

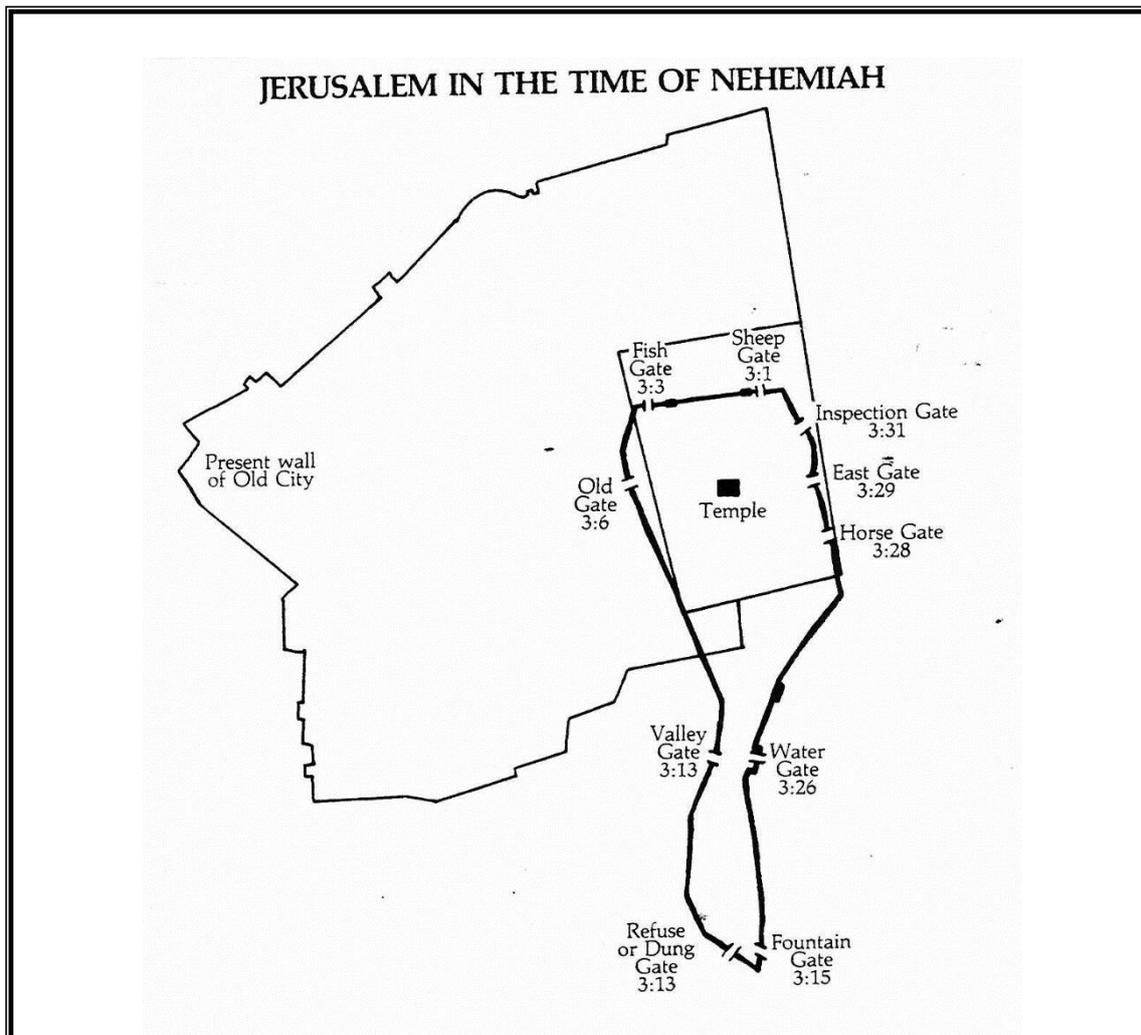
“PASS ME ANOTHER BRICK”

