

Renewal Required

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if there was one thing in your life that you could change, one thing in your life that you could sort out, that you could fix, what would it be about you or about your circumstances?

Would it be a new job, better health, more money, more time? What would it be? I want you to just think for a moment of the answer to that question, and then just tuck it away for a moment, because we are going to come back to it a little later. This morning, we are starting a new series in the book of Nehemiah, and it's probably one of the, maybe one of the slightly less familiar books to us. So, let me just encourage you right now, straight away, over the course of the coming week, to read through it. It is a great book. There are a couple of long lists of names to get through, but even they are a key part of the good story. So, do read through it this coming week, and hopefully this morning will serve as something of a helpful introduction to the book, so that when you do read it, when you go and, not if you do read it, when you do read it, right, I'm signing up for things this morning shamelessly, when you go and read it, you'll perhaps understand something of what's going on a little better, even if we're yet to figure out the why. So, please do that this week, but let's begin this morning by getting our bearings as we come to this book together. We're going to do that by just coming straight to our first point this morning, the broken walls of God's city.

Nehemiah helpfully begins his book there by kind of, right, he sends us his location with a time stamp attached, so we can immediately know where we are. See there in verse 1, we're in the month of Hislev in the 20th year, that is the 20th year of King Artaxerxes of Persia. Now, I'm sure you already know this, but that of course means, right, it's springtime of 445 BC. You knew that already, didn't you? All right, 445 BC, which means a few things. Okay, we are deep into the timeline of the Old Testament here. In our Bibles, there's a lot more books still to come in the Old Testament, but most of those actually happened and were written before Nehemiah. So, pretty much everything you know about the history of Israel from the Old Testament, right, it has already happened when we get to Nehemiah chapter 1. It was almost a thousand years before Nehemiah that Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea to the Promised Land. Right, a thousand years. Nehemiah, looking back to Moses, is like us looking back to, right, to the Norman invasion and the Battle of Hastings.

It was a long time ago. I should say that the equivalent in terms of time, obviously, William the Conqueror and Moses were quite different. I mean, they both crossed seas. Anyway, the point is, right, we are deep into Israel's history here. A thousand years since Moses, 600 years since David's reigns. And it has been more than 150 years since the Babylonian exile. That is what Nehemiah is referring to there in verse 2, right? He asked his brother and those who had come from Judah, he asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. I mean, maybe just a quick little bit of Old Testament history to get us all to speed about what's happening there, what is Nehemiah speaking about. Maybe history isn't your thing, but this is a very important thing for understanding Nehemiah and much of the Old Testament.

After King David, who I'm sure most of us are familiar with, the shepherd king who defeated Goliath, after King David, there was King Solomon who built the temple, and then after King Solomon, there was a king called Rehoboam. But during the very earliest days of Rehoboam's reign, there was, well, there was civil war. The united Israel that David and Solomon had ruled over split in two, so that the 12 tribes of Israel were now 10 tribes in the north, confusingly called Israel, and two tribes in the south, now called Judah. The books of one and two kings, they follow the kings of both these kingdoms, and neither is particularly good.

[4 : 48] But the northern kingdom is worse, the 10 tribes in the north. God continually sends prophets to warn them. He says, you need to turn back to me, you need to come back to me, or I

will have to cast you out of the land. That is what much of the prophets at the end of the Old Testament are doing, pleading, pleading with the nation of Israel to turn back. But those warnings go unheeded, and then they go unheeded. So that eventually, the northern kingdom is exiled and dispersed amongst the Assyrian empire, and then a little while later, the southern kingdom, the two tribes in the south, they follow in the same path, a similarly tragic but just fate, as they too are exiled, this time by the Babylonians. That was the Babylonian exile that Nehemiah is referencing there in verse 2.

A hundred and fifty years before. And seventy years after that hundred and fifty years, so eighty years before Nehemiah, some people returned to a ruined Jerusalem, so that there were those who had survived the exile and were back in the city. But it was a ruined city. We read in the book before Nehemiah of the rebuilding project that began in the city of Jerusalem. The temple was rebuilt, albeit on a smaller scale than before, and work had begun on the walls. We read about that in Ezra 4, the book just before. Work had begun on the walls, but it had to be put on hold, so that by the end of Ezra, Jerusalem is starting to be put back together again, but the job is not quite finished. The credits kind of roll at the end of Ezra, with Jerusalem looking better, that there's a temple, that there are the beginning of some walls, but they're not yet finished. Jerusalem is coming together again, but it still looks a little tattered. On the page before Nehemiah 1, that the credits begin to roll, that the camera kind of pans down, that the screen fades to black, and then a caption appears in the middle. Twelve years later, twelve years later, we get to Nehemiah 1, the camera pans up, and we are hoping to see, right, a shining city, walls long finished, the hustle and bustle of city life moving through the gates, the great gates, the city of David restored to its former glory. That is what we hope for, that is what we hope to see, and it is what Nehemiah hoped to hear. When he asked his brothers for news from Judah in verse 2. But what he hears is something very different. Verse 3 there, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. The walls are not just unfinished, they have been broken down, the gates are destroyed. It's 150 years since the Babylonian exile, and the start of Nehemiah, I think we are meant to feel the weight of what seems like so very little change. Nehemiah himself is in the citadel of Susa. That was kind of the winter abode of the Persian kings, right, he is a thousand miles away from Jerusalem, from a Jerusalem that is looking little better than it did a century and a half earlier. [8 : 35] It is probably worth, isn't it, mentioning why this kind of slow rebuilding, or not even really rebuilding of the walls, was such a big deal. Nehemiah mourns and weeps when he hears about it for days.

