

The Book of Nehemiah is a riveting tale of someone being called by God to do something amazing – and then doing it! Nehemiah is a wonderful character, full of faith, wisdom and practical common sense. Let's journey with him through these 25 reflections, and be inspired by his example.

Day 1 – Nehemiah 1:1-11 'Moved to act'

In the winter of 2010, I was living in Bristol and was asked to lead a group from church to organise the weekly Saturday lunchtime soup run for the city's homeless. I was co-leader of a 20s group at the time, and our group duly turned up one cold day in December at the gathering point near the main shopping centre. It was a couple of hours which changed my life. It's hard to put into words now, but I had a profound sense that each face I looked into as I served out the soup was the face of Jesus. It felt like holy ground.

After it had finished, I called my wife to say I was on my way home. 'How was it?' she asked. I couldn't reply – I just wept on the phone. Six weeks later, I was leading a team to help at the Wild Goose Café, Bristol's brilliant café which serves the homeless, the first evening of a regular commitment with which I would be involved for the rest of my time in Bristol.

Why did that soup run touch me so deeply? I can't really say; I had helped at a homeless shelter in the past, so it was something close to my heart – but that had been more than ten years ago, so truthfully it had not been a ministry priority for a long time. And then I agreed to help with one event.... and everything changed. I knew that in that season I *had* to act, I had to respond.

Maybe you've had a similar experience. It could be about anything – but there was a moment when something which had lain dormant in your heart suddenly awakes. It is this kind of experience which inspires the wonderful little book of Nehemiah which we begin today.

The book dates to the period when Israel has been conquered by Babylon and many Israelites are living in exile. By the time we get to Nehemiah, it is the mid-fifth century BC, in other words well over a hundred years since the destruction of Jerusalem. Several generations of exiles have lived in Babylon, 900 miles from their homeland. However, things are stirring. Fourteen years previously (458BC) Ezra the priest had led a return of the Levites and restored the religious life of the Jews (as they were now known – from the name Judah, meaning 'praise'). Word now reaches Nehemiah via one of his brothers that, although the priests are presumably still performing their tasks faithfully, the fabric of the city is in a sorry state: (v3) 'The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.'

It is unlikely that Nehemiah had ever visited Jerusalem. He was probably born in Susa, where he now served with an important job at the royal court: the king's cupbearer had to taste everything that the king was going to drink before the king did, so that if it was poisoned, then the cupbearer died, and not the king. In other words, he had every reason to just stay put and continue in his vital role.

But something stirred in him that day: (v4) 'When I heard these things I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned...' Like me, I'm sure he would have found it hard to put into words just why this news touched him so much *now*. After all, he was probably privy to updates about his homeland more than most of his fellow Jews. But this was the moment when God called him to act – and over the coming days we'll see where that deep, divine conviction led him.

Is God speaking to you about anything at the moment? If He is, then maybe this a moment to resolve to listen – wherever it may lead. And if not – pray for those facing such a call: for wisdom, courage and grace to respond, in faithfulness to our glorious God.

Day 2 – Nehemiah 1:1-11 (ii) ‘A prayer for the ages’

The famous 19th-century evangelist Dwight L Moody was once asked: ‘if you knew that the Lord was coming back in 25 years, how would you spend it?’ Moody replied: ‘I’d spend the first 20 years of that time in prayer.’

When I first read that a few years ago, I found it profoundly challenging. I am inclined to be an activist. I like to get lots of things done in a day, and find a certain satisfaction in ‘being busy’. But – as my old mentor used to ask me – am I busy, or fruitful? And what would turn the former into the latter?

There are a number of answers to that question – but you’ll have guessed what one of them is!

As we take a second look at the first chapter of Nehemiah, we need to admit that Nehemiah is rightly known as a person of action. He wouldn’t be the king’s cupbearer if he wasn’t. The rest of the book likewise makes it abundantly clear that he is someone who gets things done – usually quickly and displaying great organisational skills. Nehemiah is often used as a model for leadership, and rightly so.

But, before he is a person of action, Nehemiah is a person of prayer. His first response to the news about his homeland is striking: (v4) ‘For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.’ He doesn’t just do something, anything – he seeks the Lord. He waits on God, he prays. He needs to know what the Lord’s will is – and *then* he acts.

Nehemiah’s prayer is one of the great prayers of the bible – a model prayer, you could say. If you like to use the acronym P-R-A-Y to help you pray, then this prayer is a perfect biblical example:

P – Praise: Nehemiah begins (v5), ‘Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God...’
Nehemiah thanks God for his faithfulness, before he does anything else.

R – Repentance: (vv6-7) ‘I confess the sins... we have acted very wickedly...’

A – Ask: (vv8-9) ‘Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses... if you return to me... I will... bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

And finally, having done all that, we get to the practical prayer for himself:

Y – ‘Yourself’ (v11) ‘Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.’

It’s a wonderful prayer, and we don’t have to wait long to see what happens – the very next chapter, which we’ll look at tomorrow. But as we reflect today, may Nehemiah’s example inspire us in our prayers. It’s right to ask God for things, Jesus encourages us to do exactly that; but the central focus of our prayer is always the Lord himself. Nehemiah retains a profound awareness of the greatness of God, and this makes him both fervent and bold in prayer. May we, too, pray as he did – for whatever is on our hearts today.

Day 3 – Nehemiah 2:1-10 ‘Royal favour’

Being miserable at work is a risky business. Nowadays, those risks are probably more to do with our wellbeing and likelihood of promotion (the PIE method attributes 30% of your promotion prospects down to projecting a positive persona); in the court of King Artaxerxes it would have been downright dangerous. Bear in mind that Artaxerxes was one of the most powerful rulers who ever lived, presiding over a large empire for more than forty years (465BC-424BC); a man who murdered his brother to make sure he seized the throne after his father’s untimely death; a man whose drinking bowl, one of which still survives – housed in the British Museum – and therefore might have been held by Nehemiah (how cool is that?) bears this inscription: ‘Artaxerxes, the great king, king of kings, king of countries, son of Xerxes the king, of Xerxes [who was] son of Darius the king, the Achaemenian, in whose house this drinking cup/saucer was made.’

To be in the presence of this ‘great king, king of kings’, it was not advisable to look miserable. And yet, Nehemiah had to get his boss’s attention. It’s risky, but extremely clever: if the man who is responsible for your safety is looking sad (v1), then you need to know why, right?

We can only speculate whether this was a plan formed over a long period – this is four months since Hanani’s visit – or whether Nehemiah was particularly moved on this day; either way, the crucial moment comes... and is successful. The King is sympathetic, and, like the strong, decisive ruler he is, gets straight to the point: (v4) ‘What is it you want?... (v6) How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?’ What an amazing opening! Nehemiah is blessed with royal favour: he gets permission to go (v6), letters of safe conduct (v7), materials he can use to help with the project (v8) and soldiers for security (v9). (He also has enemies, now, too (v10) – but we’ll come back to that.)

There is, however, another king involved here. Nehemiah has not just royal favour, but Royal favour: (vv4-5) ‘The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king...’ Beneath the visible circumstances, another Hand is guiding all things. The king of kings is unwittingly doing the business of the King of kings.

