

Nehemiah 3

Brynmawr Family Church Sermon
Stuart Wheatman, Sunday 9th May 2010

Intro-

- In Neh1 we looked at Nehemiah's godly response to terrible news- that the jews were like sitting ducks as the defensive walls around Jerusalem were broken down. We saw how he turned to prayer, held on to the promises of God and looked to see how he could be part of the solution.
- In Neh 2 we saw the huge importance of relationship and reputation in seeing our godly dreams fulfilled, looking at Nehemiah's key relationship with the King. We saw how Nehemiah had courage to share his vision, had a plan of action and how he dealt with opposition from the enemy by referring back to the mandate the king had given him.
- This week we look at the how the dream began to take shape as people set to work.

Read Nehemiah 3

The importance of the sheep gate- 3:1; 3:32

- The high priest was the spiritual leader of the people and both him and his colleagues were first to muck in and get their hands dirty. Out of all the areas they could choose to restore they chose the part where the sheep were brought through to be sacrificed in the temple. They were eager to repair this area and also consecrated it. During passover, the lambs would be inspected to make sure they were without blemish, and hundreds of them would pour through this gate representing each family.
- The account starts and ends with the sheep gate (also called now St. Stephen's gate and the Lion gate). The sheep gate for us today speaks of the sacrifice of Christ- the cross. The message of the cross must be central to our lives- it is the message of grace, through faith from first to last (see Romans 1:17- from faith to faith). The sheep gate was around the area of Bethesda- where the pool was, where Jesus healed the lame man (in fact John mentions that it was near the sheep gate in John 5:2). The name Bethesda means house of grace. The cross is where we access God's healing and grace. In his book, WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?, Philip Yancey raises the matter of Jeffrey Dahmer's conversion. Dahmer, the mass murderer, abused and murdered 17 young men. He cannibalized them and stored body parts in his refrigerator. Eleven corpses were found in his apartment. He was the epitome of the word vile. During his trial he sat serenely in court, showing no signs of remorse. In November of 1994, Dahmer was beaten to death in prison by a fellow prisoner. A documentary program was made just a few weeks before Dahmer's murder. The interviewer asked him how he could possibly commit the crimes he was convicted of. Dahmer said that these things happened before he believed in God, when he wasn't accountable to anybody. He said it all began with petty crimes and small acts of cruelty, and he just kept going, further and further. Nothing restrained him. Dahmer then told of his recent religious conversion. He was baptized in the prison whirlpool and spent all of his time now reading his Bible and Christian literature. The prison chaplain affirmed Dahmer's conversion, saying that his repentance was sincere and that he was one of his most faithful worshipers. Some find reports like this troubling. Grace for a cannibal? Our natural response is to fold our arms and say, "No, it's not that easy. God isn't going to let you off just like that, not after what you did. God is forgiving, but he is no pushover. Grace is for average sinners like us, not deviants like you." The Apostle Paul in Romans 1 lists all the horrendous crimes that 'bad' people do against God, then in Romans 2 he addresses those who think they are morally superior. Paul is thinking of one person, a man or woman who, after reading chapter 1, would say, "Wait a minute. I'm not like that. I'm not perverted. I'm not violent. I don't cheat on my spouse." It is these self-righteous moralists that Paul is addressing in Romans 2. We have all fallen short of God's standards and qualify for His grace.
- The sacrificial system was their worship of God. Worship of God must be central to our lives. Jesus is our foundation, our cornerstone- all we do is to come from a love for Jesus. Last week Dave Tucker spoke about obedience to Jesus being the true

good foundation- 'Lord I love you, help me to love you more'. One of the catalysts of the Welsh revival of 1904 was when Florrie Evans declared in front of a packed hall at an evangelistic meeting 'If no one else will say it I will- I love Jesus with all my heart'. Jesus got to the heart of the matter when He asked Peter 'do you love me?' "What establishes preeminence in the Christian community is not office, title, or territory, not the charismatic gifts of tongues, healing or inspired preaching, but only our response to Jesus' question 'Do you love Me?'" Brennan Manning (2003, *The Rabbi's Heartbeat*, p.94)

The importance of every link in the chain- 3:1; 3:32

- We noted how Nehemiah 3 starts with the sheep gate in verse 1 and ends with the sheep gate in verse 32. There is a complete circuit described going anticlockwise around the walls of the city (see picture). We are only as good as our weakest link. A P.A system is only as good as the worst lead you have. Someone may have invested huge resources on one part of the wall, but unless everyone does their part it only takes one gap for the wall to be useless. 'You are the weakest link.. goodbye!'. When Israel tried to take the promise land just one person, Achan messed up by taking plunder which God had forbidden- it led to a defeat for all the Israelites at Ai. What we do privately does have an effect on the rest of the body- sin as well as holiness effects the whole.
- Each person had a part to play in repairing the bit of wall where they lived- 3:10,23,28,29,30. The place you live, work has been allocated to you by God- you are the best person to serve God in that particular area with the particular set of skills you have. Liam Neeson in taken 'I have a very particular set of skills'. You are a specialist- use what God has uniquely given you, in the place unique to you to serve Him. You are an indispensable link in the chain of what God is doing today. Dr. Halbeck, a missionary of the Church of England in South Africa, from the top of a neighboring hill saw lepers at work. He noticed two, particularly, sowing peas in the field. One had no hands; the other had no feet. The one who wanted the hands was carrying upon his back the other, who lacked the feet. He, in turn, carried the bag of seed and dropped a pea every now and then, which the other pressed into the ground with his feet. And so they managed the work of one man between the two.
- The Church is a body, a team, and ceases to function properly if all do not give their unique contribution. Although the role of pastors and leaders is key, their role is not to do all the work- Eph 4:12 the saints are to be equipped for works of service. The pastor is late, he's forgotten the date and what will the people do then, poor things! They'll sit in the pew, with nothing to do, and sing a collection of hymns, poor things! After doing the Network Course some have had follow up meetings to discuss areas of service. If there are areas you think you can serve in come and have a chat and let's see things happen.
- All sorts of people are involved in the rebuilding- 3:8- goldsmiths, perfumers 3:12- Shallum and his daughters; priests 3:28. Viggo Olsen, who helped rebuild ten thousand houses in war-ravaged Bangladesh in 1972, derived unexpected inspiration from reading a chapter ordinarily considered one of the least interesting in the Bible: 'I was struck...that no expert builders were listed in the "Holy Land brigade." There were priests, priests' helpers, goldsmiths, perfume makers, and women, but no expert builders or carpenters were named.'" Rehoboth and Gateway building projects- families with wheelbarrows whilst cement mixer poured. Rachel and Reuben doing painting. Sarah and myself up ladders doing plasterboarding. We are an army of ordinary people. Your country needs you. What can you give towards the war effort?

