

THOSE WHO BUILT THE WALLS AND SET UP THE GATES

The account covers the building of the north wall, which was the most damaged (3:1–7), and the extensive repair of the west wall (3:7–14) and east wall (3:15–32), that is, counterclockwise around the city.⁶⁰ The rebuilding was done by those who—unlike Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem—had a share, a claim and an historic right in the city. As you read it, your first reaction may be that the names are difficult to pronounce, but let's go a little deeper than that!

I find lists of names like this very exciting! Below are five reasons.

1. Human interest

There is the sheer human interest of the story, and of the people who take part. For example:

- The high priest Eliashib leads the list, even though we later find that his grandson was an opponent of Nehemiah (13:28).
- The priests dedicated or consecrated the Sheep Gate (3:1), because this was the wall of a holy city (11:1, 18) and upon completion the whole wall would be dedicated or consecrated (12:27–43).
- The men of Tekoa actually repaired two sections of the wall even though their nobles were slackers (3:5, 27)!
- Meremoth and Meshullam both repaired two sections (3:4, 21, 30), though we later discover that Meshullam was a relative of Nehemiah's enemy Tobiah (6:18).
- Shallum's daughters got to work on their section (3:12).
- Local rulers played their part (3:12, 14, 15, 16, 17, and others).
- Priests got to work (3:1, 22, 28), as did a goldsmith and a perfumer (3:8).
- Malkijah, son of Harim helped (3:11): he had formerly been in trouble for marrying a foreign wife (Ezra 10:31). He must have repented, and now took his place in rebuilding the wall.

⁶⁰ The city was on the eastern hill of Jerusalem, the place where David's city and Solomon's temple had been built. It was later extended to include the western hill as well, as it did in the time of Jesus and the apostles.

I wonder if there is a pointed contrast between people of Tekoa, who didn't live in Jerusalem (Tekoa was about 22 kilometres south of Jerusalem), who rebuilt two sections of the wall, and those priests who repaired the wall in front of their own houses (3:28)? The latter do look a bit selfish! But perhaps they helped elsewhere as well. And of course people from neighbouring towns would find their safety within the walled city of Jerusalem if enemies attacked. So people from towns like Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Zanoah, Beth Hakkerem, Beth Zur and Keilah took part in building the wall. Some of the priests lived in surrounding areas (3:22), while some lived in the city (3:28).

The beams and gates for the Fish Gate (3:3) were for a structure that would include a roofed gatehouse over the top of the gateway, and two sets of double gates—one external and one internal. Kathleen Kenyon and other archaeologists have uncovered sections of the wall. It was roughly built by untrained people, not by expert stonemasons. It is typical of the people of God in Ezra and Nehemiah's day that they were so willing to take a lead. In this chapter I counted 40 individuals or groups who took part. And from this list comes a sense of the human joy of working together on a common task, and of finding that if each person and group does their bit of the job, then together great things are achieved. This is a pleasure given us by God, and we should enjoy it and thank him for it. This chapter shows us the dignity of the work that we do, and the pleasure of working with others in a common task.

2. God values our work

This list shows us how much God values the work that we do, and honours believers for our good works. I love those verses in the letters to the churches in Revelation where Jesus tells churches that he knows what they do for him. For example, to the church at Ephesus, he says: 'I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance' (Revelation 2:2). It might be that no-one sees your good deeds, but Jesus knows them and God honours them. God honoured the hard work of these builders by including their names in the Bible. If you are reading Nehemiah on your own, please now read through Chapter 3 out loud, to honour those God has honoured. If you are in a small group, then please do the same.

3. The significance of the rebuilding

For people who know their Bibles, the rebuilding of these walls is highly significant. Let's look at some verses from Isaiah. God had caused the breaking down of the walls at the destruction of Jerusalem, because of the sin of the people:

The Lord stripped away the defences of Judah ...
You saw that the walls of the City of David
were broken through in many places. ([Isaiah 22:8–9](#))⁶¹

Yet God had not forgotten his people, and had not forgotten the walls of Jerusalem:

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!
See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me.' ([Isaiah 49:15–16](#))

And if God's people repented, then God would restore them to Jerusalem, and allow them to return and rebuild:

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. ([Isaiah 58:12](#))

4. God's plan

This chapter also reminds me of the joy Christians have in being fellow workers in gospel ministry. The workers in [Nehemiah 3](#) were furthering God's great plan to bring his Son into the world to be our Saviour. [Jesus Christ](#) would come to this city, and here he would die as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and rise again on the third day. Here, in this city, on the day of Pentecost, Peter would begin the preaching of the gospel of Christ to the nations.

