**A Different Kind of City**
**Nehemiah 6:15 – 8:18**

We're back in the book of Nehemiah. To bring you up to speed, it's about 445BC, and Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls. And despite some fairly intense opposition the walls have been going up. And we're going to pick up the story as the walls are completed and as Nehemiah tells us what happened next.

**Nehemiah 6:15-7:5**

Now, if you blink you could almost miss it. Chapter 6, verse 15: 'So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.' And think what that had entailed: the vision, the courage, the sheer hard-work. To rebuild a city's walls in just 52 days was a huge achievement, and yet Nehemiah doesn't brag about it. Instead he knows where the glory really goes, v16: 'this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.'

And throughout this book, we've seen Nehemiah sending up arrow prayers to God when he needs help. But then it's easy to remember God when you want him to do something for you, isn't it? But when you're achieving your goals, and life is going well, it can be much easier to forget God. Nehemiah doesn't. He knows that it's God who makes the impossible possible.

And their enemies see it too. And realising this was God's doing had an interesting effect on these enemies. Nehemiah says they 'were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem' (v16). So realising that God was in this all along undermines their confidence. But it has the totally opposite impact on Nehemiah. Because knowing that God has helped you and is with you gives you the courage to do the *next* thing that needs doing. You see, Nehemiah doesn't say, 'ok, I've achieved what I came out here to do, time to sit back,' instead he knew that rebuilding the walls was just the first step to rebuilding the people.

And his objective was to establish Jerusalem as a different kind of city. A community that would fulfil its calling to stand out as a beacon to the surrounding nations. Which is why this matters for you and me, because it's the same call God places on us. As Jesus said, 'you are the light of the world. A city set on a hill' (Matt 5:14).

So, how did Nehemiah go about building that kind of a city? Well, he needed two things. He needed God-centred leaders and a God-centred people.

**God-Centred Leaders**
You see, Nehemiah faces a problem. The nobles of Judah, the influential men of the city, were in close contact with this man, Tobiah. He tells us, v18, 'For many in Judah were bound by oath to him.' And that word *oath* was used of business or trading agreements. But they weren't just business partners. Nehemiah tells us that Tobiah's family had married into the Jewish nobility, and later, in chapter 13, we discover he's married into the High Priest's family as well. So Tobiah's web of influence goes right to the top.

Now why does that matter? Because of who Tobiah was. He was governor of neighbouring Ammon and had opposed Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls all the way, and whilst he considered himself a worshipper of God, he was probably neither Jewish nor committed to God in any meaningful way. And so the Jewish leadership have allowed themselves to be compromised, and compromised by the prospect of political and financial gain. And as a result, they don't want Jerusalem to be different from those around them, because that would be bad for trade. So their loyalties are divided.

Now, no doubt Tobiah had his good points. He was obviously a great networker, wasn't he? The kind of guy you'd enjoy having round for dinner; plus he was an entrepreneur – all these business links. And so the nobles try to persuade Nehemiah of all this: v19, 'They spoke of his good deeds in my presence'. 'Come on Nehemiah, he's not such a bad person, really he's one of us'. But the hard truth is that these leaders have been willing to compromise the distinctiveness of God's people and, as a result, the blessing they should be in the world, for their own personal advantage.

And think how easy that is to do: To allow your thinking to be shaped by outside influences. To allow your own personal advantage, your own gain, of status or power or pay to sway you, to influence you away from the call to be distinctive. To use power and status to preserve your power and status, rather than use them for the good of others. To be compromised, rather than Christian, because the gains seem greater that way.

And Nehemiah knows that if the people are to be a beacon and a blessing, they needed leaders who would lead them towards that, not compromise.

So what Nehemiah does is fascinating. Chapter 7:1: 'Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, *and the gatekeepers, the singers and the Levites had been appointed*…' So the first thing he does, having completed the walls, is to put some key people in place. He appoints gatekeepers, to protect the city and control the influences coming into it. He appoints singers – because this was going to be a city of worship. And he appointed Levites – to teach people, so that the city's foundations would be the word of God.

But over all of these he places two men: Verse 2, 'I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle [that's the temple fortress] charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many.'