Sermon by Tan Sin Liang

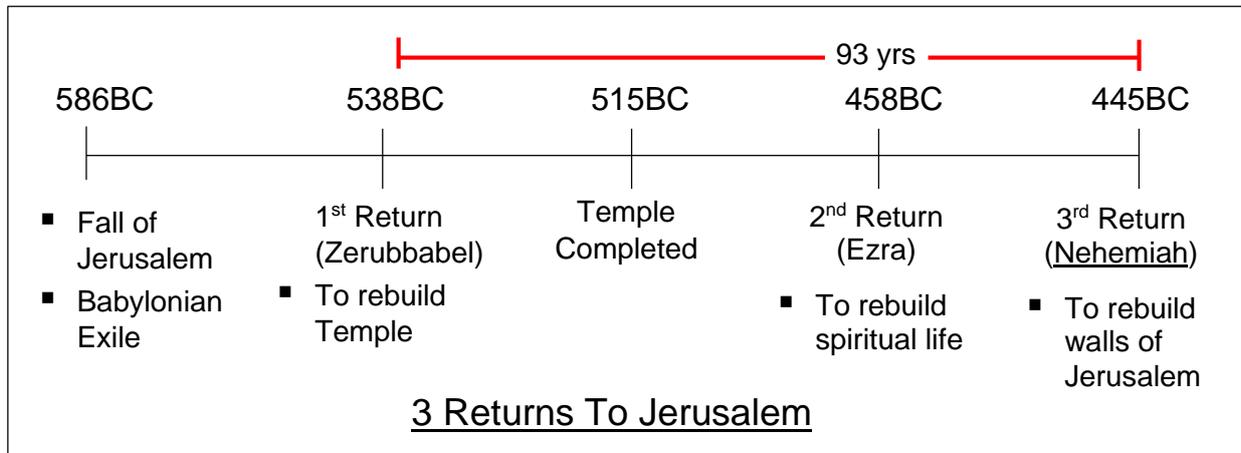
Scripture Reading: *Nehemiah 2:17&18*

17. Then I said to them, “You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach (“disgrace”).
18. I told them how the hand of God has been favourable to me and also about the King’s words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us arise and build”. So they put their hands to the good work.

Nehemiah 2:17-18(NASB)



Historical Background To Nehemiah



- When Jerusalem was conquered by Babylonians, the Temple of God & the city wall at Jerusalem were destroyed
- City Wall of Jerusalem laid in ruins for more than 100 yrs.
- Under 1st Return – temple was rebuilt in 515 BC.
 - but no one rebuild the wall of Jerusalem
- Under 2nd return – no one rebuild wall of Jerusalem
- What is a city without walls?
 - it is defenceless, vulnerable to attacks by enemies around Jerusalem
- It is against this background, the book of Nehemiah unfolds
- Nehemiah is poised to return to Jerusalem under the “3rd Return” in 445BC

Upsetting News From Jerusalem

- Let me take you to the palace where Nehemiah worked.
- Nehemiah was in the King’s palace when Hanani and some Jews came to visit him.
 - they’ve just come back from Jerusalem
- The conversation then led to Nehemiah asking an innocent question: “So how are things in Jerusalem?”

- Hanani: “The Jews who survived the exile are in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire.”
(*Neh 1:3 ESV*)

- When Nehemiah heard this, you could see his whole countenance fell. He was like a man who just heard the tragic news of his loved one just died.
- He sat down & wept.
 - He mourned for days (not sure how long)
 - He fasted and prayed for days

Prayer Of Nehemiah (Neh 1:)

- Notice 1st thing Nehemiah did was not to run to the King for help
 - 1st thing he did: he “ran” to his God
- There are some prayers that move God in heaven
 - this is one of them
 - reminds me of the same great prayer by King Jehoshaphat
- This is how Nehemiah prayed.

Prayer Of Nehemiah

1st: He Praised God (v5)

- Nehemiah did not start by telling God what he wanted (that’s the way we pray isn’t it?)
- He praised God as the “great and awesome God who keeps his covenant and steadfast love”.

2nd: He Vicariously Confessed The Sin Of Israel (v6 – v7)

- Next, he took upon himself to confess the sins of Israel, “we have sinned against you; I and my father’s house have sinned.”
- This is what I call “vicarious confession”, confessing on behalf of fellow Jews.

3rd: He Reminded God His Promises (v8 – v10)

- He reminded God that if Israelites confessed their sins & forsake their wicked ways, God would bring them back to Jerusalem (God had started the 1st & 2nd Return)
- He also reminded God, though sinful, the Israelites were still His children.

4th: Finally His Petition (v11)

- Usually our prayer has only 1 part – petition
 - what you want from God
- This is what he wanted God to do
 - “make your servant successful today and grant him compassion (‘mercy’) before this man”.
 - “Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man” (NIV)

- That’s the way we should pray.
- Who is “this man” Nehemiah was referring to? He was King of Persia (King Artaxerxes)
- What did Nehemiah want?
 - He was going to ask the king for a favour
 - To do something about repairing the broken wall of Jerusalem

Who was Nehemiah?