We have the privilege of being fellow workers in gospel ministry today. We may be doing gospel ministry, speaking of the [Lord Jesus](#) to others, full-time, part-time, spare-time, or when we have opportunity. We may be partners in gospel ministry in praying

⁶¹For the historical account of how God did this, see [2 Chronicles 36:15–19](#).

for others, or in supporting others in their ministries (see for example [1 Corinthians 3:9](#); [Colossians 1:7](#); [4:7](#); [Philemon 1, 2, 24](#); [3 John 8](#)).

5. God loves builders today!

Paul uses the language of building to describe our ministries of the word to each other. God values builders, and God wants every member of the church to be a builder! Paul writes, ‘By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care’ ([1 Corinthians 3:10](#)).

He warns that everyone in the church needs to show love: ‘knowledge puffs up while love builds up’ ([1 Corinthians 8:1](#)). He wants us to value gifts of speaking and encouraging each other: ‘Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church’ ([1 Corinthians 14:12](#)).⁶² And notice Paul’s vision for building up the church in the following verses:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, **so that the body of Christ may be built up** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and **builds itself up in love**, as each part does its work. ([Ephesians 4:11–16](#))

Let’s be builders!

6. We benefit from others

Let’s think, too, how much we benefit from others. I wonder if you know this traditional saying:

Today I was warmed by fires I did not build.
I drank from a well I did not dig.

⁶² And note that ‘build up’ is often translated ‘edify’, for example in [1 Corinthians 14](#).

I sat in the shade of a tree I did not plant.
Let me pause to give thanks for the efforts
of those who came before me.⁶³

I have been thinking deeply over the last few months of that vast number of people whom God has used to teach me: parents, brothers; kindergarten teachers, primary school teachers and secondary school teachers; friends at every age; authors of all those books I have read; radio and TV programs, via the web; music teachers, lecturers at university and college; those who have taught me practical skills; music heard, works of art seen, gardens and buildings enjoyed, which have all expanded my aesthetic awareness and enjoyment; colleagues, parishioners, students, people at conferences; other speakers at conferences; people I have heard preach in person or electronically; and casual meetings and conversations. And of course even more learning happens by watching how people live, when we learn even though no-one is teaching!

Most of what I have learned I don't remember learning, though I do remember some moments of learning very vividly. I am so grateful to God for each of these countless gifts and for those who have contributed so generously to me and enriched my life—whether they have known it or not.

We have benefited from those who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah, from Eliashab to Malkijah and the goldsmiths and merchants (3:1, 31, 32) so long ago. Their actions have encouraged us, and warmed our hearts. Praise God for [Nehemiah 3](#)!

OPPOSITION TO THE WORK—BUT THE WORK CONTINUES!

Look at the ingredients of [Nehemiah 4](#):

- ridicule by enemies (vv 1–3)
- prayer (vv 4–5)
- action (v 6)
- planned attack by enemies (vv 7–8)
- prayer (v 9)
- discouragement at lack of resources (vv 10–12)

⁶³This saying is based on words from [Deuteronomy 6:10–12](#).

- wise planning (vv 13–15)
- action (vv 16–23).

They were lively days with lots of opposition, lots of prayer, lots of wisdom, and lots of work! It reminds me of the church in Acts and throughout the ministries of Paul and the other apostles: lots of opposition, lots of prayer, lots of wisdom, and lots of work. It does make the life of some of our churches look a bit tame!