So, faced with a compromised leadership, he puts two men in place who he knows he can trust. And the first one is his brother Hanani. Now, is that just a case of nepotism, of jobs for the family? No! It was through Hanani that Nehemiah first heard about Jerusalem's plight in the first place, so this man's heart for God's people and God's glory were clear. And Hananiah, his colleague, stood out from the crowd in a way that Nehemiah wanted the city to stand out from the surrounding nations: he feared God and he was faithful to God, and those are two great character traits for any of us who aspire to leadership.

You see, the nobles were more concerned about what Tobiah thought than what God thought. They had fallen into a fear of man rather than the fear of God, which Proverbs tells us is a snare, and that's especially so if you're a leader. Because if you care more about what people think than what God thinks, you're almost inevitably going to end up compromising on stuff that matters.

But what drives your leadership also matters. For Hanani and Hananiah their allegiance, their faithfulness, Nehemiah tells us, was to God. For the nobles their allegiance was to their own gain, what they could get out of their position for themselves. And the problem of that in leadership is that you begin to use people rather than serve them. People become expendable, they become fodder for your progress up the ladder, or for your profit, and maybe unconsciously at first, you begin to accept hurt in others' lives as necessary collaterial damage, because you're still progressing. And that's a short road to toxic leadership. And you don't want to be a toxic leader.

So, no less now than then, there's this need for a different kind of leader, isn't there? Whether that's in your family, or church or your workplace. A God-centred leader: men and women who will be faithful to serve for the good of others rather than their own gain, and out of a fear of God more than man.

But to build a different kind of city also requires a different kind of people.

**A God-Centred People**

And two things tell us this is what Nehemiah is aiming for. Firstly, he tells us about his orders concerning the gates, v3: 'And I said to them, "Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors." And this was about what was going to be this city's god. You see, the gates controlled the flow of trade into and out of the city. And Nehemiah issues these orders because this was to be a different kind of community. They aren't there to work and do trade as early in the day as possible until as late at night as possible. Profit and gain and personal advance weren't going to be their gods. Because when they are, and you've probably experienced this, work can begin to erode into time that should be spent resting or worshipping, and the danger is you sacrifice your family or your life on the altar of work. But here, God was to be their God, and that would need a different kind of working.

But secondly, chapter 7 is given over to the list of returned exiles, those who could prove they really were Jews, distinct from the surrounding people. And it's from them that the city would be repopulated.

Now, for us, those kind of ethnic barriers have gone. And yet, if the church is to be a distinctive community, she also has to be distinctive in the people who make her up. Not by ethnic origin, but by the way we live. The way we exercise power, the way we work, how we deal with conflict, how we use our money and our time, the way we treat others, how we see sex and relationships, has got to be different from those around us, if the things we say are to have any credibility.

And there lies the problem, doesn't it? Because whilst we are certainly no better than those around us, often we are also no different. So we need a power at work among us to change us so.

And that's what makes what happens in chapter 8 so crucial, because we see a power at work in their community transforming them.

**Nehemiah 7:73-8:18**

Look at v1, and it's just a few days after the wall's completed: 'All the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate.' So the whole city, or at least all those old enough to understand, and all those from outside, gathered in a public square, and from a wooden platform Ezra the priest read from the book of the Law of Moses. Verse 3, 'And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday.' So this sermon was somewhere between 4-6hrs long, and you think some of mine are bad! And then the Levites would go around helping people understand what the word of God said and applying it to their lives: v8, 'They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood.'

Then the next day all the fathers came back for more, and there's a bible study for dads: v13: 'On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law.' And no doubt these dads went home and taught their families as the law told them to.

And then on each day of the feast that followed, there was daily Bible teaching by Ezra: v18, 'and day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God.'

So, can you see how it's the word of God that begins to shape their lives? It's not some new idea, they don't try and get trendy for trendy's sake. Under Nehemiah's leadership, Ezra takes them back to the book, because it's this that will form them into this stand-out community. And notice where it all begins: not, interestingly, in the temple, but in the public square. Now, was that just to do with space? Maybe, but I think there's something else as well. They take the word of God into the city, into the place where business was done, where contracts were signed, where ideas where argued over, and they allow it shape them. There was going to be no sacred/secular divide, no compartmentalization of their lives. Instead, you see them allowing God's word to influence both their public and their private lives. Their Monday to Friday as well as their Sabbath day.