Build something which lasts- the Broad wall 3:8

- A cheap brand can look the part, but not last 10 minutes compared to the real. A cheap Rolex copy may look exactly the same as a true Rolex, but will it be as good? Building takes time- great to have Elfed Godding with us- he said that on average it takes about 7 years for Church plant to settle down and really begin to grow.
- As a Church we can become obsessed with numbers. Numbers are important, but quality, not just quantity is of huge importance- the Broad wall (Neh 3:8) was a huge

piece of wall widened generations previously by Hezekiah during the Assyrian invasion. It was now of use generations later because it was built well (you can still see it today). Build something substantial and it will serve future generations also.

- The leaning tower of Pisa took 176 years to build but was never built with the right foundations for the softness of the soil. Over those 176 years many different things were done to try and compensate for the "tilt": The foundations were shored up and reinforced; the upper levels of the tower were actually built on at an angle to try and at least make the top of the tower look straight. The Tower of Pisa has continued to stand for over 800 years now; it now leans more than 18 feet away from the vertical, and still hangs on. Much has been done to preserve the building. But for all the reinforcements and enhancements that we can do to the structure -- even with all our modern technology -- one thing can never be "fixed": That is, the building can never be made perfectly straight, like it was intended to be -- at least, not without tearing it down and starting it all over again. And although the structure has withstood eight centuries of wear and tear, architectural specialists do predict that eventually the structure will have to come down because of its unstable construction.
- Grace. Relationships. Accountability. Humility. Honour. Perseverance. Lifestyle of worship.

The lesson of the dung gate- 3:14

- God sees the hard work that we do, even when nobody else does and He will reward us accordingly- Heb 6:10-12
- 'Dung, dung, dung!'. 'It's a dirty job but someone's got to do it'. 'If you think you're too big for a small job, you're definitely too small for a big job'. The nobles of the Tekoites would not put their shoulders to the work Neh 3:5, but the Tekoites themselves not only did the portion allocated to them (3:5) but did an extra stint (3:27). Sometimes Christians can run away with themselves spiritually, thinking some jobs are below them- we have to get our hands dirty to see the dream become reality. Pete Davies 'rodding' over the Rehoboth. Socials are important in building Church just as the 'spiritual' meetings- we need to fellowship together to build community, as modelled by Jesus and His disciples.
- The dung gate allocated by Nehemiah to Malchijah son of Rechab, leader of the district of Beth Haccerem. Does not say that he had any help with it. He was from an important background- his father was leader of a whole district, yet he was prepared to take on a dirty job. The dung gate was where the rubbish and 'dung' was taken out to be thrown into the valley of Hinnom, a place previously known for idolatry and child-sacrifice (Neh.11:30; Joshua 15:8; Lev.18:21; 1 Kings 11:3,5,7; 2 Kings 23:10, 13; 2 Chron.28:3; 2 Chron.33:6; Jer.32:35; Amos 5:26; Acts 7:43) to be burned. There were constant fires there. This became a picture of Hell which Jesus used to portray his warnings about Hell to the people. The ravine/valley of Hinnom is to the southwest of Jerusalem. The Hebrew phrase *gê* ("ravine of") *hinnom* became *geenna* in Greek, and Gehenna in Latin and English. So Malchijah literally had the gate to Hell to repair- what a job! His name literally means 'Jehovah is my King'. When God is on the throne of our lives we are prepared to serve, no matter what it takes.
- Luke 14:7-14- take the low seat. Matt 20:25-28- not lording over but a servant, just as Jesus came to serve. Bill Hybels has said: "I would never want to reach out someday with a soft, uncaloused hand -- a hand never dirtied by serving -- and shake the nail-pierced hand of Jesus. John Ortberg has said "Jesus took a little child in his arms and said, in effect, "Here is your ministry. Give yourself to those who can bring you no status or clout. Just help people. You need this little child. You need to help this little child, not just for her sake, but more for your sake. For if you don't, your whole life will be thrown away on an idiotic contest to see who is the greatest. But if you serve here often and well and cheerfully and out of the limelight, then the day may come when you do it without thinking, "What a wonderful thing I've done." Then you will begin serving naturally, effortlessly, for the joy of it. Then you will begin to understand how life in the kingdom works.

Summary

- Jesus and the cross to be central. Every link is important. Build to last. Serve the King.

Song- *An army of ordinary people*