

# Building Walls

If you are among the millions of people who travel to work on public transport, you will no doubt be familiar with the scene on a bus, a railway carriage or in a tube station, where the attention of your fellow travellers is fixed on scanning their mobile phone or tablet. You could be forgiven for thinking that each exists within their separate, virtual world.



Of course hundreds of years ago, long before the invention of mobile devices and social media, many still wanted to live in their own physical space. To do so meant surrounding oneself with the protection of a physical barrier such as an earth embankment, or a stone wall.

## Walls Through Time

A good example is the city of Chester, which for almost 2,000 years has been enclosed by walls. Originally it was a fortress made up of earth ramparts topped by wooden palisades, with wooden gates and towers at regular intervals. By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, the sandstone walls were under construction and the Romans completed the circuit some 100 years later.

Regular repairs were carried out on the walls throughout history, including Chester's re-fortification in 907 AD by the Saxons, who it is believed extended the walls. If you travel to Chester today you can see the full circuit of the walls, as they were completed by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Repair of the walls was an ongoing problem during the medieval period, and some of the Roman altars and tombstones were used as materials.

During the English Civil War, Chester was besieged between 1644 and 1646 and some of the walls and towers were damaged. The walls had outlived their defensive purpose by the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and they now served as walkways for visitors to promenade.

The circuit of the walls of Chester extend for 3 kilometres and rise to a height of 12 metres in places. They have been designated as 'buildings of exceptional interest' and in a year the city attracts 8 million visitors from all over the world.



This figure exceeds Jerusalem with around 3.5 million visitors a year, yet Jerusalem's history goes back further and is even more colourful. The discoveries of archaeology trace the records of the Israeli capital for over 3,000 years. During that time, the city walls went through many changes, falling into disrepair and ruin particularly when the land of Israel was invaded by her more powerful neighbours. The word of God, the Bible, describes many such circumstances and we are going to look at just one situation to see what we can learn from this, for our lives today.

## **Building Confidence**

These days there are no end of self-help books or web sites where you can find out how to lead and develop the skills of a team. Yet there is at least one of the books of the Bible – called Nehemiah – that can give us better guidance than all the books that you can buy.

The book was named after the Jewish cupbearer to the King of Persia in about 446 BC. Being a cup-bearer was a very responsible position, because not only did he have to taste everything that was poured into the king's cup, but by doing so the cup-bearer was putting his own life at risk. Because of his position, Nehemiah was held in high regard by the court and at the same time he had special access to the King.

After 70 years' exile in the Babylonian and then Medo-Persian empires, some of the exiled Jews returned to the land of Israel from Babylon (in modern day Iraq). This was the result of a decree by King Cyrus in 536 BC allowing them to return and rebuild Jerusalem.

However, those resettling in the land found they faced fierce opposition and as a result the walls of Jerusalem had been left to fall into ruin. Nehemiah received the message:

*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 (Nehemiah 1:3).*

The scene is set, and in the rest of chapter 1 we read how Nehemiah, in great distress, prayed to the Lord God about this, and that he might be able to play his part.

*“O LORD, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” For I was the king's cupbearer (Nehemiah 1:11).*

We can learn from Nehemiah's confidence in God. Despite the fact that he and many of his people were still a long way away from their homeland, he believed that God was in control and would answer his prayer. There are times in our lives when life is not easy and yet if we believe that there is a God and we have faith, He will answer our prayers.

## **Organising the Work**

We have already seen Nehemiah as a man of prayer, and we find that he demonstrated his leadership skills in the way that he organised the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Although he did not initially involve the people in

creating a plan, he did involve them in the construction itself to make the best use of resources.

Firstly, he subdivided each stretch of the wall according to the amount of work required. So the more repairs that were needed, the shorter the length of wall that was allocated to them. Secondly, Nehemiah chose those people who had the strongest reason to complete each part of the wall. Generally, the families or small businesses who were located nearest the wall being repaired were allocated to carry out the work.

From goldsmiths and perfumers to nobles and priests, all were involved. Each section of the wall was not necessarily completed by highly skilled builders or craftsmen, but where there was a shortfall in technical skills, this would be made up for by the enthusiasm and motivation to complete their task. They would have shared ideas on how to complete the stonework to adjoining walls. Perhaps there are still lessons here for many of us who work in teams today.

Rebuilding the walls of the city of Jerusalem was not just a largescale construction project aimed at protecting the city from attack. It was also a way of restoring the national pride which had been so crushed by the invasions of Israel and Judah and the subsequent captivity led by the Babylonians.

The groups involved with the work also came from different levels of society, both rich and poor, male and female. It is no accident that Eliashib and the priests head the lists of

builders, which reflected that the work involved was not only physical labour but it had a spiritual significance too.

*Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They built as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and consecrated it, then as far as the Tower of Hananel (Nehemiah 3:1).*

## **Dealing with Setbacks**

Nehemiah's leadership was not only challenged by the size of the task. His resolve was tested in other ways. Firstly there was the reluctance by some to take part in the rebuilding work, and this included some of the rulers.

*The Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their LORD (Nehemiah 3:5).*

However, Nehemiah was able to get the other Tekoites to work hard and even to complete a second portion of the wall, even though their nobles opted out:

*The Tekoites repaired another section, next to the great projecting tower, and as far as the wall of Ophel (v27).*

The second challenge came from those who had settled in the land of Palestine while the Jews had been in captivity in Babylon. Their leader, a man called Sanballat, had heard via his spies in Jerusalem what Nehemiah



had been doing. He came with his accomplices to mock and threaten the rebuilding work.

*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?" 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" (Nehemiah 4:2–3).*

In the face of such withering comments, it would have been tempting for Nehemiah to strike out and give Sanballat the opportunity to attack Jerusalem. Nevertheless, he endured this criticism by praying to God for help:

*Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders (v4–5).*

Here is another important thought for us, to think and pray before reacting, especially when we are under pressure.

The work continued, and the next attack from the local opposition would be with weapons, rather than words. They planned a surprise attack, relying on the Jews being distracted by their work and the amount of rubble preventing them from seeing the ambush.

Nehemiah heard about the plot, and instructed that a watch be set day and

night. Each builder was to be accompanied by a guard with weapons, ready for an attack on the walls. A trumpeter would summon reinforcements for those resisting an attack. But despite these preparations, he was not self-confident, but he encouraged the people to have faith in God:

*Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses... Our God will fight for us (Nehemiah 4:14, 20).*

## **Confidence Justified**

The threatened attack never materialised, and Nehemiah's confidence in God was vindicated. By facing his challenges in faith, he had led his people to rebuild the city walls.

At the completion of his task Nehemiah made a request which he echoed at several points in the record:

*Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people (Nehemiah 5:19).*



We too can seek God in prayer for guidance when we face challenges. If we do, He will not forget us.

**Chris Martindale**