

Nehemiah: Builders, Breakers and the Work of God

How do you build a church? How do you break down a church? The book of Nehemiah has the answer to both questions.

Nehemiah is the account of how Israel, having returned from their Babylonian captivity, was really still in disgrace, because Jerusalem existed without walls. In ancient times, a wall established a city as a self-respecting one with ability to defend itself. For Jerusalem to be without walls was to really still be in exile, to still be in submission to others. Rebuilding the walls was consolidating the end of the exile and preparation for what God was getting ready to do in the next 400 years.

But Nehemiah is more than that. It is a timeless lesson for all believers of all times: how the work of God is built. As we read today, the NT picks up the image of ourselves as stones in a temple, a work that is being built. In reading Nehemiah, we learn how God's work, even now in the church era, is built.

In Nehemiah there are really two types of people: builders and breakers. There are those who were part of the building process, and there were those who became part of an attempt to break down the work. The same is true today. Everywhere you go, every church you go, in every age, and in every place has these two types of people: builders, and breakers. As we do an overview of the book of Nehemiah, I'd like to do it by seeing the kinds of people in this book. Six types of people: three kinds of builders, and three kinds of breakers. Let's examine ourselves as we do so, seeking to know what we are like.

A. The Builders

I. Selfless Leaders

Nehemiah was the epitome of a selfless leader. Nehemiah was driven by concerns beyond his own health and wealth and advancement.

Consider some examples of his selflessness.

He was possessed of God's priorities

Nehemiah 1:1-4 **Nehemiah 1:1** The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel, ² that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province *are* there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem *is* also broken down, and its gates *are burned* with fire." ⁴ So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *for many* days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Here is Nehemiah, living the life of a political insider. He is the king's cupbearer, which meant he was one of the most trusted associates and confidants of the Persian king. He lived a life of wealth and luxury in the palace. But here Nehemiah hears about the shame and humiliation of Jerusalem, that the city of Zion looks like a slum, the city of King David looks like a run-down ghetto, the city to which also many of the prophecies relate,

the city to which Messiah was to come, it looked shameful. And Nehemiah was so burdened by this, that he began praying.

From verse 5 to 11, Nehemiah shows he is also *prayerfully dependent*. He poured out his desire to God, praying for forgiveness, praying that the honour and dignity of Israel would be restored. This is a selfless leader. He care more about the glory of God, and the reputation of God than he does his own career and advancement.

We see more of that in the next chapter. Here in chapter 2, we discover that Nehemiah was also *personally sacrificial*.

Nehemiah 2:1-5 And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, *when wine was before him*, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. 2 Therefore the king said to me, "Why *is* your face sad, since you *are* not sick? This *is* nothing but sorrow of heart." So I became dreadfully afraid, 3 and said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, *lies* waste, and its gates are burned with fire?" 4 Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. **Nehemiah 2:5** 5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it.

Nehemiah, as a cupbearer, was to be joyful in the presence of the king. Cupbearers that looked sad and dour was risking their lives. Don't think Nehemiah had no control over his facial expressions. He was willing to put this on the line, so that the king would question him, and he could arrange to be sent. This man was going to give up the stability and luxury of his career to deal with a problem hundreds of miles to the west of him. But being possessed of God's priorities, he was personally sacrificial. He was willing to travel, give up comforts, give up what was familiar. And in fact, we read in chapter 5, that he was willing to give up certain privileges to make the work happen.

Nehemiah 5:14-15 14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions. 15 But the former governors who *were* before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

The work of God always goes ahead when there are leaders who love what God loves, and are willing to sacrifice to see God's work do well.

But more needs to happen. Nehemiah was a leader who pro-actively surveyed the needs. In chapter 2:11-16, Nehemiah goes out at night on horseback, and surveys the whole city. He understands what is needed, the extent of the damage, the amount of work that will be done. From there, he begins planning, and organising. It's amazing to think that all the people who built the wall were already there and present before Nehemiah arrived, but no one was doing anything. It takes a selfless leader, who will embrace the cost, survey the task, and then galvanise God's people to do the work.

Nehemiah 2:17-18 17 Then I said to them, "You see the distress that we *are* in, how Jerusalem *lies* waste,

and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach." 18 And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. So they said, "Let us rise up and build." Then they set their hands to *this* good work.

For the rest of the book, Nehemiah is personally involved in the work. He builds himself. He organises. He solves problems. He protects the work from the enemies and their designs. He does this, not because he wants to get rich, or have a great lifestyle, or become powerful. He does it because he loves what God loves, and wants to see God's honour, no matter what.

Happy is the church blessed with selfless leaders. Happy is the Christian school blessed with selfless leaders. Happy is the ministry blessed with selfless leaders. When they are present, the work is built.

