

The Biblical record along with other historical evidence confirms that the city of Jerusalem lay in ruins for approx. 140 years. In 721BC the first group of Hebrew people (the Northern Kingdom of Israel) were taken away into exile into Assyria. Almost 150 years (587BC) later Jerusalem was demolished by the Babylonian Empire and almost everyone was taken back to Babylon. The Babylonian Empire then fell to the Persian Empire and so 48 years after their exile (539BC), some of the Hebrew people return to the original Promised Land, but few decide to live in the old city of Jerusalem. It's not until 142 years after Jerusalem was destroyed, that the wall around the old city is rebuilt (445BC).

142 years the city has lay uninhabited. This once Great city of Jerusalem at the centre of the Kingdom under the warrior King, David, and the prosperous Solomon lay destroyed. The chosen nation of God all but vanished off the face of the earth. All those who were taken away into exile died in exile. How their faith in God was tested?

Now, there must have been at least a remnant who still sought after God – albeit that life was anything like what they had hoped for; they remained faithful; Nehemiah was among them. How prepared are you to remain faithful when nothing in life works out in the way that you had hoped? When you are forced into exile or lockdown? When you lose your job? When cancer comes uninvited into your life? When your dreams and hopes are ripped away from you? Will you stand firm and trust your God regardless?

We're drawing toward the end of the book of Nehemiah and the tide has turned. The wall around the city has been re-built. The gates have been restored. The people are returning to live in the city. The physical rebuilding of the city and the nation has begun, and so has the spiritual. The people have returned to God's Word and renewed their covenant with God. They have promised to be faithful to Him. The work of God has brought about revival.

For this is the work of God, and this work started in the heart of Nehemiah as the Lord convicted him to go back to Jerusalem and take responsibility for building the surrounding wall. And then, once the wall was completed, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, the people came together as “one man” to hear the Word of God read to them – and the nation of God; the people of God were reborn. Life came, by the Holy Spirit into the valley of dry bones.

In chapter 12 we come to the great celebration and the dedication of the walls. From the ruins and desolation, captivity and exile, to a nation reborn, we see the providential hand of God. And so, it's time to recognise and celebrate the goodness of God. Nehemiah was more than keen to keep the focus of the people, - on God. This was God's doing – He had orchestrated and brought about the rebirth of the nation. He was responsible for the rebuilding of the city walls and now Jerusalem as people moved back and reconstructed their homes. Life and its blessings and success is never about us. The growth, maturity, unity, well-being of the church is never due to us – but all due to the Lord. He alone is worthy of all praise.

And so, we'll commence at v.27. **“At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. 28 The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem, ...for the musicians had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. 30 When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.”**

The Levites were called in from the surrounding towns to lead in the thanksgiving celebrations. V.27, they were **“to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.”** They were given the task of making a raucous hallelujah chorus. I can imagine Nehemiah taking them aside prior to, and in his pep talk telling them to “go for it” once the time for singing and praising God commenced. “Don’t hold back – let it rip.” There was a time for propriety whereby they were to purify themselves and the wall, but after that – to celebrate joyfully.

As we come to the church worship service each week, it is good to purify ourselves as we come – in quietness and prayer, seek the Lord and His forgiveness, asking that He might reveal to us any sin that may need to be brought into the light and confessed – to purify ourselves, and then to enter into our praise of God – so grateful for who He is and what He has done for us – to joyfully celebrate with thanksgiving.

One of the reasons we come together each week is to give thanks to our God who is deserving of all praise. We give thanks because we recognise that Life is all about God. We are reminded through an incident with Jesus. He was on His way to Jerusalem, and **“As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”**

When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

This foreigner happened to be a Samaritan, but it was he who sought to give all praise to God. All of these lepers were in an appalling state, their flesh was rotting away on them. They were dying a slow death; Jewish society couldn’t bear to go near them, and was afraid of them and their disease. All ten were healed, yet only one fell on his face before Jesus praising and thanking Him for what he had done. I think that oft times we’re not too dissimilar to the nine. We come to God in prayer and He blesses us, and we fail to give thanks.

Nehemiah on the other hand organises two large choirs, comprising of the Levite singers, the leaders and officials, the 7 priests with their trumpets and the musicians. Both groups with similar formations, but sent off in opposite directions from the other end to the Temple. You can read about that from v.31 – 43. But essentially, you have two large choirs making their way around the top of the city wall till they meet together and then continue to sing their praises once within the temple.

They also offered great sacrifice unto God, rejoicing because God had filled them with great joy. V.43, **“The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.”**

I grew up on a farm, and apart from a farmhouse just across the road from us, the next closest house was around 1.5km away. One summer whilst looking after our farms (our parents were away on holiday), a mate and I cranked up his guitar amp to play some music and then headed down the road to check it out. We could still hear that music as clear as a bell 1 km down the road. I imagine the celebration from the walls of Jerusalem was at least like that. Everybody joined in the raucous chorus, and people in the outlying areas could not only see the activity on the wall, but hear it as well.

What a testimony! The wall was evidence of the providence of God. The people walking on that wall were a testimony to God. Remember early on in its construction, their neighbouring enemies said, **“... if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”** (4:3) And their praise unto God was a great testimony to the provision of God.

As the people made their way around that wall, they saw the visual rebuilding of their city, and their nation. You know, we have some wonderful facilities here and we praise God for that, but these facilities, like the walls around Jerusalem at the time, are just a tool to be used for the glory of God.

As they looked around, they saw the goodness of God, and they praised Him. As you look around to the ways that God has worked, moved, provided for you in your life, I trust you too are drawn into praise. If you are finding praising God difficult at the moment, could it be that you are failing to see the wonderful ways that God has worked for you?

As they looked around, they also saw that many of the homes still lay in ruins within the walls of Jerusalem. Those who had come in from surrounding areas were still struggling to get on their feet and provide for their families. They still remained under the reign of the Persian Empire and had to pay their dues.

Yet the words of Habakkuk rang true in their hearts, **“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to tread on the heights.”** (Hab 3:17-19) Every one of us goes through tough times and long for better. But in the midst of it all we still see a good and faithful God.

Verse 43 begins, **“And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy.”** This celebration: this day of rejoicing could be heard from many miles away because they praised God from their hearts; God had given them great joy, and they entered into their praise exuberantly, cheerfully, enthusiastically, unashamed of what others around them may have thought; they entered in as though God were the only one watching. They wanted God to know that they loved Him for who He was and what He had done for them. The details of their procession are less important than the spirit from which they came to praise God. God is far more interested in what is going on in our hearts than he is with a “correct” form of worship.

And so, you’ve probably realised, the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls in Nehemiah is a great analogy of what God does for us when he rebuilds our lives through Jesus Christ.

Like the Israelites in exile, we start from a place of utter ruin, a consequence of our sin, where there appears to be no hope, we’re born into a situation where we’ve strayed from God and are cut off. But God is calling us by His Spirit; He’s drawing us by His Holy Spirit, and has a plan for us.

The rebuilding work starts when we turn back to Him, asking for forgiveness for our sins. As we ask Him to be the boss of our lives; as we thank Him that Jesus has paid the price for our sin and saved us; God then starts his healing work; recreating us so that we are a reflection of Jesus; a truly miraculous and wonderful new life is built, and our God is more than worthy of our praise and adoration. If the Holy Spirit is prompting you this morning, I encourage you to invite Jesus to be your boss; builder, or your personal trainer.

By looking at this monumental event in history, and it’s fitting celebration, I hope, we are encouraged this morning to celebrate God and his ongoing rebuilding work in our lives. God and God alone is worthy of our praise.

Song: TN 285 Goodness of God