It is sometimes hard to see the hand of the Lord at work; but we believe in a God ‘who works all things for good to those who love Him.’ Nehemiah knew the Lord’s favour, and the door opened for the great work to which God had called him. Today let’s pray for all of us feeling a similar call, to any kind of kingdom work: for favour, and open doors. If that’s you, take heart! If that’s not you currently, then join your prayers with those who are, in faith that the Lord will be glorified. All the Lord’s work ultimately needs Royal favour.

Day 4 – Nehemiah 2:11-20 ‘Weighing the task’

‘Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, “This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.”’

Nearly five centuries after Nehemiah, the Greatest Teacher of them all shared this wisdom with those who were listening. His message: weigh the cost; follow through with your intentions; finish what you started. He was talking about the decision to follow Him; but in practical terms, it could just as easily apply to any great task to which the Lord calls us.

As we have seen, Nehemiah had such a task, a calling. He had the king’s favour and the opportunity to tackle it. However, the fact that his initial prayer had been answered, and the door opened, was no excuse for him to just ‘wing it’; in today’s passage we see how Nehemiah prepared thoroughly for the great task set before him.

First, he settled in – note that it was three days (v11) before he began his survey, and at this stage he told no-one about it. Second, he surveyed the scene. He went out and inspected every metre of the walls (vv13-15). He wanted to know exactly what was required, before the third stage, which was... he shared his vision: (v17) ‘Then I said to [the officials]: “You see the trouble we are in... Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”’ Note that Nehemiah wisely focuses more on the outcome of success (the vision i.e. honour and a renewed reputation for God’s people) than the task itself.

This achieved its desired effect, and the people were ready to get on with ‘this good work’ (v18). But there is a fourth stage, which will prove increasingly important as the narrative develops: Nehemiah stayed resolute. Opposition from other locals who stood to lose by the renewal of Jerusalem starts to get louder and more insistent (v19); however, Nehemiah is ready to respond. He knows his history, as well as what is required for this task: (v20) ‘You have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.’

As time progresses, we’ll see how the opposition becomes fiercer and more intimidating; more on that in a few days’ time. But today, let’s be inspired by Nehemiah’s purposeful planning and preparation. God equips those He calls; but he also expects us to play our part – to prepare ourselves, weighing the cost, following through with our intentions and forming a determination to finish what we started. Whatever the Lord is doing in you and with you at present, resolve again to co-operate fully and faithfully; and trust that as you pray, plan and prepare, He will open the doors, equipping you every step of the way.

Day 5 – Nehemiah 3:1-32 ‘Everybody matters’

OK, I admit it – this was probably quite a turgid read today! A long list of who built what along the length of the wall. There are some fascinating tidbits along the way, though: the fact that some of the upper classes felt that the work was beneath them (v5); on the other hand, Shallum’s daughters put the nobles to shame, by rolling up their sleeves and getting stuck in (v12). Even the priests joined in the collective endeavour (v28).

What’s the basic point here? Everybody matters. Everybody has a part to play. This wall was not built by experts, but by a significant chunk of the whole population giving their time and energy, each playing their small part; together, hundreds or even thousands of ‘small parts’ achieved a great task.

In church, we encourage people to find their true gifting, and that’s absolutely right. However, there’s also a flip side to that coin: God values everything we offer, and sometimes a willing offering of some time, enthusiasm and basic hard graft is exactly what’s needed. No doubt there were leaders and experts in charge; many of them are listed at the start of each paragraph (and let’s take a moment to note again how amazing Nehemiah’s leadership skills were, that in such a short space of time he could identify and galvanise such a large group of people). However, all these figureheads needed people to (literally) do the heavy lifting.

Someone once observed to me that 50% of discipleship is just turning up; and the older I get and the longer I stay in Christian leadership, the more I think that person was absolutely right. This side of heaven, we’ll never know the names of Shallum’s daughters who helped to repair the Tower of the Ovens; but, like all the others who joined in this momentous task, they gave what they could, and the Lord blessed it.

Mother Teresa observed: ‘We cannot do great things; we can only do small things with great love.’ What small thing can you do today? Where could you give a bit of time and enthusiasm this week – or simply ‘show up’ as an encouragement to somebody?

Everybody matters to God; everybody matters in the work of God’s kingdom. May God bless the work of your hands today, this week and always.

Day 6 – Nehemiah 4:1-6 ‘Facing opposition (1): Words’

In 1787 the young MP William Wilberforce first proposed the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the UK parliament. Over the next twenty years he would submit this same bill fourteen times. On each of the first thirteen times the bill was rejected and Wilberforce was subjected to vitriolic opposition, both to his character and his cause. A famous example of this opposition came in April 1791, when the (ornately-named) Colonel Banastre Tarleton described the horrendous conditions of slave ships as ‘hideous phantoms of imaginary woe’ and ‘descriptive flights of a towering imagination.’ Eventually, in 1807, the bill passed, and his biographer notes the extraordinary atmosphere in the House of Commons, as ‘quite out of order, three hurrahs echoed and echoed while he sat, head bowed, tears streaming down his face.’

Most great tasks for the kingdom of God will face opposition. It is notable how this opposition develops to Nehemiah’s remarkable work: from initial anger (2:10) to accusations of disloyalty (2:19) and now to outright ridicule: (v2) ‘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?’

We’ll see tomorrow how the final stage of this growing opposition was actual physical threat; today, though, we’ll focus on the power of words, and particularly scorn, as a tool of discouragement. Just as with Wilberforce, notice how the verbal opposition attacked both their character (‘feeble’) and their cause (‘heaps of rubble’).

These voices were from actual opponents; however, it’s worth observing that for many of us, such voices come from within. We question whether we are up to the task; whether we have the resources to manage it; whether we will fail and bring shame upon ourselves and perhaps more importantly, upon God.

Nehemiah’s approach was twofold: first he prayed: (v4) ‘Hear us, our God, for we are despised.’ In the light of the New Testament, we may not be able quite to echo the sentiments of this particular prayer, but the key point is that Nehemiah asked God to intervene on their behalf. We are not to be agents of judgement; we leave that to God, and trust both our protection and prevailing to Him.

Second, to prevent the people getting discouraged, he set an achievable target, something to aim for as a first stage: ‘So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height.’ The result was encouraging: ‘the people worked with all their heart.’

When we face voices of opposition, either within or without, it’s easy to be discouraged. Today, let’s take heart from Nehemiah’s example, asking God to uphold us, and setting ourselves a manageable target. Great buildings are built, one brick at a time.

Day 7 – Nehemiah 4:7-23 ‘Facing opposition (2): Actions’

It is a sad fact of human nature that, in the end, the will of ‘the flesh’ tends to resort to brute force to achieve its ends. ‘Might is right’ has caused untold suffering over the centuries, but nothing much changes under the sun. Our ‘civilised’ world today has more wars currently than for eighty years, and no doubt as many as there were 2,500 years ago, in the time of Nehemiah. Our sinful nature doesn’t really change – unless God intervenes, which of course is the heart of our good news.

It is perhaps almost inevitable, therefore, that the initial success of the rebuilding project, as described yesterday, leads to the fourth and most severe level of opposition – actual physical threat: (v8) ‘They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem.’ This was particularly alarming given two specific practical challenges: first, weariness – (v10) ‘the strength of the labourers is giving out’; and second, over-stretched capacity – (v19) ‘the work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated.’