Now, the truth is that we are all being shaped and formed by something aren't we? So what is that for you? What shapes the way you work, or the way you live as a family? Or dads, what shapes the way you lead your families? What influences the way you use your money, spend your time, or pursue your career? What moulds your public and your private life? Now the list of possible influences are endless, aren't they? Friends, family, maybe even your kids, the

media, the prevailing culture in the office or on campus. But from what happens here, I want to give you three reasons why it should be the word of God, and in particular the gospel of Jesus, that should be shaping you.

Firstly, it will humble you. And you need something to do that. You need an authority outside yourself that will speak truth to yourself. And that's what happens at the Water Gate. Look at v9, 'All the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.' Why? Why this public outpouring of grief? Because as Ezra read them God's law, they realized just how far from it they had fallen, just how far from God they really were. In a very real sense, the words they heard condemned them. What they heard about God and about themselves humbled them. It spoke to their lives and their lifestyles and they realized they were far from where they should be.

And five hundred or so years later the apostle Paul wrote that 'through the law comes knowledge of sin' (Rom 3:20). And the people at the Water Gate discovered that, in Paul's words, 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23). We all have.

You see, one danger of religion is that you see what is wrong with everyone else, but you don't see what's wrong with you. That if only *they* got *this* sorted, if only *they* behaved in *this* way, things would be better. But you don't see your own issues. Well, God's word has the power to cut through that, and it shows us ourselves as we really are, and God as he really is.

And we need that if we are to change and to grow, if we are to be different. And the gospel does just that. It tells us that you and I are so wrong that the Son of God had to come and die for us to rescue us. It tells us that without him all is lost: that while we might be able to impress others or pull the wool over others' eyes or even our own eyes, we don't fool God. That for all our success, at heart we can never reach the required standard. So the gospel profoundly humbles us, as we realize that we are no better than anyone else, but in just as much need of God's mercy as everyone else.

But it doesn't leave you in the dust. It also lifts you up, and that's what these guys at the Water Gate experienced.

They are overcome by their guilt, but Ezra and Nehemiah don't milk the emotion of the moment as many religious hucksters would, instead they tell them, v10, 'Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' And they send them home to celebrate and to feast.

Well, great, but how can they go from weeping over their sins one minute, to joy and celebration in the next? Isn't that just sweeping all that's wrong under the carpet? Well, no. In v12 Nehemiah says, 'And all the people went their way to eat and drink… and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that had been declared to them.' So whilst God's word humbled them it also lifted them up because it told them that God had chosen them, that he loved them, that he had made a way for them to come back to him. And the gospel tells you the

same. It tells you that you are chosen by God, not because you have made the grade, but because he loves you even though you can never make the grade or be good enough. That though you are so wrong that Christ had to die for you, Jesus loves you so much that he was willing to die for you. That though you are far off from him he has made a way for you to come back to him. And when you understand that, just as they understood it, joy comes.

And the next day, the dads learnt about the Feast of Booths – when they remembered how God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and kept them safe and provided for them in the desert. And when you understand, deep down, God's protection and safekeeping of you, that he has provided everything you really need in Christ, that he will never leave you, or forsake you, joy comes (even in the midst of suffering).

So, the gospel humbles you but it also lifts you up. And it's fascinating isn't it? The mortar could hardly be dry in the wall and Nehemiah and his men are telling them, 'that's not where your ultimate security comes from, that's not what keeps you safe. The joy of the Lord is your strength.' And the joy that comes from knowing that Christ has died for you, and all that that means, gives you a sense of security that family or career or wealth can never give you. A joy that can make you strong when you feel weak.

But the third reason you need the word of God and the gospel to be the thing that's shaping you, is because it makes you outward looking. It takes your eyes off yourself and breaks the self-centredness that stops us being a blessing to others.

Just look how it works here. They read God's law, they grieve over their sin, then they head home to celebrate and Nehemiah says to them, v10, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine *and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready*." Why? Because they've been reading God's law, and they'll have heard how he is a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, that he cares for the poor and the asylum seeker, for those who have nothing.

And whilst the gospel humbles us and lifts us up, and fills our hearts with joy, it also sends us out in service. Because when you understand that Christ has welcomed and loved and served and provided for you, you'll want to welcome and love and serve and provide for others like that. And you'll be willing to lay down your life for them, as Christ laid his down for you.