- At the end of whole of Chapter 1, the last sentence (*Neh 1:11*)
 - Nehemiah introduced himself (almost reluctantly)
 - “I was cupbearer to the King” (*Neh 1:11*) (6 words, shortest sentence in Chap. 1)
- “It is almost like a “footnote” (“Oh by the way, I was the cupbearer to the King)”
- If Nehemiah was a Singaporean, he would have stated in 1st verse of Chapter 1, not the last verse.
- Doesn’t that say something about this man?
 - speaks of his humility
 - speaks also of his meekness (power under control)
- All great man of God have this great quality
 - meekness & humility (Moses, Daniel, Jesus etc.)

Who is a cupbearer?

- He was a very trusted member of the King's inner circle of royal servant
- He was the person who would taste the wine first before allowing the King to drink it.
 - because in those day, one way to kill the King was to poison the wine he drinks
- So if the wine is poisoned, cupbearer who drank it earlier will drop dead
 - thus saving the King from wine – poisoning
- That was the theory. 'That was how it was supposed to work.
- This obviously involve a great element of trust that he does his job faithfully
 - he wouldn't cheat & end up killing the King.
 - so the King's life depended on a cupbearer.

Nehemiah Before The King

- Though sad as he was, Nehemiah tried to go about his work as normal as he could
- Each day he prayed for the right time to catch the King in his good mood to speak to him (what was weighing heavily in his mind).

Q: Have you been through a similar experience?

- waiting for the right time to speak to your boss? Your spouse?

- In the end, Nehemiah did not speak to the King
 - the King spoke to Nehemiah instead.
- How did it happen? Listen to this conversation between the King & Nehemiah in his court.

Conversation Between King & Nehemiah (my paraphrase of *Neh 2:1-8*)

- King: Nehemiah. I notice the past few days you looked very sad. Why is your face so sad? You're not sick. This must be sadness of heart. Why? Someone in your family died? (You won't find this in the Bible).

- Neh 1:1 "I had not been sad in his presence".
- Neh 1: 2 "Then I was very much afraid".
- Why? – appearing sad before the King is very disrespectful. Penalty? Capital punishment – death penalty

- Nehemiah: "Oh King, why wouldn't I be sad? The city where any father was buried lies in ruins. "The wall of Jerusalem has been lying in ruins for almost 100 years". (not in Bible)
- King: "So what do you want?"
- Nehemiah: "My King, may it please you to send me to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem."

- If you're the King, what would you say to Nehemiah, your cupbearer?

- "What? You want to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem??
- You know how big the city wall or not? (Nehemiah may not have been to Jerusalem before)
- You know how much money you need or not? You got money or not? No money? Then how to build? How?
- You mean to tell me, out of the 1,000s of Jews living in Jerusalem, no engineers there? No architect?
- As you said, it has been lying in ruin for almost 100 years like that, so why bother?
- It is not to your business, is it? Your business is to serve me, your King, Jerusalem 1,000 miles away. What has that to do with you?
- Oh, by the way, do you have an engineering degree from University of Jerusalem? You're a cupbearer, not an engineer. Not an architect.
- Sorry. The answer is "No".

- Thank God, that was not how the conversation went.

- King (replying to Nehemiah's request): I have 2 questions for you.
 - 1st: How long is your journey?
 - 2nd: When will you be back?
- Nehemiah gave the King a time line (not mentioned). The King nodded.

- This was the break-thru Nehemiah has been waiting for!
- Secretly, Mr. Nehemiah had prepared a secret 'Wish List' (in case the King grant him leave to go to Jerusalem)
- So Nehemiah whipped out his pocket this flimsy hand-written piece of paper and he said to the King: -

Nehemiah: "Thank you, my Lord. I also have 2 questions.

1st: Can I have your Royal Letter of Safe Passage to the governors of provinces that I will pass through on my way to Jerusalem?

2nd: Can I also have your Royal Licence address to the Royal Keeper of the King's Forest to cut down timber because I need them to repair the wall & to replace the burned city gates and to build my home".

King: Ok. Anything else you need?

- So God answered Nehemiah's prayer. Remember Nehemiah asked God for 2 things –
 - (i) King be compassionate & (ii) grant him success
- God answered both his prayers
- In fact God gave Nehemiah more than what he asked for
 - God moved the King to include a royal cavalry to escort him to Jerusalem!

"And the King granted them to me because the good hand of God was on me"
(Neh 1:8)

What Can We Learn About Nehemiah So Far?

- (i) Nehemiah was a man of prayer
- (ii) Nehemiah was a humble man

(iii) Nehemiah was obedient to God's calling

- Did God call Nehemiah to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem?
- “Yes”, if you read it carefully. It is hidden somewhere in Chapter 2 (like, by the way, he is telling us this)

“I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind (“heart”) to do for Jerusalem”.

(Neh 2:12)

How do we know God's calling?