Again, Nehemiah’s response is both prayerful and practical: (v9) ‘But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.’ In fact, this courageous and common-sense approach is fine-tuned with two further tweaks: everything is organised into shift patterns, so that some work while others guard (vv16-18), round the clock if need be (v22); and a watch is posted with an early warning system (a loud trumpet!), so that if one place is attacked, the guard can move quickly along to defend it (vv18-20).

As we see day in, day out, Nehemiah’s approach is a wonderful blend of faith and planning: ‘Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you,’ is a maxim which we can see brilliantly illustrated in Nehemiah’s case... except that Nehemiah never loses sight of who ultimately delivers success: when he gives a much-needed pep talk to the tiring workers, he points their gaze upwards as well as outwards: (v14) ‘Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.’ Similarly, he reminds those who might have to fend off attacks: (v20) ‘Our God will fight for us!’

Nehemiah chapter 4 is a model of how to stay both faithful and fruitful under intense pressure. You may be in such a season; if so, be inspired by Nehemiah’s wisdom and witness. If not, then take a moment today to pray for Christian leaders everywhere. Their task of partnering with God in building His Kingdom may be a spiritual rather than a physical one, but it requires much the same mindset and many of the same skills and gifts. May we all have grace to ‘remember the Lord, who is great and awesome,’ and may this inspire our work, however great or small, today.

Day 8 – Nehemiah 5:1-13 ‘No peace without justice’

The title for today’s reflection comes from a famous slogan popularised by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the 1990s. The point is that, unless fundamental issues of justice are addressed within a society, even great changes which appear to improve peace are superficial. It’s no use giving people the vote if they can’t feed themselves, or find employment. Or, in the case of Jerusalem in the fifth century BC, there’s not much point rebuilding the city walls if most of the inhabitants are still being exploited by a small minority of people with power and wealth.

It appears from the text that many of the city’s (and region’s) Jewish residents had been sold into slavery since the conquest and exile more than a hundred years previously. Part of Nehemiah’s more comprehensive plan for the renewal of his homeland was to buy back their freedom (v8). This would be vital if effective self-government was to be restored and the economy revitalised.

Yet, at the same time he was doing this, Jewish nobles were still exploiting their fellow countrymen, charging excessive interest so that loans could never be paid back; taking their land and property and forcing them to pay inflated prices just to live there – in other words, keeping them effectively as bonded labourers. In extreme cases, they were still selling those who could not keep up the repayments as slaves to other powerful non-Jews (v8).

Such practices were explicitly forbidden by Jewish Law, the law God gave to them via Moses 800 years earlier. However, we only have to read the Old Testament prophets to know that greed and exploitation were common among the people, and indeed formed much of the reason why Israel was consistently warned by the prophets about the coming judgement if they continued to tolerate or even encourage such inequality and injustice. Nehemiah knew that a new wall was a sticking plaster, unless the people started living as God had always planned for them to live – in willing obedience to His commands.

So, when the poor of the area come to him in desperation, he tackles it head-on. Note first, though, that, despite being ‘very angry’, he takes time to reflect and plan his response (vv6-7, a wise practice for us to observe in passing). Then he challenges the nobles and officials, using two main arguments: first and foremost, it is against God’s law (v9). Second, he himself is practising integrity, refusing to charge interest on the loans he gives (v10) – which is also part of the Law.

The exploiters had no answer to that; they couldn’t hide behind the excuse which is usually given to justify greed and immorality: ‘everyone else does it, so why shouldn’t we?’ Nehemiah’s integrity shamed them into change, something which Nehemiah wisely formalised with an oath taken in a public assembly (vv12-13).

Reading today’s story, we could be reading about our own age; sadly, the greed and self-interest of a small powerful elite continue to drive world affairs. Oh, that more of us had Nehemiah’s courage and integrity to effect change! It may feel hopeless at present; but let’s be encouraged by the fact that God sees, and knows, and will one day put things right; and in the meantime, let’s pray that God would raise up Nehemiahs for our own day, and that the spirit of Nehemiah would renew our own public life and society.

Day 9 – Nehemiah 5:14-19 ‘Practising what we preach’

‘I can’t change the world; but I can change the world in me.’ This is a line from an early U2 song, and it’s always stayed with me. As we concluded yesterday, what Nehemiah tackled 2,500 years ago is still just as prevalent today, only on a much bigger scale. The possibility of change feels so distant – what can any of us possibly do to see the sort of renewal Nehemiah was aiming at?

This is where I take heart from that line in the song: I can’t change the world, but I *can* change the world *in me*. The one thing I can do, regardless of world events, is make good choices about how I live. Revolutions happen one person at a time. The kingdom of God grows one person at a time. If enough of us practise humility, generosity and integrity, then the world starts to change.

Nehemiah knew this. He knew that he had to practise what he preached, in order to see real change. But I get the feeling that he would have done it anyway, regardless of whether other people noticed; for him, integrity was ultimately a matter between him and his Lord: (v15) ‘Out of reverence for God I did not act like that.’

For Nehemiah, this meant refusing the perks of power: he didn’t eat the governor’s food for the whole time he was there, which turned out to be twelve years (I wonder if King Artaxerxes knew it would be that long when he agreed?!). Interestingly, despite this commitment being lived out over a such a long period, the food was still prepared for him every day (v18). Instead, it was used to feed a large number of others (v17), which included those who were not officials i.e. those who really needed food. Nehemiah turned his humility into generosity, something he was glad to do ‘because the demands were heavy on the people’ (v18).

The leadership lesson here is that true leadership requires humility, integrity and self-sacrifice – something we ultimately see confirmed and modelled in Jesus, 450 years after Nehemiah. Again, let’s pray for more leaders in public life committed to these ideals. However, there’s a general principle here. Change begins with us. Nehemiah had huge challenges to deal with; he could have seen the food allowance as a perk, a reward for all the stress. Instead, he chose humility and generosity, and his personal integrity blessed dozens of people, *before* he even went to work.

Let’s pray today for the grace to emulate Nehemiah; to change the world in us, and trust the Lord for the rest. And may we echo Nehemiah’s short final prayer, with faith and gratitude (v19) ‘Remember me with favour, my God.’

Day 10 – Nehemiah 6:1-9 ‘Facing opposition (3): lies and gossip’

Followers of Jesus have often been treated as threats to the ‘established order.’ In many ways this is strange: a group committed to living peaceful, holy, servant-hearted lives ought to be the very last people to be considered subversive. On the other hand, we worship a different Lord, one to whom all the Powers That Be will one day give an account; and that makes flawed human authorities nervous. Corrupt power hates having to share it, or recognise its limitations.

Such a state of affairs goes all the way back to Jesus himself; the only perfect human who ever lived was frequently subjected to false allegations, not least at his final arrest and trial. The main reason Christians were martyred in the time of the Roman Empire was because they refused to worship Caesar as a god. Interestingly they were also accused of incest, since spouses referred to each other as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ – a term which reflected their faith not their genes!

This latter piece of scandalous gossip connects much more directly with what Nehemiah faces in today’s passage. We’ve seen the various ways that his opponents have tried to undermine him – thus far primarily through insult or intimidation. Now, they try a different tack: (v6) ‘It is reported among the nations – and Geshem says it is true – that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt.’ Lies, basically, spread via gossip (if Geshem says it is true...). It is a sobering but healthy reminder that even our best intentions can be misinterpreted – sometimes unwittingly, here quite deliberately. This is a ploy to stop the rebuilding work, effectively continuing the policy of intimidation by other means.