Notice the strategy of the enemies. They used a military parade of Samaria's army, and the visit of a leader (4:2–3). They had previously tried lies and slander (2:19, 'Are you rebelling against the king?') and would use it again in 6:6–7. They used ridicule: 'feeble Jews'; 'Will they (rather than trained stonemasons) restore their wall?'; 'Will they finish in a day?'; 'Can they bring the stones back to life?'; 'even a fox climbing on it would break down their wall of stones!' (4:2–3). And they also used threats: 'Before they know it ... we ... will kill them' (4:11). This is of course contradictory, for if the Jews are so feeble and the wall is so fragile, there is no need to kill them! But those who oppose the work of God and the good works of his people will use any method they can. We are used to that, even today. And their strategy works, for people in Judah were discouraged (4:10), and many feared for their lives (4:12).

Notice the prayers of Nehemiah and the people. Nehemiah's prayer (4:4–5) was a vigorous prayer that God would frustrate and judge those who opposed the good works of his people. It was not a prayer for eternal condemnation, but a prayer that God the Judge would not let their opponents succeed, would not ignore the wickedness of their actions. It was the right prayer to pray in times of human weakness, when God's plans are opposed, and when only God can rescue. And God answered Nehemiah's prayer, and did frustrate the plans of his enemies (4:15), and enabled his people to succeed in building the wall.

It is like the prayer I pray when I see people opposing gospel ministry, either from inside or outside the church: 'Please frustrate all their plans, and make them fall into the pits they have prepared for others'. And of course Nehemiah did not just pray as a private individual. He was the community leader, fulfilling not only God's will but also the command of King Artaxerxes. Remember the instruction given by Paul in [Romans 13](#):

But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are

God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ([Romans 13:4](#))

In opposing Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls, these people were not only opposing God's plans, but also the plans of their king!

Notice that Judah and Jerusalem were now surrounded by enemies—from the west Ashdodites were now added to Sanballat (north), Tobiah (east), and Geshem (south-east) as seen on the map on page 17!

See the great combination of trust in God and wise actions, for example in [4:9](#): 'But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat'. We often think that if we pray, we need not act, and that acting when you have prayed is faithless. Or we act, and forget to pray. We either take too little responsibility, or too much responsibility. We need to keep the right balance between trusting God and taking responsibility. And the right balance means doing both whole-heartedly! I love the way the book of Proverbs tells us: 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding' ([Proverbs 3:5](#)); and it also tells us: 'Go to the ant, you slug-gard; consider its ways and be wise!... it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest' ([Proverbs 6:6, 8](#))!

The same good combination of trust in God and practical wisdom is found in Nehemiah's words and actions. He set up people at the lowest points of the wall to guard the workers, with swords, spears and bows ([4:13](#)). He also told the people not to be afraid, to 'remember the Lord, who is great and awesome' ([4:14](#)), and wisely reminded them that they were fighting for their families, wives and homes ([4:14](#)). As Nehemiah prayed that God would remember him, so he encouraged the people to 'remember the Lord'. He encouraged the 'rubble-rousers'⁶⁴ to action in building the wall. So half the workers were protecting, and half were building ([4:16](#)), and even those who were building were armed ([4:17–18](#)). Their equipment was that of a Persian soldier, a reminder that they were serving King Artaxerxes, as well as serving God. Furthermore, because the people were widely separated along the wall, Nehemiah appointed a trumpeter to sound the alarm if they were attacked ([4:18–20](#)). They worked from first light to starlight, and the workers stayed in the city during the nights to guard it. They remained ready for action at all times ([4:21–23](#)).

But with all these wise and practical actions, and while he encouraged them to be

⁶⁴ Brown, *Nehemiah*, p. 79.

ready to fight, he also reminded them of another great practical reality: ‘Our God will fight for us!’ (4:20). Perhaps they remembered the words of [Psalm 127](#):

Unless the LORD builds the house,
the builders labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain. ([Psalm 127:1](#))

Who is this God the LORD? The God of his people, ‘our God’ ([4:4, 9](#)), who is powerful enough to defend his people against their enemies ([4:4, 14](#)), who frustrates the plans of his enemies ([4:15](#)), who hears their prayers ([4:4, 5, 9](#)), and who fights for his people ([4:14](#)), and here enabled them to defend themselves and succeed in building the wall ([4:15–23](#)).