- When God calls us to do something, He usually put the thought or idea into our heart
 - from there it begins to speak & usually a deep conviction that won't go away
- Then God may also further show you by circumstances to confirm it.
- That has been my experience
- That was the case for Nehemiah
 - 1st God put the thought in his mind, it grew & convicted him (mourned & fasted)
 - then God showed him circumstances to confirm his calling by the King granting his request & providing all the resources)

(iv) Nehemiah was prepared to leave his comfort zone to serve God

- Nehemiah probably had a cushy job in the King's palace, surrounded by luxury.
- Why would anyone want to quit such a cushy job & undertake a dangerous task with no guaranty of success?
- Would the Jews in Jerusalem accept him as their leader?
 - would they even listen to him?
 - would they obey him?
- Nehemiah's plan was fraught with danger (as subsequent events confirmed)
- Nehemiah may return to the King a “failure”.
- When great men of God obey God to undertake a task
 - risk of failure is not within their vocabulary.

Hudson Taylor – 1st Missionary to China

- *When he set sail to China to evangelise this dark powerful nation, he did not know what await him. Later they found these words in his diary:*
 - (i) *First, it was “impossible”*
 - (ii) *Then, it was “difficult”*
 - (iii) *Finally:, it’s “done”*

- When God calls us to do something for Him
 - just obey and do the right thing
 - leave the outcome to Him (that’s not your responsibility).
 - I’ve been through this way before & the consequences I had to face was dire. But God delivered me.
- (v) Nehemiah was a man of action
- Nehemiah did not just mourn about the problem
 - He got up and did something about it
 - he travelled from Susa to Jerusalem (1,000 over miles) to solve this problem
- (vi) Nehemiah did not have power but he had great influence
- As the royal cupbearer he had no power but he had great influence (being close to the King)
 - And he was prepared to use his position in the King’s court to serve God.
 - Are you and I prepared to use our influence in our workplace, market place and community for God where he has placed you?

How Nehemiah Rebuild The Wall Of Jerusalem (Chap. 2)

- How he managed to rebuild Jerusalem shows his great leadership qualities.

1st: He surveyed the damaged wall & city gates

- He did this at night so as not to draw unwanted attention to his task (esp from Jew’s enemies)
- This helped him to plan and to mobilise the entire community

2nd: Called for meeting with leaders

- After a night of surveillance around the wall and citygates, he called for a meeting with the leaders of the Jews (priests, nobles & officials).
- 1st he reminded them how bad their situation was (maybe they're so used to it they don't even realised it)
- Then he told them why he was in Jerusalem
 - how God had put this vision in his mind
 - how the King provided him everything he needed for this project
- So he issued them the challenge:

"Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be in disgrace ("reproach"). (Neh 2:17)

- And the leaders responded resoundingly:

"Let us arise and build. So they put their hands to the good work". (Neh 2:18)

- Here we see Nehemiah the great "motivator", getting the leaders to "buy-in" his idea to repair the walls
- He knows, if he get the leaders, he gets the whole community.

3rd: How he mobilised the entire community workforce

- 1st: He assigned each section of the wall to the family that lived nearest to that section of the wall.
- 2nd He assigned other people to build the city gates.
- So it was very well organised, no one was left out
 - not even the priests and Levites, nobles & rulers.
- Listen to this (Chap 3): -

V1. Eliashib the high priest built the Sheep Gate
V2. Next to him the men of Jericho built. Next to them, Zaccur built.
V4. Next to them Meremoth repaired. Next to them, Meschullam repaired
V5. Next to them, the Tekoites repaired but their nobles refused to serve the Lord
V7. Next to them Uzziel, goldsmiths repaired
V8. Next to them Hananiah, one of the perfumers repaired

- V9. Next to Rephaiah, son of Hur, ruler of half district of Jerusalem repaired
- V10. Next to them, Jedaiah repaired opposite his house
- V12. Next to him, Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of half of Jerusalem, he and his daughters repaired.
- V14 The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of ruler of District of
- V15 The Foundation Gate repaired by Shallum, son of ruler of District of
- V17 Next to him, the repairs were made by the Levites
- V28. Above the Horse Gate the priests repaired, each one opposite his own house.
- V32. Between the upper chamber of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the merchants repaired.