I have seen this myself. I spent many years attending a church which was part of the HTB network in London. These churches are thriving, and a lot of people hate them for it. More than one national newspaper has written articles over the years describing it as a cult. As someone who attended one of these churches during the period it was being described as such, I can safely say that I couldn’t imagine anything that was less like a cult; anyone could come and go as they please, and leadership was widely dispersed and actively encouraged. Its ‘problem’ was that people who joined one of these churches really loved their Christian community, thrived in their faith and naturally wanted to share it as a result. Sadly, HTB was perceived as a threat largely because its evident fruit was a pointed reminder of the decline of much of the rest of the church.

Jesus called the devil the ‘father of lies,’ and much of the devil’s best work is done simply through encouraging people to spread them. What should our response be? Certainly not to ‘fight fire with fire,’ or even to indulge in lengthy self-justifications; Nehemiah’s response is our model. He simply tells the truth and gets on with his work: (v8,v9) “‘Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.’ ...I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

St Paul tells us that the only offensive weapon we have in the armour of God is ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.’ Let God’s word in Nehemiah be our ‘sword’ today, powerful truth demolishing the lies which can undermine our faith. And may the Lord strengthen our hands for whatever kingdom work He has for us, this day and this week. Amen.

Day 11 – Nehemiah 6:10-14 ‘Facing opposition (4): fear’

What is the opposite of faith? Most of us would instinctively say ‘doubt’ – but that’s not the biblical answer. In the bible, the opposite of faith is fear. It’s why Jesus prefaces his post-resurrection encounters repeatedly with the words, ‘Do not be afraid.’ It’s why St John tells us that there is no fear in love. Yes, there are healthy fears, which we learn as we grow up for our own protection; but generally, fear is a constricting factor in our adult lives. It is especially damaging to our souls, as well as our wills: a primary motivation of fear rarely leads to good decisions being made.

Bullies know this all too well. Make a person afraid and they will act against their own interests; or rather, they will act in their (and your) perceived short-term interest at the expense of their long-term one. In today’s passage, we see Nehemiah’s opponents make one last throw of the dice. Thus far they have failed with every strategy to stop the work; their final option is to make Nehemiah afraid for his own personal safety. Although it might sound sensible for Nehemiah to hide for a few days or even hours to protect himself, the location is significant: the sanctuary of the temple was a sacred space, and to use it for his own protection would have driven a wedge between himself and the priests. Nehemiah would have lost not only credibility but also moral authority.

Ironically, the threat would have carried more weight if the proposed ‘safe house’ had been anywhere else but the temple; but Shemaiah overplayed his hand, egged on no doubt by Nehemiah’s chief adversaries Tobiah and Sanballat. Nehemiah rightly smelled a rat and called out the skullduggery. He chose faith over fear, and the work continued – indeed as we’ll see tomorrow, it was about to be completed!

Few of us face the kind of threats Nehemiah did; but we all face smaller ones. We all have regular moments which ultimately demand a decision: to choose the path of faith or fear. Such choices become habit-forming. Choosing faith makes it easier to choose faith the next time; and vice versa.

‘Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin,’ St Paul observed. If this sounds overly harsh, the point Paul is making is that our motives matter. Otherwise neutral choices get ‘infected’ if fear or some other negative emotion is our driver. Conversely, to act in good faith often commands a blessing, even if we sometimes make what we later consider to be the ‘wrong’ choice. God is gracious and knows our hearts.

Today, may the Lord grant us all grace to choose faith over fear in our decisions and actions, be they big or small; and may choosing faith become our life-giving habit, as we trust in Him. Amen.

Day 12 – Nehemiah 6:15-7:3 ‘Completed! – and continuing...’

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

What joy it must have been to write those words! Even better, to actually see the rebuilt wall; to walk around inside its perimeter, knowing that the city was secure; to celebrate with those who had put in so much hard work, had risked their lives and chosen to trust both God and their inspired leader, Nehemiah.

So why doesn’t the book of Nehemiah finish here? This was the great task, but it’s only less than halfway into the book. There’s a long way to go yet! And that, surely is the point: Nehemiah’s vision was about much more than the wall – it may have begun like that, but ultimately it was about the renewing of a nation. The wall was the necessary first step, without which nothing else could be achieved; however, it was only the first step towards the bigger goal – a task which took not just 52 days, but 12 years, and counting (see 5:14).

This sense of now... and not yet – or completed... and continuing – is reflected even in our modern bible translations, some of which put v15 at the end of one section, whilst others put it at the start of the next section. Which is it? Again, I think those scholarly debates about the textual flow reflect the much more important point: this is not the end, it is not even the beginning of the end; but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning. As someone once said. (Bonus point if you know who, when and why.)

In fact, what is most striking is how little time is taken here to pause and celebrate the completion of the wall – that will come later. We simply get a short note (v16) that its completion shook their enemies, who saw that the Lord was helping His people. After that, we’re back into the thick of the challenge – nobles who are still under the sway of Tobiah, and the latter’s continuing attempts at intimidation (vv17-19).

None of this is going to stop Nehemiah from pressing on, though; he is not someone to rest on his laurels, he immediately starts putting the next stage of the plans in place: appointing key officials. His prioritising is instructive: first the gatekeepers (absolutely vital for the new fortifications, which had to be stewarded safely at all costs); then the worship leaders – for this is first and foremost a worshipping people. And *then* the city leadership – at which point some of you will be raising eyebrows at the appointment of Nehemiah’s brother. Nepotism? I don’t think so: bear in mind it was Hanani who had travelled all the way to Susa to tell his brother what was happening in Jerusalem; then factor in all those who were already under the influence of Jerusalem’s enemies (see vv17-19), and the pool of trustworthy people must have been small.

The clincher is the next appointment – Hananiah – appointed ‘because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do.’ Nehemiah is not handing out ‘jobs for the boys’; his priorities are character and depth of faith. It’s hard to do better than that – yet another leadership blueprint for today.

This side of glory, the work of the kingdom is always: now... and not yet; Jesus’ great work on the cross is complete – and yet always continuing, as the gospel spreads across the world and into ever more human hearts. Today, take a moment to pray for the Lord’s kingdom work to continue, in whatever places it intersects with your life; and pray for the leaders of that work, that they may have grace to see the fruit of their labours, and still to persevere, however near or far the finish line is.

Day 13 – Nehemiah 7:4-73 ‘Each to their own town’

Before I was a minister, I was a market researcher. This was at a time when my kids were very young, and had no idea what sort of job their daddy had. So, when I came home from work and they asked me what I did, I said: ‘Counting. Daddy does counting for a living.’ Which was basically true, albeit I imagine they sometimes wondered how anyone could get paid for listing numbers up to ten! (For the record, I did go a bit higher than ten... sometimes.)

Counting is definitely something we find a lot of in the bible. The bible is full of lists of numbers; indeed, there’s a whole book of them which has that very name. Nehemiah chapter 7 is another great example of this value placed upon numbers of people. Genealogies really mattered to the Israelites, and here we have a long list of all the descendants of various families who had returned from exile (or in some cases may never have left).

The reason is made clear at the start of today’s passage: (v4) ‘Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not been rebuilt.’ Not surprisingly, nobody wanted to live in a defenceless city which was surrounded by enemies. But the city had walls now; so, Nehemiah made it his priority – inspired by God (v5) – to get those families to return. How? Certainly not by bribery, threat or even ‘marketing’. He used a much more effective strategy.

