you typically respond to opposition to the work of God?
- How do you think God would like you to respond?

Nehemiah 5 - A Generous Hand

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil."

"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

Remember me with favour, my God, for all I have done for these people.

Discussion Questions

- What are some examples of selfishness you've observed this past week?
- Read Nehemiah 5. What were the people's complaints that reflected selfish interests? What did people want to be done differently?
- Who were the opportunists in this situation? How do you know?
- In Nehemiah's day, the people with money had the power to take advantage of others, and the poor people were devalued. What parallels to this situation are there in our society today?

Jesus was angry when he went into the temple. He made a whip and turned over the tables of the money-changers (John 2:14-16). To some, this might seem strange of, even not Christ-like, but this was actually an example of righteous anger. He was angry at sin and therefore sought to bring righteousness. We need righteous anger in order to correct sin in our lives, our churches, and our nations. We need it to fight injustices like poverty, trafficking, and racism in society. We should have righteous anger about sin, not to cause problems, but in order to help bring righteousness. How do we discern if our anger is righteous like Nehemiah's?

- What can we learn about conflict resolution from Nehemiah's response to the conflict in Israel and how can we apply these principles?

- How do we develop a righteous anger towards sin against God and others? How do we start to practice gentleness when personally offended?
- Who are the wise counsellors that you communicate with, especially in a potential conflict? How have they helped guide you in the past?
- Why does Nehemiah share that he and his brothers are also lending the people grain (Neh 5:10)?
- How can you emulate Nehemiah's response?

Nehemiah 6.15-7.4 & Nehemiah 8.1-8.12 - A Wall Finished & Word Read

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.

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.

Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shekariah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah. Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do. I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."

Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt.

Nehemiah 8.1-8.12

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Discussion Questions

- When has God's Word particularly touched you or helped you in a powerful way? Describe a time when you have experienced conviction and grief from a truth you read in Scripture.
- We read Nehemiah's people had a powerful experience with God's Word too. Why do we need to understand the Word in order for it to be effective?
- After the Levites read, taught, and explained the Word, how did the people respond? Why did they respond that way? When someone mourns or grieves, it is usually over the loss of something. What did the Israelites realise they lost when they heard God's Word?
- As God's people gathered, they listened attentively to God's Word and to God's servants, the Levites, who helped them understand. Trace that word 'understand' through Nehemiah 8. In what ways do you struggle sometimes with understanding God's Word? What encouragements do you find here?
- Several themes woven throughout the Bible appear in our reading - the secure city with walls, the feasting, and God's desire to dwell among his people. Our study shows how these themes will reach their fullness in the new heaven and new earth, our everlasting home. What are the ways this hope can sustain our Christian lives?

Acknowledgements

I have used the following books to put this book together:

- Carson, D. A., Nielson, Kathleen. God's Word, Our Story
- Brown, Gregory. Nehemiah: Becoming a Godly Leader (The Bible Teacher's Guide Book)
- Lucado, Max. Life Lessons from Ezra and Nehemiah
- Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Determined (Nehemiah): Standing Firm in the Face of Opposition
- Nielson, Kathleen. Ezra and Nehemiah (Knowing the Bible)

Testimonies

As Nehemiah embarked on God's mission to restore, rebuild and revive his church, and in turn, his community - here are some testimonies from Christians in Medway.

Siju Adeoye – Councillor



"My mission to my community is woven with three strands; facilitator, fixer & forward thinker. In other words, I love facilitating dialogues whether it is conversation with my neighbours or political discussion on doorsteps in my ward or lively debates in forums to commenting on trending issues on social media. I'm keen to hear wide ranging views on current affairs in our community and beyond. The study of Nehemiah we are about to embark on tells us that Nehemiah was keen to hear about issues affecting his community. I really want to hear my ward's concerns, what are the issues in people's hearts. I don't want to be a councillor that will bury my head in sand and shy away from people's issues - far from it.

"Nehemiah had a privileged position in the Palace, he took practical steps to fix the problems he cried, fasted and prayed about. Holding an elected office is a privilege where the electorate, regardless of age, gender, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation or faith, believe you will be their advocate. The question is, what one does with the information they are privy to? My desire is to be inclusive, fight injustices and help rebuild our community. It is said you don't become an effective leader by default. I say it is engaging with real issues in the real world. Many times, those issues will be heart wrenching - you feel it, it grieves you and at times moves you to tears only to stir you up wanting to do something about it. It is also said, empathy is always a healthy signpost to a purposeful direction.