II. Diligent Workers

For the work of God to go on, you need more than selfless leaders. You need diligent workers. You need those people who are going to do the bulk of the work of the ministry. In this case, it was the people who actually repaired and built the wall in different sections.

In chapter 3, we read of a long list of people who built the wall. The Bible gives us in scrupulous detail, who they were, and what they did.

This should show us that God knows who works for Him. He notices every labour done for His name.

Hebrews 6:10 10 For God *is* not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, *in that* you have ministered to the saints, and do ministe

I don't this list is the last or only list God will make of people who served him, and in what way they served him. Jesus said even a cup of cold water given to the least of the saints will be a reward you do not lose. Our God is generous, and looks for ways to reward.

Some things to notice about these diligent workers. Chapter 4:6 tells us about their attitude.

Nehemiah 4:6 So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its *height*, for the people had a mind to work

A mind to work. Not coasters, not spectators, not lazy consumers, but people willing to work. Ministry is work. It's work for all of us. And if the vast majority have a mind to work, the work is built. If the vast majority make excuses, and say their lives are too busy, the work is not built.

Notice also that these people were willing to each work in his or her section. They were

assigned a place and a task, and they did not wonder around looking for something else. When God's people see what needs to be done, go to work, and do it until it's complete, the work is built.

Sometimes that involves multi-tasking.

Nehemiah 4:15-17 15 And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and *that* God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work. 16 So it was, from that time on, *that* half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and *wore* armor; and the leaders *were* behind all the house of Judah. 17 Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon.

Sometimes you don't get to do exactly what you want to do. Sometimes you have to do several things, to build God's work. But when diligent workers have a mind to work, and work in their section, and are willing to do whatever needs to be done, the work is built.

And with those diligent workers, by the end of chapter 6, had completed the wall.

III. Devoted Worshippers

In chapters 8, 9 and 10, we meet the devoted worshippers. Having built the wall, Nehemiah reinstitutes worship and right Temple practices. In chapter 8 you see one kind of devoted worshipper: Ezra, the faithful preacher.

Nehemiah 8:1-3 **Nehemiah 8:1** Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who *could* hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. 3 Then he read from it in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the

Nehemiah 8:8 8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading.

In chapter 9, you see worshipper together responding to God's Word in repentance. They together compare themselves to God's Word and claim ownership for their own sins. Their worship was not just intentions in their hearts. They made commitments. Look at verse 38

Nehemiah 9:38 38 " And because of all this, We make a sure *covenant*, and write *it*; our leaders, our Levites, *and* our priests seal *it*."

And then they made commitments to go back to what they used to do, give certain tithes, certain firstfruits. They rededicated the temple service. In other words, these worshippers were devoted to not only hearing God's Word, but to responding to it.

When that happens, the work is built.

B. The Breakers

I. Passive Spectators

Nehemiah 3:5 5 Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.

It is interesting to read of these Tekoite nobles who did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord. Here was a group of people who would benefit from this work. They would sleep under the blanket this work provided, sit in the shade of what this built wall would mean, but they were not willing to get involved. We don't know why. Too lazy, too busy, too fearful, too soft, whatever the reason, they did not work. They were passive spectators: watching and doing nothing.

Perhaps someone says, “a passive spectator is not a breaker of the work. He just doesn't contribute.” No. The truth is, if there is a work being built, and you somehow draw strength, comfort, protection, provision from that work, but do nothing to help grow it or build it, you are a breaker. How so? Because your inactivity overburdens the others. Your lack of work places extra strain on others, who are carrying the load you should be carrying. And as the too few do the too much, it becomes too heavy for them. They break down, burn out, become discouraged. And when people who are building become too tired to keep on building, what has just been done to the work? It has been broken.

There is no neutral position in God's work. You are building, or you are breaking, even if it is by being a passive spectator.

II. Disobedient Drainers

In chapter 5, we come across some very selfish nobles. They were charging the poor such interest on their loans, that these people were now mortgaging their lands and selling their children into servitude just to make it. Nehemiah called these nobles and rebuked them, and made them swear to restore the lands to those people.

Now those nobles knew that what they were doing was sinful. They knew they were forbidden to charge interest on loans to fellow Jews. They knew they were impoverishing others while gaining from it.

These people were draining the work. Their sinful behaviour brought division between brother and brother. It brought distraction: causing Nehemiah to have to mediate and solve this problem instead of getting on with the work of building. Deliberate disobedience drains the work.

We find two more examples of this later on in the book.

Nehemiah 13:15 15 In those days I saw *people* in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and

bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all *kinds of* burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned *them* about the day on which they were selling provisions.