Here’s where we need a bit of context. When the Israelites first settled in the Promised Land, every family was given a parcel of land, as theirs in perpetuity. Sometimes land was sold or taken by other families; however, the Jubilee every fifty years was meant to undo all such imbalances, whereby the land was restored to each family. Sadly, the testimony of the prophets throughout the history of Israel indicate that the Jubilee was unlikely ever to have been practised – human greed being what it is – however, those records of which families owned what still remained.

Nehemiah found those records (v5), cross-referenced this against the current population, and consequently made a comprehensive list of who was meant to live where – by family. This is the long list in verses 8-69, and what is fascinating is that this list extends well beyond Jerusalem. It covers the whole country: (v6) ‘each to his own town’ – repeated at the very end of the chapter: (v73) the ‘Israelites settled in their own towns.’ It is a grand vision to repopulate the land.

On the face of it, what is there for us today? Is this just an interesting but curious relic of Old Testament history? At face value, maybe... but there is something powerful here about roots. Where we come from shapes us, for good or ill, and we never entirely leave those roots behind. Jesus was ultimately rejected at Nazareth – but it’s insightful to observe that he went there early in his ministry. He began from his roots.

In the modern world, many of us leave home and live elsewhere; we also grow and develop in different ways, and much of this is good. But roots matter – they matter to us, and also to God. Today, spend a few moments reflecting on your roots. What did God form in you through them? How does he use them in you now? And let’s pray that God works our roots to good, just as He works all things to good, that we may bloom where we’re planted today.

Day 14 – Nehemiah 7:73-8:8 ‘The power of God’s Word (1) – Clarity’

What does a society need to thrive? It’s a question we ask ourselves a lot nowadays. Despite rapid advances in technology, medicine and global infrastructure, many cultures seem stuck in a slow but steady downward spiral. It’s a question which also lies at the heart of Nehemiah’s great work. As we have observed, this was always about more than a wall. It was the renewal of a nation.

By the start of chapter 8, a huge amount has been achieved – the defences are more or less secure, leaders have been appointed, and a great programme of resettlement has been started... but something crucial is missing. It is this that Nehemiah and the Jews’ spiritual leaders attend to next, and it forms the heart of the next section of this remarkable book.

For centuries, Israel had a pattern of festivals: centred in Jerusalem, these were designed for the whole people to spend time worshipping the Lord together. Since the exile more than a century previously, such festivals had been largely abandoned. However, about fourteen years before Nehemiah, Ezra the priest had arrived in Jerusalem and begun the process of spiritual renewal. (We haven’t mentioned Ezra much, but it’s worth noting that these two books belong together – and rightly so, as Ezra means ‘help’ and Nehemiah means ‘comfort’. Nehemiah is effectively the second half of the ‘renewal story’.) Ezra’s work was groundbreaking, but without a secure city its scope was limited. Now it was possible to be more ambitious: so, come the autumn of Nehemiah’s first year (‘the seventh month’ is roughly September), the first great gathering took place.

The heart of this gathering was the public reading of scripture to the whole assembly (v3). Ezra the priest read from daybreak until noon, while the people listened. There are some key details which should not escape us: first, the initiative came from the people. This is not ‘religion imposed from above’ – the people ‘told Ezra’ to read the bible to them! Our engagement with scripture begins with enthusiasm to hear and receive it.

Second, there is something special about studying the bible together, corporately. Of course, there is great value in personal study – I wouldn’t be writing these reflections otherwise! – but the word of God also needs to be read publicly, to reach a whole people.

Third, this study takes place best in an environment of worship and adoration (see v6). It is not just an exercise of the head – though our minds must be similarly devoted – it is an exercise of the heart: ‘Amen! Amen!’

Alongside this reading came explanation: (v8) ‘making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.’ The task of Israel’s spiritual leaders was not just to read scripture but to teach it – to bring clarity. How we need this today! To return to our initial question, many have wondered if we have become like the people of Amos’ time: a culture which suffers a ‘famine of hearing the words of the Lord’ (Amos 8:11). Into this vacuum comes not only secular worldviews, but – perhaps more dangerously – distortions of a truly biblical worldview, where the word of God is distorted to serve a purpose. The only ‘cure’ for this is to immerse ourselves in scripture again: to sit under it in humility, rather than over it in judgement, and to experience the true renovation of the heart which comes as a result.

Today, let’s finish with the great prayer for the Second Sunday in Advent – written by Cranmer in the 1540s but just as needed today: ‘Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.’

Day 15 – Nehemiah 8:9-18 ‘The power of God’s Word (2) – Conviction’

God’s word has a power all of its own. The bible is full of references to its own efficacy: think of Isaiah 55:11 – ‘my word does not return to me empty’ – or Hebrews 4:12 – ‘the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.’

No surprise, then, that a whole morning of listening to scripture produced a profound effect on the large crowd gathered by the Water Gate (and let’s note in passing that they were *not* meeting in the temple area, just in a large square by the city limits – a reminder that God’s people can gather anywhere to meet with the Lord, and God’s word can have its effect anywhere, too.) This profound effect is a work of God’s Spirit and is what Jesus later called ‘conviction’ (John 16:8).

Conviction is more than just understanding; it is revelation which fundamentally touches our hearts and changes our mind, compelling us to change. What others experience as ‘just words’ seem to be given specifically and directly to us, to transform our lives immediately. For the people gathered listening to Ezra, this was experienced both as sadness and joy: the deep realisation of just how far they had fallen short of God’s plan for their lives led them to weep (v9); the encouragement that the Lord in his mercy and grace had given them a fresh start, and renewed their lives and their community, led into joy and celebration (v12).

Indeed, in v10 of this passage, we get the famous phrase – which nobody ever remembers is in Nehemiah, of all places! – ‘the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ There’s a phrase to fill our hearts today.

Conviction, though, also requires more than just our emotions and resolutions; it requires action. It is one thing to know we need to change; it is another to actually try and do it. In this case, the people realised that a major festival required by the Law was not being celebrated (v17) – and they were in the exact season in which they should be celebrating it (v14). So, they acted: they made shelters, and, for the first time in generations, celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. By the way, this is now known as Sukkot and is still practised annually today – in 2026 it will be commemorated from 25th September until 2nd October.

We’ve come a long way from repairing a wall, haven’t we? This chapter conveys some of the energy, the passion, which was stirring God’s people, as they rediscovered who they were. We, too, need regularly to ‘rediscover’ who we are in Christ; to be gripped again by the power of God’s word, and the conviction of His Spirit. Maybe that’s a word for you today; or maybe it’s to reflect: where is God’s word particularly speaking to you at the moment? Either way, pray for grace to act on your convictions; and may the joy of the Lord always be your strength, this day and every day. Amen.

Day 16 – Nehemiah 9:1-25 ‘The power of God’s Word (3) – Confession’

Confession is good for the soul.

It’s also a practice which has become increasingly unfashionable in modern culture, where the word sin is often seen as an outdated concept. If there is such a thing as sin, it’s something like not being true to yourself – whatever that means!