"Nehemiah was an astute forward thinker. He took tours around his city, made assessments and planned how he would help rebuild his city in a set time. We are living in exciting times -

Medway is a place to live, learn, work and visit. A lot of focus has been on strategic developments of the Medway Towns into a city of culture by 2025. I've had the opportunity to tour around key major regeneration sites in our community. For me, forward thinking in my role as councillor is about investment in people's wellbeing, reviving our infrastructure and tackling climate change. I'm excited to serve and to serve well. I look forward to having lots of meaningful dialogues, evaluating services, debating and voting on policies during my term of office."

Katie Jenkins – Administrator



"When I moved back to Gillingham with my daughter after a year of being away, I knew I wanted to have her christened, but I also felt a calling to church. I felt quite drawn to St Mark's and first attended on Sunday 7th August 2016 where we were warmly welcomed and immediately included. I had a strong sense I knew this was where I was meant to be.

"From that first day my faith and church life just kept growing. Within the first ten months my daughter was christened, I attended the Alpha course where I was touched by the presence of the Holy Spirit and was a part of the prayer stream team. God just kept on opening doors for me to explore and grow. By fully opening my door to God, I was gaining an inner peace, acceptance, strength and hope for me and my daughter - a sense that no matter what everything would be okay and God would see to that.

"When the job opportunity for the administrator of St Mark's Church came up, I questioned it. I had previously been made aware there would be a position due to open at the church and I received a calling from the Lord prompting me to go for it. I prayed "Dear God, please only let me get an interview and get the job if you know I can be successful in it." Here I am fifteen months on as the administrator - still learning and having opportunities to grow, understand and to help others. God has been here for me even when I couldn't see it and He continues to be. Through Him, all things are possible."

Paul Smith – Foodbank Manager



"As a Christian I really feel the need to help people, I feel God has given me a real love for people, but I guess like some I wasn't sure where my gifts or skills were in relation to do this. Because of my condition (c5-6 Tetraplegic/wheelchair bound) I rely on people's help to get me through the day and never thought I would be able to help others.

"I wanted to give something back. I really wanted to help people in some way. I prayed about it, and a short time later Foodbank was being discussed at St Mark's Church and they were looking for volunteers. Someone suggested to me that this could be something I might be able to help with, so I volunteered and was given the role of adviser / St. Mark's representative.

"As an advisor you get the opportunity to sit down and talk to people and listen to them to find what their crisis is, then you can signpost them to the right organisations and charities who might be able to help. This also gives you the opportunity to pray for people, to let people know that they're not alone and there are people around that do care for them, love them and really want to help. This is also a great opportunity to talk about God (not in a pushy way but how as the Spirit leads) and to invite people to the various activities we hold at church and to our service on Sunday morning.

"My reason for volunteering was to give something back to try and help people, but it ended up given me back so much more. Sometimes God rewards us when we don't expect it."

Christine Cordle - Children's Worker



"God has a plan! We don't always know the plan and we don't always like the plan as we walk the path. However, God assures us that He knows the plans He has for us, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us a hope for the future (Jeremiah 29:11).

"My most recent journey began in 2013 when I felt God's call to return to England to look after my mum and be involved in children's ministry. I didn't want to leave my children, my grandchildren, my ministry, my friends, but the call was clear. God spent the next four years preparing me for the road ahead. In 2017 I returned to England and took a job as District Nurse. The change was hard, I was glad to be close to my family and help my mum when needed, but there was something missing, I just didn't know what. I felt distant from the church, and as I worked during most weekends, distant from ministry. The plan wasn't what I dreamed or hoped it would be.

"Last year whilst on a mission trip God spoke to me again and told me I would be in full time ministry. I was confused, but three times He confirmed this to me through three different people. This is the hope I clung to when my life was turned upside down and every plan I thought I had was called into question. I knew God had a plan but I had no idea how that plan would take shape.

"God showed His love and hope through the people He placed in my life. I no longer felt distant from the church; it had become my lifeline. I had become involved in children's ministry and loved the children, teachers and families I served. I knew God's plan was not my plan, but I felt a peace that God can use all things for good.

"The beginning of this year I was told about a job at The Family Trust by two different people who told me they thought I should apply for it. It was later confirmed by a third person. I decided to apply and leave the outcome to God. I began work at the Family Trust at the beginning of July.

"I still don't know where God will lead me. I don't feel like I have arrived at a destination, but I am walking a path God has laid out for me. Each step of His plan teaches me something I need for the next step of the plan. I have learned I don't need to know where the end destination is. I need to trust that God's timing is perfect and He does indeed know what is best for me. My job is to listen and to be obedient to God's call."