Now we live in a time, don't we, where infrastructure projects do not happen quickly. I'm not expecting to be able to hop onto a high-speed train from London to Birmingham until I'm at least 50. I'm never expecting to drive on a dual carriageway all the way from Perth to Inverness, and I fully expect my grandchildren to be taking the same ferry to Harris that we are on now. Things don't happen quickly, do they? But these walls are not just a matter of kind of transport or convenience. This is a matter of national security. How well would you sleep tonight if the walls of your house were broken down and there were gaping holes everywhere? Broken walls are a catastrophic security breach. It's not the kind of thing you can look at and say, well, as long as it gets finished eventually. No, it needed to be finished yesterday. In their day, city walls were the number one defense against enemy forces. Having no wall was like going into a penalty shootout without fielding a goalkeeper. Not only were you vulnerable, you were a laughingstock. A city was defined by its walls, and here was the great city of David, the city of God, with desolated walls. So Jerusalem's walls were a very real problem.

[10 : 20] But what we learn through the book of Nehemiah is that Jerusalem's walls were not the problem. These broken walls were telling a much bigger story, and that is the story of this book.

Throughout, we will see that the walls are not the primary problem, and the repairing of the walls is not the only medicine required. As we go through Nehemiah, I think it'll be helpful to see the walls of Jerusalem as a symptom, right, of a much deeper-rooted problem. Think about, like, going to the doctor with a fever. You've got a bad cough. You've got a sore chest. And they kind of look you over, and they say, right, you've got pneumonia. What will a good physician say? They will not say, well, they just take some ibuprofen, some paracetamol for the pain, get some fluids and rest, and it'll be okay. No, they'll say, you need something to treat the underlying problem here.

That's what really needs dealt with. You need something more than painkillers. You need antibiotics. But at the same time, it would be a pretty callous doctor, wouldn't it, who would kind of prescribe the antibiotics and then say, now get out of my surgery and crack on with life. No, while the symptoms are not the main problem, they still need treated, don't they? The walls of Jerusalem are a symptom of a much more serious problem under the surface. So the walls, they're not just kind of purely allegorical. They really are broken. They really do need fixed, and it really will be a good thing if they are restored. Just like it is good when symptoms are treated, but it is just the symptom.

[12 : 08] What is at the heart of the problem is the people's heart. And in order to understand that, we don't sort of need to do a hop, skip, and a jump to the New Testament or anything like that. We just have to keep on reading.

Because Nehemiah's prayer shows us that he knows Jerusalem's walls are symptomatic of something much more serious. So let's just turn now and look at our second point this morning, the heartfelt prayer of God's servants.

In verse 4, we learn that Nehemiah is devastated by what he hears. And his prayer reveals to us what we'll see in a moment, what the underlying problem is, and why that is so serious. But his prayer, in fact, I think begins with a reminder of what the problem is not. Because Nehemiah begins his prayer by expressing his confidence in the ever-faithful God.

Just look at how Nehemiah responds to the devastating news in verse 5. He hears this tragic news, and what he says, he says, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

[13 : 36] Nehemiah's prayer doesn't begin, does it, with a complaint? He doesn't even just begin with the needs of God's people. He begins with the faithfulness of his God. God's people are facing a crisis, but God is not the reason that they are facing a crisis.

It would have been so easy, wouldn't it, 150 years later, to think, maybe God isn't up to the task here. Maybe there is something lacking in his strength, or his goodness, or his love.

It's 150 years. Maybe he isn't really for us, because surely, surely things wouldn't look this bad if he was so good.

That is the kind of question, isn't it? You often hear people ask when they're exploring or challenging Christianity. If God is God, if God is so powerful, if God is so good, then why? Why famine? Why disease? Why death? Why suffering? Maybe those same questions can crop up in the hearts of us as God's people sometimes, too.