Nehemiah 13:23-25 23 In those days I also saw Jews *who* had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, *and* Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. 25 So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, *saying*, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves.

These were people well aware of the commands. Sabbath breaking and intermarriage with unbelieving Gentiles were some of the most public sins in all Israel. By doing so, these people were bring public shame on the name of God. They were treating Israel's covenant with God as a light thing. And they were putting at risk God's very blessing on the work. Nehemiah had to contend and fight and oppose these people, because they were jeopardising the whole work of God.

People have this idea that 'my sin is my own'. But as Achan showed us, there is really no such thing as private sin. When you are part of a body, and part of the work, your obedience builds, and your knowing, wilful disobedience breaks. The work has to slow down to deal with it. The work may suffer a lack of blessing because of it.

How do you deal with disobedient drainers? Very directly. You call their sin what it is. You call on them to repent. And if they do not, you bring more pressure to bear on them, until they do, or until they move to another place where they will no longer drain.

III. Sinful Scoffers

Sadly, in every work of God, there will also appear the most destructive of the breakers – the sinful scoffers. These people, for some reason, make it their goal to break down, oppose, and harm the work of God any way they can. In Nehemiah, these scoffers take the form of Sanballat and Tobiah. Lekk at their tactics

Mockery

Nehemiah 4:1-3 **Nehemiah 4:1** But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. 2 And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish -- *stones* that are burned?" 3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite *was* beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up *on it*, he will break down their stone wall."

These men try ridicule, scorn and derision to try to discourage and slow down the work. Nothing like a few insults, a few back-handed compliments, a few comments with barbed hooks on them to deflate a pastor, or a diligent servant of God.

Threats

Nehemiah 4:7-8 Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, 8 and all of them conspired together to come *and* attack Jerusalem and create confusion.

If mockery wouldn't work, what about simple intimidation? If there was a threat to well-being, a threat to livelihood, then surely, they'd back away. Nehemiah responded by arming his builders, and working out a strategy to defend the wall from wherever the attack came. Some people literally threaten god's people with harm. They threaten to ruin the reputation, or devastate them economically. You find people who want control, and when they cannot get it, they bully.

Plots and Conspiracies

Nehemiah 6:1-4 **Nehemiah 6:1** Now it happened when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall, and *that* there were no breaks left in it (though at that time I had not hung the doors in the gates), 2 that Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together among the villages in the plain of Ono." But they thought to do me harm. 3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I *am* doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?" 4 But they sent me this message four times, and I answered them in the same manner.

Nehemiah 6:10-13 10 Afterward I came to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who *was* a secret informer; and he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you." 11 And I said, "Should such a man as I flee? And who *is there* such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!" 12 Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all, but that he pronounced *this* prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 For this reason he *was* hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so *that* they might have *cause* for an evil report, that they might reproach me.

Plots to harm, schemes to undo someone's ministry, but getting them to stop preaching, or stop counselling, or stop evangelising and get caught up in some tangled up mess. I read of how in the 40s and 50s, some journalists were plotting to smear Billy Graham's name, by having a model whom they paid knock on his hotel door, and when he opened the door, have her embrace him or enter, and then photograph that to accuse him of adultery. Sinful scoffers are plotters, coming up with schemes to draw people away from the work.

Slander

Nehemiah 6:5-8 5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me as before, the fifth time, with an open letter in his hand. 6 In it *was* written: It is reported among the nations, and Geshem says, *that* you and the Jews plan to rebel; therefore, according to these rumors, you are rebuilding the wall, that you may be their king. 7 And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you at Jerusalem, saying, '*There is a king in*

Judah!' Now these matters will be reported to the king. So come, therefore, and let us consult together. 8 Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart."

Nehemiah was a selfless leader, so what would hurt most would be the accusation that he was doing all of this out of self-interest. "Nehemiah just wants to be the new king of the Jews." And they spread this lie, so as to smear his reputation, and get people to distrust him. Sinful scoffers are ever trying to breed mistrust in the leaders: these men are in it for selfish gain.

Even Paul dealt with this kind of thing. People accused him of using his apostleship for personal gain, of being a power-monger, of not having integrity. He wrote part of 2 Corinthians to answer those scoffers.

These are the tactics of the sinful scoffers. They are breakers of the first degree. How do you deal with them? The way Nehemiah did. You ignore their ridicule. You prepare to defend against their attacks. You quietly answer their slander, and give it no more attention than it deserves. You don't stop the work to become involved in their plots.

Disobedient drainers, passive spectators, and sinful scoffers are the three kinds of breakers we find in the book of Nehemiah. Why should any of us be remembered as a destroyer of God's work? Surely we would want to be remembered as selfless leaders, diligent workers, and devoted worshippers.