The primary issue, of course, is that sin is a word which finds its meaning and importance in relation to God. It is a spiritual problem and not just a moral or ethical or ‘lifestyle’ one. As society has secularised, so we find ways around it: different language, alternative categories... or we blame our genes or our experiences (and those are influences, but not justifications). This is in stark contrast to our pre-modern culture. Consider the words of the confession in the Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders; spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults, restore thou them that are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord; and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

That is the standard confession at both Morning and Evening prayer. In other words, a devout Anglican in years gone by would have said this twice a day, or up to fourteen times a week, or as many as 730 times a year! As my old vicar used to say, when you say the prayer book confessions, you are properly confessed.

Taking confession seriously, however, is not a question of fashion, it lies rooted in scripture. Our passage for today is the first part of an immense act of confession (which lasts all the way to the end of chapter 10). It is a significant moment, and therefore at one level, not ‘normal’ – it involved fasting and changes to the peoples’ appearance (v1), as well as a distinction between the original chosen people and those who had joined the community (v2). It took a long time (v3) and was led by a large number of leaders (vv4-5).

But, it was also setting a benchmark which *was* normative from this point on. God’s people were going to try and obey God – this great God who made everything (vv5-6), had chosen them (vv7-8), saved them (vv7-11), led them (v12), spoken to them (vv13-15), forgiven them (v17), taught them (v20), provided for them (vv20-21) and blessed them (vv22-26).

Tomorrow, we’ll see how the repeating pattern of sin, disaster, repentance and restoration pave the way for a renewal of this covenant. Today, though, let’s marvel at God’s love, patience and mercy – lavished not just on the Israelites, but *us*. And may that lead us into both gratitude and confession, and ultimately to a renewed life which brings glory to ‘thy holy Name’. Amen.

Day 17 – Nehemiah 9:26-37 ‘Cycles of sin... and grace’

Someone once said that the definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result each time. I don't know if that's true, but it's certainly a decent definition of human nature. We do the same thing over and over, intending to change... only to find the cycle repeating again.

The second part of the people's great prayer of confession, which we're covering today, certainly makes that very clear. Time and again God blesses the people; time and again they turn away and disobey, bringing disaster on themselves in the process; at which point they return to God, who mercifully forgives and blesses them once more... only for the people to disobey, and so the cycle repeats again.

This pattern has been evident throughout the history of God's people. The Book of Judges is probably the most sobering read in the bible, precisely for this reason. Every time a Judge is raised up by God and rescues a wayward people, they soon turn back to their wicked ways – leading them to cry out again to God... and so on, and so on.

700 years after the time of the Judges, it seems the penny has finally dropped. The people in Nehemiah's time not only make this amazing prayer to God, they also give a wonderful summary of the story of God's people – a story of disobedience and grace. Now they find themselves again at the bottom of the cycle (vv36-37) – *but* they know who the Lord is, they understand his character: (v32) 'the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love.' They ask God to be gracious again; to rescue and restore them again, trusting in this great God who 'delivered them time after time' (v28).

Today, we may feel that we make this kind of prayer so often. A repeating cycle – can God possibly forgive this time? The answer is yes – not because of who we are, but *because of who He is*. Our God is the same yesterday, today and forever. His mercy always triumphs over the judgement we deserve.

Today, seize that truth again, and claim the forgiveness which none of us merit, but the Lord graciously bestows upon us. May that make our hearts sing! And may we live in the kindness of this God, reflecting that kindness to others. Amen.

Day 18 – Nehemiah 9:38-10:39 ‘The power of God’s Word (4) – Commitment’

‘In view of all this...’ And so, we get to the heart of the prayer. After a long and detailed confession of the people’s rebellious ways, their repentance is manifested in a ‘binding agreement’, witnessed by their spiritual leaders (10:1-27). True conviction and confession always ends in commitment.

Indeed, the word repentance, which we often equate to ‘saying sorry’, really means ‘change your life’. For the people of Nehemiah’s day, this was reflected in a series of very practical commitments relating to marriage (v30), Sabbath (v31), resourcing their worshipping life properly (vv32-34), and generosity (vv35-39). All core components of the Law, which were often neglected but which were integral to their distinctiveness (i.e. holiness) as the chosen people of the one true God, Yahweh.

Although it is rare for us to make detailed practical commitments in our confession prayers, we do reflect those intentions in a general sense in many of our standard prayers:

‘Grant that we may serve you in newness of life, to the glory of your name.’

‘That we may act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with you, our God.’

Or, to return to the prayer we quoted a few days ago: ‘Grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name.’

Take a few minutes to reflect on what repentance looks like for you today. Maybe it’s not a case of making specific commitments; or maybe there might be value in doing so – as long as we hold fast to the Lord’s grace, and live in freedom rather than condemnation.

What we do understand at a much deeper level than those praying this prayer more than 2,000 years ago, is that this kind of transformation can *only* be achieved by the Holy Spirit working in us. So, as we choose to serve the Lord today, pray for a fresh infilling of grace, poured out by the Holy Spirit, to live out your commitments. And in all things may we abide in Him, bearing much fruit, to the glory of His name. Amen.

Day 19 – Nehemiah 11:1-20 ‘National lot-tery’

That title got your attention, didn't it? A reflection on the National Lottery? Well, yes, in fact – the original national lottery: today's passage describes those families who were chosen to settle in Jerusalem. The method for selection was casting lots, and those included were drawn from across the country – hence national lottery. Imagine neighbours looking at each other as the lots were drawn, thinking: it could be you?!

Let's rewind a little: after the completion of the wall and the renewing of the covenant, there still remained a very practical problem – not enough people were actually living in Jerusalem to make it defensible, or indeed to serve as a true capital. Fresh blood was needed, which could only be derived from other parts of the country. The leaders led by example – v1 tells us that they settled in Jerusalem regardless. However, more families were needed. How to choose? They cast lots.

If this seems strange, a bit of biblical context is useful at this point. Casting lots is a frequently mentioned practice in scripture, going all the way back to the giving of the law (first mentioned in Leviticus 16:8). The worldview of the Old Testament is that God is in control of everything, everything happens according to His will, and thus God allows the Israelites to cast lots in order to determine His will for a particular situation. Indeed, Joshua used the practice numerous times to allocate the land in the original settlement hundreds of years previously; so, it was the natural solution for the people of Nehemiah's day.

Not surprisingly, those who were selected and obeyed the decision were 'commended' for doing so (v2) – presumably very few of them would have chosen to leave their ancestral land and their community connections. By faith they understood, though, that it was the will of the Lord.

The practice of casting lots continues throughout scripture right up to the choosing of Matthias as the new twelfth apostle just before the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:26). It is noteworthy, however, that this is the last mention of the practice: once the Spirit is poured out on all believers, we no longer need such methods to make decisions; we can be guided into all truth (John 16:13). We can also observe that the practice, once stripped of its religious motives, quickly became associated with gambling – most soberingly at the foot of the cross, where the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothing.

You probably didn't find this passage the most thrilling read – but there is a profound point lying under the surface. This seemingly random process led to a dramatic life change for thousands of people; all faithful, all trusting the Lord – and yet called to something they probably didn't wish or expect. God's will surprised them, and they must have journeyed to Jerusalem with all their belongings, faced with a clear choice: to trust and obey, or to resent and complain. Perhaps you have faced a similar moment in life, when you sense that God has shut one door you wished had remained open, and maybe opened another that you didn't really want. Perhaps you find yourself in this place now. The call to trust suddenly seems painful. Yet, the message of scripture is that all such trust is rewarded: God always repays. If you find yourself in unexpected territory, pray for grace to accept, even to embrace – the Lord works all things to good for those who love him. Amen.