[14 : 49] If God really was for us, wouldn't life look a little bit different right now? Wouldn't things seem a bit better? But if anyone could have been thinking that way, it would have been Nehemiah.

Nehemiah, 150 years, there is no one alive who has seen God's people safe and secure in God's city. Maybe God's forgotten about us.

Maybe he can't save us anymore. Maybe we should find another way out of this mess. But Nehemiah thinks none of those things for a moment. Because he knows who God is.

Whatever our present circumstances might tempt us to believe, God is unchanging. God is always good.

He is always and forever great and awesome, always faithful. His love is never failing. And he always hears when his people cry out to him.

[15 : 51] Let that be an assurance to you today. Draw confidence in God's faithfulness from Nehemiah's confidence in God's faithfulness.

Not for a moment did he think God was at fault. Not for a moment did he think God was incapable or unable of doing anything about Jerusalem's walls. Not for a moment did he think God did not care or was not needed.

Not for one moment. And I think part of the reason that Nehemiah was so unswervingly confident in God's faithfulness was because of his equally clear grasp on his own sinfulness.

Nehemiah knew God's faithfulness was not the problem because he knew where the real problem was. Not in God, but in him. Nehemiah moves immediately from expressing his confidence in God's faithfulness to confessing his own and God's people's sinfulness.

Verse 6. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

[17:19] Even I and my father's house have sinned. Jerusalem's wall is the symptom. Israel's sin is the underlying infection.

We might doubt God's faithfulness when we lose sight of our own sinfulness. When we think we are good or even just not that bad, we will quickly think we deserve better, we should have more.

But as soon as Nehemiah hears of the broken walls, he bows his head and bends his knees.

Nehemiah knew straight away what the walls were preaching.

And I think the depth of language Nehemiah uses helps us to see that he understood the depths of sin. Verse 7. We have acted very corruptly against you.

He's not saying, is it, we've made a few mistakes here and there, but on the whole, we've not done too badly. No, he says we have acted very corruptly. Very corruptly and have not kept the commandments, the statutes and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

[18:38] Now, I wonder what comes into your head when you think of those who have acted very corruptly. What kind of person do you picture when you imagine someone who has not kept God's commands?

Not what kind of person pops into your head. Well, just look down there for a second with me at verse 11 and see how else Nehemiah describes those, including himself, who have acted very corruptly.

Nehemiah says there, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servants and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name.

Those who have confessed to have acted very corruptly are not a different category of people from the servants of the Lord who delight to fear his name. Nehemiah can confidently say, can't he, I delight to fear your name, I am your servant, but I have acted so very, very corruptly.

We might often, might we want to put those people into two different categories. There are those who fear God's name, there are those who serve him, and there are those who sin and act very corruptly.

[19:54] But Nehemiah says, no, that they are both me. I truly delight to fear the Lord, I am his servant, but my heart is so very full of sin.

I have acted so very corruptly. I have disobeyed. Who do you picture? What do you see when you think of someone who has not obeyed God's commands and has acted very corruptly?

The answer is that you should be picturing a mirror. I've mentioned this before, but if you want to see maturity in the Christian life, what you should see, shouldn't you get good fruit in people's lives? That is what we are seeing in Titus on our evening series. But so too, should you see an openness, an awareness of people's own sinfulness and a readiness to acknowledge that.

Confession, but like Nehemiah does here, like we have done together this morning, using these very words, reminds us, doesn't it, of who we are, of what is in our hearts.

[21:06] Even when we delight to fear in the Lord, there is still so much sin rooted deeply in us. Now we do, I think, need to be careful and clear about exactly how we kind of carry what we're seeing here forward for us today.

Nehemiah understood that the broken walls a thousand miles away were a cause and effect symptom of the sin of himself and God's people together.

Right there and then, at this point in redemptive history, Nehemiah is making a right connection between the unfaithfulness of all of God's people together and the sorry state of their worldly affairs. Under the covenant of Moses, which Nehemiah references here, Israel were subject, the nation of Israel was subject to particular consequences.

Such as exile and broken walls because of their unfaithfulness. But that was to point people forward to the need for Jesus, showing that God's people, by their own obedience, were unable to remain in the promised land of rest.

[22:27] They needed someone to be obedient on their behalf. That someone has come. He has come in the person of Jesus, the Son of God who we're united to by faith.

With Him as our great high priest, we can come and stay in the presence of God as we do now. As we gather here this morning. I know I've tried to explain that using as few words as possible, which means, well, you've maybe not understood it and I've probably not explained it very well, but the big point of saying that is this.

While the walls then were rightly understood as a symptom of Israel's national sin, we should be very careful to think that difficult personal circumstances in our personal lives today are necessarily

a result of personal sin.