Alastair Williams – Teacher



"Becoming a teacher is one way I serve on a daily basis. I have been a teacher for 10 years. In my current role I am the school SENCo (additional needs co-ordinator) and Designated Safeguarding Lead which means I support in the day to day child protection within the school. Ultimately as well as teaching I work with young people and their families to ensure the young people make great progress academically and socially.

"God has called me to teaching because it enables me to give back, share with and guide young people through the education system. My role in the school community is to give hope, reassurance and a supportive hand through their time at school. At times this is difficult as the path going forward is not one families had expected, but through God's blessing it is one I have been able to guide them through."

Alice Digman – Physiotherapist



"The story of how I came to Medway is a "God story" essentially. I applied for a job at an NHS Trust that was not in Medway and I accepted a job there. About a month after that, I got an interview at Medway Hospital. Since I already had a job offer, I only decided to go to it for interview practice. But I really liked the team and it felt really friendly. I was offered a job there about a week later and I declined it initially because I already had one. But the lady on the phone was nice and told me about all the things Medway has that other Trusts don't and she gave me the weekend to think about it.

"Then at the weekend I made a pros and cons list, my pros list was really long for taking the other job, the cons list for Medway was really long. But there was some reason I hadn't said a definite no. There was a reason that I felt I should consider the job at Medway and maybe I was being called there. I moved here knowing nobody in the area and just starting a new life here because of what everyone around me thought was a stupid decision.

"There are so many lovely people that work in Medway Hospital. It's amazing how many are Christians, sometimes you don't know they are, but they just come out of the woodwork. Being in a place where you face difficult situations has taught me how to lean on God. It's given me the opportunity to have important discussions with people about God and about suffering, life, death and I'm really blessed that God put me in a position where I can do those things.

"I have seen God working in Medway. I've seen the Foodbanks, refugee soup kitchens and even in a place where a lot of people consider the Medway towns to be quite a rough area, where lots of people are addicted to drugs and alcohol, you can find God, you just have to seek him. It's very easy to say God is not here, but when you take that step back, you can see him everywhere.

"When Nehemiah saw Jerusalem, he saw the ruins of the city destroyed by the Babylonians. Just as Jerusalem was in physical ruins, our country and communities continue down a path of spiritual ruin, with a lot of idolatry of money and power. We can start taking steps to rebuild the walls from Nehemiah. The first thing Nehemiah does is pray for his nation, for himself and for the sins of his forefather. This is a great starting point for us in Medway. It's important we learn how to pray for our community, spiritual review, faith in the darkness and for Jesus to be present. The second thing is that we make the visions of our lives to bring Christ to Medway and make that the heartbeat of our families. Walls aren't built top down, they're built bottom up. We must teach our children of that vision and make that the vision for their lives and their communities, so we can see in God in Medway more.

"God works in my life in many ways - moving to Medway was just one of those ways. Another way was meeting my partner. I wasn't looking for a relationship when I came to Medway but I was searching for a church and I happened to meet him at a young adults group. We really hit it off and we didn't consider becoming boyfriend and girlfriend for a long time, but God brought us together. Neither of us were looking for a relationship but because we were both seeking God, we ended up finding each other. That's a real testimony of how God gives you what you need when you're seeking him."

Ilesanmi Oyinloye – Listener



"I gave my life to Christ when I was seventeen. Since then I've been in and out of faith, but for the last nine years I've been fully in Christ. Then after that, I would say the last four years have been a turnaround where I have really felt God's presence. Before, I did things with my own strength, and God was there, but I thought I could sort things out myself. But God said no, you need to surrender everything to me. I was in a dark place and God said that it would be my turning point. It made me appreciate people and life even better. Helping people and listening to people is my passion, that's my nature even from when I was young, my passion has been there for people, the community and the church of God in any capacity. That turning point made me realise that you need to have time for God in your busy schedule, he has done

things for you. I live every day as if tomorrow won't come, so I try and do what I call an "MOT of myself", where I look at where I've gone wrong, because we sin every day, and the next day I try and make it a new day where I learn from my mistakes. Nobody is perfect, but we are saved by his grace.

"I call myself a listener. I know my own story and I know where God has brought me out from. I listen to people and encourage them - where you think the journey has ended, it has only just started. Some people just need to be listened to, I can stay with them for four or five hours as they pour out their mind. After, I can tell them that there is somebody out there that can comfort them. Because some problems you can't solve as humans, it's only God with prayer.