Day 20 – Nehemiah 11:21-12:26 'A people of promise'

What are you like with lists? Did you find today's passage a fascinating journey through some exotic names and even more exotic places? Or a dreary trawl through meaningless information?

The bible is full of lists; and we've already seen several big lists in this little book so far: ch3, ch7, ch10 and even yesterday in the first half of ch11. This list, however, is a bit different, since it is probably an insertion into the book. Remove this passage and the narrative runs smoothly from 11:20 to 12:27, so what is this additional 'sub-list' doing here?

The answer is that this little section connects the story of Nehemiah with the bigger biblical story. One of the key themes of scripture, and especially of the Old Testament, is God's faithfulness to his promises and to his people. The people, in contrast, are often faithless, but they cling on to the faithfulness of the Lord. The list of settlers we looked at yesterday is also found in 1 Chronicles 9:2-17 – albeit not in the same format and with some different names, so presumably both were drawn from some bigger list, perhaps kept in the archives at Jerusalem.

Chronicles is all about the faithfulness of God, and the expectancy of the fulfilment of his promises. When was Israel going to be restored? What does a faithful covenant people look like? As Nehemiah records what looks like a dry list of names in 11:1-20, it triggers a memory in a later compiler (it's clear that this small section isn't written in the time of Nehemiah by the reference to him in the third person in 12:26, as well as the reference to Darius – see below). This is the story of the people of promise – a people still waiting for their deliverance.

There are two interesting details which would escape our notice without the help of the scholars. The first is that the towns of Judah referenced in 11:25-34 cover a wider area than the actual province of Judah at the time. This might be considered 'wishful thinking' – more likely, it is a declaration of faith and hope that the land would one day be fully restored.

Second, the inclusion of the priests who returned with Zerubbabel decades before Ezra and Nehemiah (12:1-21), as well as those in the time of 'Darius the Persian' (v22, probably Darius II who ruled a couple of decades after Nehemiah) – in other words a period of more than 100 years – makes it clear that this list has a theological significance. This is the record of faithful worship and service rendered to the Lord over generations, as is testified by the reference to praise and thanksgiving in 12:24.

God is not done with his people yet; nor, from this list, are the people done with God. Nehemiah is ultimately a book about spiritual renewal, and not just a textbook for wise leadership and project management; about worship, and not just a wall. Today, take a few moments to offer your own 'praise and thanksgiving' to our amazing, faithful God; and commit yourself again to serve this Lord in this generation, as our spiritual ancestors did in theirs.

Day 21 – Nehemiah 12:27-43 ‘Days of celebration’

There is something wonderful about worshipping the Lord in a large gathering. I first experienced that powerfully at Easter 1999, when I attended Spring Harvest. Walking into the Big Top for the first evening celebration and realising there were 5,000 people there gave me goosebumps. I had never praised God in such a large crowd, and it was thrilling. People from all over the country, all walks of life, here for the sole purpose of worshipping the Lord... a foretaste of heaven.

That kind of gathering – and maybe you have enjoyed something similar – is a good way into today’s passage. At long last, we get to the big party! The wall is dedicated, an occasion which drew people from across the country: the Levites ‘were sought out from where they lived’ (v27); the musicians likewise (v28); the leaders of Judah were all there (v31) and were assigned the task of organising a procession along the top of the wall, along with massed choirs – one heading clockwise, the other anti-clockwise (vv31-39). When they met at the other side they headed to the temple area for a combined celebration (v40): what a moment that must have been! All the toil and the tears, the worry and the work; now they could give thanks to the Lord who had inspired and overseen it all.

It is very much in character that Nehemiah should have ensured this celebration took place. David Pawson insightfully reflects that Nehemiah ‘was a happy man and encouraged others to be happy. It was Nehemiah who said, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” I don’t think Ezra would ever have said that – he was too busy weeping over the people. In many ways they make a perfect couple. The “help” and the “comfort” belong together.’ As evidence, Pawson reminds us that when the Law was read by Ezra (ch8), ‘Ezra saw the situation as a time to weep, but Nehemiah was telling them to have a party’ (see 8:9-10).

The point is: we need *both*. Life is hard. The fact that it is hard means we do our fair share of weeping; *but* it also means that times of rejoicing and celebration become more important than ever. We all need days like the one described in this passage. Special occasions to celebrate and to praise the Lord, above and beyond the normal points of our worshipping life – where ‘the sound of rejoicing... could be heard far away’ (v43). It is not a form of denial that life still has its challenges – we’ll see plenty of those in ch13. It does, however, place those challenges in context, in the wider perspective of the continuing grace and faithfulness of God.

We may not have the chance for such a celebration today – but we can echo praise in our hearts, trusting that the Lord will likewise grant us a divinely-given joy, which is our strength – for this day, and every day.

Day 22 – Nehemiah 12:44-47 ‘The gift of worship’

Strictly speaking, I don’t earn anything at all. I haven’t done for 16 years now.

What ministers get paid is called a ‘stipend’ rather than a ‘salary’. It’s easy to forget why this matters. I’ve often caught myself referring to my role in ways that suggest I earn a wage: if someone thanks me, I’ll make a joke along the lines of, ‘it’s kind of you to say that, but I get paid to do this!’ The thing is, though, I don’t. A stipend is an allowance which ministers are granted precisely so that they don’t have to earn a ‘wage’ – they can dedicate themselves to leading the people of God.

It’s a subtle distinction, but its implications are profound, on multiple levels. First, it makes it clear that the minister’s own spiritual life sits at the heart of what they ‘do’. We are led *by* God, so that we can lead people *to* God. Second, it reminds us that the work of God is not a transaction, but a calling. This applies to everyone, at one level – we are *all* called in different ways. Ministers, though, are appointed and provided for in a way which places that calling at the very centre of their work.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, it is about grace. Life is gift. All we are, and have, is a gift from God. We live in a way which reflects this: a grace-filled, gift-soaked life. In this case, we give generously to the community life of God’s people, in order that our ministers can give their time and energy back to God, and to us, in order to lead us in the life and worship of that community. We don’t pay ‘subs to a club’ – we gift our money, that others might gift their time back to us. It’s all gift – or should be!

This practice has deep roots – it goes right back to the very earliest history of God’s people. The Law given to Moses sets up the system to provide for Israel’s leaders of worship – and it is this which Nehemiah makes sure is put back in place, now that Jerusalem is functioning as a city (and a worship centre) again: (v44) ‘contributions, firstfruits and tithes’ to provide for the priests and Levites (their ministers), as well as the musicians and gatekeepers (their worship leaders and vergers).

It’s worth noting that many of these people could earn their own money if they had to – they had fields to cultivate and, as we’ll see tomorrow, when the ‘stipends’ weren’t paid, they went back to them in order to earn their keep (13:10). But the contributions of the people, if given faithfully, ensured they didn’t need to: they could dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their calling.

Most churches have an annual ‘Stewardship Sunday’ (or equivalent) – a moment in the year when we think about our financial generosity. It’s tempting to encourage people in pragmatic terms: ‘give x to the church, and the church can do y with it’; or, dare I say, ‘give us more, or we’ll close!’ To do so might ‘work’ at some level, but it’s not the point, at least not how God had originally designed it. Life is gift – God gives generously to us, that we might give generously to others, that they might give generously back to us. The natural result of living like this would be ‘praise and thanksgiving to God’ (v46).