That is not to say we never fall under our Father's loving discipline. It is to say that our sin will not necessarily show itself in the same external, symptomatic way that it does here.

Because what we're seeing here, this is on a kingdom of God wide scale at a different point in redemptive history. So we need to be careful about drawing those lines kind of too directly.

[23 : 49] But here is where I think we can press Nehemiah 1 home for us today. I asked at the beginning if there was one thing in your life that you could change, one thing in your life that you could fix, one thing in your life that you could sort out, what would it be?

What do you think in your life is that the big fix that is needed? What is the thing that if it were fixed, life would be so much better, so much easier, that then everything would be okay?

Okay. What was your answer? No, I think we get a couple of things here from Nehemiah, don't we? Whatever you said, it might well be a very good thing if that was fixed, just like the walls of Jerusalem. They really were a problem.

There really was a solution that needed to happen. But what we also see here is that if it is anything external, if it is anything outside of us which can be solved by things outside of us, then that's not the biggest problem in our lives.

[25 : 06] that is not the big fix that needs to happen. Nehemiah did not begin by praying for bricklayers.

The problem is sin. The most deep-seated problem is always sin. We must see that in ourselves just as Nehemiah saw it in himself.

Like the walls of Jerusalem, there might be very real problems, very real struggle and difficulties in your life that it would be genuinely a very good thing to resolve. But whoever you are, that is not your biggest problem.

The biggest problem for every single one of us is our sin, our disobedience to God, the way we have acted very corruptly against him. Nehemiah knew that.

He knew the depths of his own sin and the sins of those around him. But the reason that caused him so much distress, the reason his own sin caused him so much distress was not because of what it meant for himself, but what it meant for God.

[26 : 31] we see thirdly in this prayer that Nehemiah's concern is for the glory of God. We have been saved by grace, we have been shown mercy in Jesus, we have forgiveness of our sin, but that forgiveness, that personal salvation, that is not at the top of Nehemiah's priority list.

He understood the sin of God's people to be so serious because of what it meant, I think, for God's glory. Having confessed to sin, Nehemiah arcs back round to God's faithfulness in verse 8, but just look there at the end of verse 9 and into verse 10.

Right, I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there. Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem and its people is founded on his knowledge that it is there amongst God's people that God's name dwells and the people are God's people.

Right, verse 10, they are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and your strong hands. This is all about God.

Now, I think part of that concern on Nehemiah's part, what was what was for the public perception of the God of Israel. Right, here was a city of the Lord and it was a sad and sorry sight.

[27 : 59] I think there is concern on Nehemiah's part for what the sin of God's people ends up preaching to the world. When the people of God's kingdom live in sin, it will bring disrepute upon the name of God.

But more than that, more than that, Nehemiah is concerned that the people's sin has hindered God being rightly worshipped by those whom he had saved, redeemed for that very purpose.

Nehemiah says in this prayer to God, doesn't he, you have redeemed your servants so that they might worship you where your name dwells.

And right now, because of our sin, that is not happening. That is Nehemiah's great concern. Not for his salvation, but for God's glory, for God to be worshipped rightly by those whom he has redeemed for that very purpose.

It would be wonderful if we could say the same thing ourselves as a church. That our greatest concern is not for ourselves, but for the glory of God.

[29 : 13] That our greatest longing is not even for our souls to be saved, but for God's Son to be praised. So what can we expect to see as we go through the book of Nehemiah?

Well, Jerusalem's walls really are broken. That really was a problem, and they really do need to be restored. But we've seen in this opening chapter that Jerusalem's walls, that is not the only thing that needs to be restored.

In fact, Jerusalem's walls are of secondary importance compared to the far greater need that God's people would be restored. Renewal is required for the walls, yes, but more so for the people.

The real problem was their sin. And that was the most significant problem because it was that sin that scattered God's people. So it was sin that stopped God's people from being able to come and worship him in the place where his name dwelt.

The need for renewal was so great because renewal was required for God to receive the glory and worship he deserved and was due.

[30 : 33] So as we go through this book, expect to see walls restored, but more than that, expect to see a people restored so that they could come and rightly worship God in his presence.

And as we do that, pray, pray this week that through this we would be restored. Not only saved, absolutely saved through Jesus, but renewed continually, dying to sin and living to Christ that we might worship, that God might receive all the glory.

So go and read Nehemiah this week and pray that in light of this series we would be constantly renewed, that our worship might be ever more glorifying to our great and awesome God.

Let us pray as we close together. Amen. O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love, we thank you and praise you for who you are, the faithful God, the ever faithful God.

Lord, we confess that we have sinned against you, that we have acted very corruptly, but we pray, Lord, that you would restore and renew us for your glory, that we might come and worship you, that we might worship you in all of our lives and make your glory known to all the earth.

[32 : 18] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.