"I've lived in Gillingham for seven years. When I first moved here, I was a little scared that it wasn't the right place, but through my wife, God assured us that it was the right place for us. Since then, going to St Mark's has been a blessing, we have met lovely people. But the first couple of years, being included was a bit challenging. But because I'm a shy person, if you don't come to me, I'll just stand there. God will use people in St Mark's for me and my family in times of need and even listening to me when I was down, people take time to encourage me and pray with me. I've learned from that, and through that I've learned to do that for others."

Rob Byrne – Aspiring Church of England ordinand



"I first asked Christ into my heart at the age of four and remained a very devout believer until sixth form, where my social life, partying and everything other than the Lord took precedence in my life. I went off to university and I became even more backslidden and unconcerned with my spiritual life. I still called myself a Christian – I sent arrow prayers up to God when I was in trouble, and I occasionally showed up to Christian Union on Tuesday evenings, but that pitiful shell was now the extent of what was once a thriving relationship with my maker. By the end

of my first year of study, I approached a fork in the road. I became very aware of my hypocrisy. I concluded that if I was going to continue living a secular lifestyle, I should cease calling myself a Christian altogether. Why wear the label of a faith I was making no meaningful effort whatsoever to follow? But I couldn't do it. I knew in my heart of hearts that God's grace was very real and that he was calling me back from the cliff edge. It was then that I repented for my sins and began a very long journey back to a meaningful relationship with God.

"Like the return of a mobile phone signal as you drive out of a valley, I began to recognise God's presence in my life once again. I started to study the Bible in depth again and to look for a church. I tried several types of church - a Baptist church, a Charismatic congregation and one within the New Frontiers network. I eventually settled on St Mark's, Gillingham in October 2016. Since then, God has been working in wondrous ways in my life. I have had the chance to volunteer and take lead in so many capacities in church life. I started by volunteering at the Foodbank on Saturday mornings and it was here that I discovered the key gift of pastoral care that God had blessed me with. I continued with this, as well as exploring a gift for preaching I felt I had with Rev Saju Muthalaly. I delivered my first sermon on 15th March 2018 and I felt an overwhelming sense that I should pursue ministry in some form or another from that day.

"I continued to study my MA in Journalism and after graduating, I worked for local station KMTV and the Kent Messenger newspaper. In early October, I was reporting on the killing of a mother and daughter in the village of Hadlow. It was a horrible story. But curiously, the macabre subject matter was not what made me feel out of place. It was the role I was playing as a journalist. There I was, knocking on the doors of the neighbourhood where the killings had taken place on a quiet Saturday morning, desperately trying to paint a picture of who the deceased were before their lives had been taken. It occurred to me that while the press, particularly the local paper I was working for, would keep writing about the story as the trial went on over the months to come - the community would be grappling with this appalling tragedy for an unimaginably longer time than the events would remain in the news cycle. I hated being a part of that. I wasn't any good at being a strictly impartial observer. I wanted more skin in the game than that. I knew deep down inside that I would derive more satisfaction helping a community like Hadlow in a pastoral capacity than a journalistic one. I took great interest in what the Vicar of Hadlow was doing to comfort, bless and rebuild the parish's morale in the aftermath of the heinous events. He made himself fully present, opening his church to absolutely anybody in the area who needed to encounter the Lord, or even just a person who cared in the wake of these dreadful events.

"I am not trying to cast aspersions on journalists for the difficult work they do. Having worked as one, I recognise the importance of having access to information on a right-to-know, not just a need-to-know basis. But it was that day where I had an overwhelming realisation that being a reporter was not my niche in life. Instead, I began to respond to the call God had laid

on my life. Gradually, through prayer and discussion with others in Christian ministry and my family, I became convinced that God was calling me to train as a priest in the Church of England. It was a huge eureka moment. I finally knew what God had built me for. Just as God called Nehemiah to pray for his nation and put the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls into motion, I knew He was calling me to play my part in building His kingdom here on Earth as an ordained priest. Nothing else in my life surpasses the passion I have for the Gospel. The opportunity to spread the Gospel, while serving, caring and ministering to a community, is more important to me than anything else in the world. God had given me the gifts a priest needs to exercise their ministry, who was I to defy the Lord and not pursue His call?

"Saju began supporting me in my discernment process. At the beginning of the year, a job opportunity had come up at St Mark's as 'Operations Manager & Ministry Intern'. It was a perfect God-given opportunity to immerse myself in what life as a priest in the Church of England is like. I decided that I needed to test my call, leave full-time journalism and embark on the road to full-time ministry. I got the job and I have been working closely with Saju and the team at St Mark's for more than six months now and I am feeling more affirmed than ever in God's calling for my life. Please pray for me as I embark on the next stages of this journey."