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to live like that?

Day 23 – Nehemiah 13:1-14 ‘Promises, promises’

People can't obey God.

Or at least, not all of the time, or even most of the time. You could say that, 'People can't obey God' is a pretty good summary of the whole Old Testament, certainly its history books. Renewal is only ever temporary, things usually go back to how they were after a while. Nothing new under the sun.

As one commentator put it quite bluntly, the book of Nehemiah ends less with a bang and more with a whimper. After the high point of the dedication of chapter 12, and indeed the reforms which renovated the contributions and tithes to sustain the worshipping life of the people, it's downhill all the way in chapter 13 – or rather, more of a bumpy ride.

One of the other reforms enacted by Nehemiah starts ch13: the commitment not to intermarry with other races. If this seems unduly separatist – especially remembering that Ruth, King David's great-grandmother, was from Moab – then what follows underlines why it mattered. The Lord's prohibition on intermarriage was not some sort of closet racism, it was the pragmatic recognition that intimately sharing other worldviews would undermine the faithfulness of God's people.

So it proved here: as soon as Nehemiah was called back to Babylon, after 12 years of unstinting service (v6), the new priest in charge of the storerooms gave over much of the space to Nehemiah's old enemy, Tobiah (vv4-5). The result was corruption on a grand scale: offerings and tithes were diverted (v5); the Levites and musicians weren't provided for, and therefore went back to working the land (v10); as a result, presumably, the worshipping life of the Jews was also 'neglected' (v11).

It's a sorry tale of how quickly spiritual growth can peter out, if we choose to disobey God's clearly revealed will. Back we go down the mountain again. Nehemiah returns, however, and once more sets things right: (v8) Tobiah is thrown out (again); (v9) the rooms are purified (again); (v12) the tithes restarted (again); and (v13) new leaders appointed to make sure that this time it's done properly. It's a remarkable testimony, once more, to Nehemiah's resilience, faithfulness and leadership ability.

Chapter 13 reminds us that, great as Nehemiah was, a human leader can only ever effect temporary change. We need Someone who can transform us from the inside out, to make that kind of renewal permanent. That's never mentioned in these pages – but it's a powerful lesson we take (implicitly) from this wonderful little book.

As we reflect today, let's acknowledge that the people in these pages are so like us; let's give thanks that we have an eternal leader, even greater than Nehemiah – the Lord Jesus Christ – on whom we can fix our eyes every day; and let's resolve to keep living the life, empowered by the grace of the only One who can truly transform us. Amen.

Day 24 – Nehemiah 13:15-22 ‘Respecting the Sabbath’

We live in a workaholic society. Take the Enlightenment dogma of continuous progress, mix with a subtle blend of the Protestant work ethic, add a sprinkling of consumerist worship at the altar of customer entitlement, shake thoroughly and hey presto! A fabulous modernist cocktail. And, like a cocktail, tasty as it seems at the time, drink too many and you’ll pay for it in the end.

Teaching on the value of sabbath has never been more important, or harder to achieve. It’s tempting to think, though, that it ‘must’ have been easier in ancient times. Not so; although at first reading today’s passage appears as yet another example of ‘silly’ disobedience on the part of God’s people – they know what they needed to do, they just didn’t do it – look below the surface and this fragile community were facing serious pressures. Imagine leaving Babylon – the largest and wealthiest empire in the world – to set up business again in Israel: chances are business was tough, the large and lucrative markets weren’t there, especially with hostile nations around them. No wonder they were tempted to open on the Sabbath; to do seven days of business rather than six.

It’s so easy to think like that, isn’t it? But to do so misses the ultimate point of Sabbath: it is not just about rest (though that is vital and fundamental), it’s about *trust*. We stop for a day, trusting God to provide for our needs. We refuse to believe the appealing little lie that our success in life depends entirely on our own efforts. We remind ourselves that we are not our own gods, and joyfully submit to the one true God, who graciously and lovingly provides what we need.

This is what Nehemiah was so worked up about; we might see his response as an over-reaction, but Nehemiah knew his history: (v18) ‘Didn’t your ancestors do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.’ The Sabbath, almost more than any other commandment, was a touchstone of the people’s relationship with the Lord – precisely because it indicated how much they were trusting Him. Hence the extreme measures Nehemiah took to preserve it (vv19-21).

As we reflect today, let’s return to those Sabbath themes of rest and trust. Which speaks to you? Where is the Lord nudging you toward renewal in your life? And let’s use the words of Nehemiah’s simple prayer as our response: (v22) ‘Remember me... my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.’ Amen.

Day 25 – Nehemiah 13:23-31 ‘Remember me, my God’

Every November we have our season of remembrance. It begins with All Saints Day on the 1st – a chance to remember the global church – moves through Bonfire Night and concludes with Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day, when we remember the impact of war, and rededicate ourselves to the cause of peace. Remembering is important, and necessary; it forms a major theme of scripture. Time and again, God’s people are called to remember – their God, their history, their unfaithfulness, God’s faithfulness – because our memory is our identity.

What’s interesting, though, is that it’s not always one-way traffic. In fact, in the Psalms, the great ‘book of remembering,’ there are more references to *God remembering us* (16) than the other way round (11). God, of course, unlike us does not have a problem with memory – but calling this to mind serves in the Psalms as both a wonderful affirmation of faith, and a heartfelt prayer.

Perhaps it is no surprise to find Nehemiah concluding his own story in similar terms. As we observed a couple of days ago, chapter 13 is a sobering way to finish the tale, and what punctuates this last part of the story is that simple prayer: ‘Remember me, my God.’ Nehemiah increasingly feels like King Cnut, endlessly trying to push back the unstoppable tide of disobedience and spiritual apathy. After all his endeavours, all he can cry out is: ‘Remember me, my God.’

I think the pattern of these prayers is significant, too. Someone once observed to me that most people start as Arminians and end up as Calvinists; it’s a posh way of saying that when we’re young, we think faith is all about us, about how much we can do for the Lord. As we get older though, increasingly we realise how reliant we are on the grace of God. We become – painfully and joyfully – conscious that it’s all grace. It’s not about us, it’s about God.

Nehemiah’s final reflections seem to follow this pattern. Look how they start: (v14) ‘Remember me for... what I have so faithfully done.’ Then (v22): ‘Remember me... show mercy to me according to your great love.’ And finally, here in the last verse, a simple cry from the heart: ‘Remember me with favour, my God.’ I’ve done all I can, but in the end, it’s all you.

It bears a striking resemblance to the prayer of the thief on the cross: ‘Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.’ Yet, the contrast between the two couldn’t be greater, could it? The thief who had nothing to offer Jesus but this one prayer; and Nehemiah who had lived a life of outstanding service and great achievement. In their last words, though, the only way they can truly approach God is *exactly the same*: ‘Remember me, my God.’ It’s all grace. It’s all about God, and not about us.

It’s a good way to finish this story, isn’t it? After all the exploits, Nehemiah is not ultimately a book about Nehemiah, it’s a book about God. As we’ve seen throughout, Nehemiah’s great life relied on God’s grace and was lived in humility. He finished how he started.

May this be the pattern of our life’s journey, too. It’s not how we start, it’s how we finish. ‘Remember me, my God.’ Because it’s not about me; it’s all about you. Amen.