- This shows Nehemiah was a great organiser

Several things we can observe

1. The people were working very close to each other.
 - You get the sense that they were standing shoulder-to-shoulder to each other covering each foot of the wall.
 - That's the way we should build the church. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder to serve the Lord.
 - Close enough to pass the stones (bricks) to each other. Hence, the title of my sermon: "Pass Me Another Brick"
2. The entire Jewish community was involved.
 - They were all from different backgrounds (from the high priest Levites, & nobles except the Tekoites nobles) to the goldsmiths, perfumers, merchants, rulers and even Levites were all involved. Ordinary family members.
 - No one was left out
 - They were all united (with same mission: rebuild the wall)
 - That's the way we should serve in our church
 - serve the Lord together regardless of our positions (or lack of position) in society
 - because at the foot of the cross, we're all equal

3. Taking 'Ownership'

- By assigning each section of the wall or each city gate to each family and occupation
 - Nehemiah was making Jews take 'ownership' of the problem
- That's the way we serve our church
 - we must take 'ownership' of our church, because no one else will.

Wall Half Completed – Opposition From Enemies

- Under Nehemiah's great leadership the entire wall of Jerusalem was half completed in a matter of weeks.
- Then came trouble. There was opposition from enemies of the Jews.
 - both from within and without
- Not uncommon, when the church wants to march on
 - there will be opposition & resistance from members within the church and opposition outside the church (common in other countries like Malaysia)
 - we need to be vigilant against such attacks

Who are these enemies?

1st: Enemies from within

- In verse 5 we saw that while the Tekoites Jews were willing to join in to rebuild the wall
 - the Tekoites nobles refused. Why?
- Verse 5 tells us: "their nobles would not stop to serve their God"
- In other words, they were proud, arrogant & selfish.
- If we do not partake in God's work, we miss out on God's blessings.

2nd: The enemies from without

- Sanballat (governor of Samaria), Tobiah (probably governor of TransJordan) and Gesham the Arab
 - formed an unholy alliance ("The Unholy Trinity") & have been opposing Nehemiah's efforts from Day 1.

- They probably felt threatened. A rebuilt Jerusalem would threaten their authority & influence in this region.
 - so they oppose Nehemiah.
- This external enemy posed a greater threat to Nehemiah's work.
- When they heard that Nehemiah & the Jews had completed half the wall within such a short time.
- They were alarmed. They decided to stop Nehemiah by all foul means.
 - first, they ridiculed Nehemiah & the Jews:

("What are these feeble Jews doing?.....even a fox climbed up on it, it would break down their wall....")

(Neh 4: 2-4)

- then they used treachery
- When ridicule & treachery failed, they resorted to threat. They were about to launch an attack on Nehemiah & his men.
- Besides praying, this was what Nehemiah did.

Nehemiah's strategy against enemy (Chap 4)

- He set up guard day & night (v9)
- While half of the Jews worked on the wall, the other half stood guard with spears, shields, bows and breastplates (v16)
- "Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon" (v17)
- "So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared" (v21)

- What a marvellous strategy. Shows Nehemiah was a great strategist.
- That's the way we should guard our church.
 - be on guard at all times against Satan using his enemies (both within & without) to attack the church
 - don't let the enemies stop the church from doing what it is called to do.

Wall Completed – 52 Days

- Under Nehemiah's leadership, the wall of Jerusalem was completed in a record time of 52 days (*Neh 6:15*)
- For nearly 100 years the wall of Jerusalem laid in ruin, God called Nehemiah & he completed the job in 52 days (despite serious opposition).
- It all began with a casual conversation in the King's court
 - God used this casual conversation to move Nehemiah to undertake this historic task.
- Sometimes that's how God move us. Starting with a casual conversation.

CLOSING

- The church needs every able-bodied member to serve
 - irrespective of who you are (rich or poor, young or old etc.)
- So where are the "Nehemiahs"?
 - where are The "priests"? The "rulers"? The "goldsmiths"? The "perfumers"?
- Let's echo the words of the leaders to the challenge by Nehemiah "Let us arise and build".

2 lessons we learn (simple but profound)

(i) One man can make a difference

- Who says one cannot make a difference?
- Nehemiah did. And what a difference he made.

(ii) When God calls He wants our availability, not our ability. 'Ability' he can provide.

- When God called Nehemiah, he did not say to God: "Why me? I'm only a cupbearer. Please call someone else"
- When Nehemiah availed himself to God, God gave him the ability
- Ever wondered where did Nehemiah, a cupbearer, acquire all these leadership qualities?
- 1st: Mister Nehemiah may have sat through some "Cabinet Ministers" meetings & observed how the Persian empire was run (while serving the King his favourite wine)

- 2nd: God equipped him with the abilities he needed for the job.
- For the record, Nehemiah became the governor of Jerusalem before returning to the King.
- So from cupbearer to governor, it became possible because God make it possible.
- So when God calls, avail yourself. Don't worry about the ability. God will provide.