

**Key Passage: Nehemiah 2:17**

Key Thought: God brings his exiles back to Jerusalem and moves them to rebuild the walls.¹

The gospel in Nehemiah:

“Who do you think you are?”

That question comes at us from all sides. When God calls a people, gives them a name, and builds the walls around them, those walls serve to welcome in all who are willing, but also to protect those inside from the wolves. The walls serve as walls of separation, walls of protection, walls of distinction.

Walls are important. Psychologists speak of “boundaries.” Not just for children, but for us all. We don’t always recognize or appreciate those walls of distinction. And because the temptation is often so strong, we sometimes feel the lure to stray outside those

¹ Note, key passages, key thoughts, and hook questions come from Michael Williams, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens*. These notes are compiled from 4 principal sources. In addition to Michael Williams book, notes are also derived from Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*, Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*, and H. H. Drake Williams, *Making Sense of the Bible*.

walls. And sometimes those walls are in need of repair. And there will be people standing on the hills all around us, looking at us defining ourselves by these walls, fixing these walls, manning these walls, and living within these hedges. And they will say “just who do you think you are?”

And we will say: “We are subjects of a wonderful King, who grant his people a richer, more enduring and profoundly fulfilling life than anything available outside his kingdom.”²

But that’s the conclusion. Let’s start at the beginning.

14 years have passed since Ezra’s reforms. The walls of the Temple are built. Sure. But the city is still a ruinous mess. And there are no concrete borders separating a chosen people from the rest of the world. I’m reminded of the story of Lot, who “pitched his tent toward Sodom.” And the next time we hear about him, he and his family have moved into town. There is a generation of children who are now teenagers and their only living memory is of a life among the ruins, with the lure of the world all around them. Imagine living in such an environment without walls. It makes any distinction mighty blurry. Hard to tell where the people of God stop and the world begins.

The cupbearer to the Persian King, Nehemiah hears of the ruin and the rubble. His concern is noted, and the King sends him back to his homeland to repair the breach. The problem wasn’t just that the city had no walls; the people had no visible moral or spiritual boundaries. The walls represented distinction.

The plan was generally agreed to by the insiders. But how do you think the locals reacted when they saw walls of separation erected among people with whom they were used to rubbing shoulders? “Just who do you think you are” is just one of the things they probably said.

It wasn’t easy. There was opposition (Chap 4 & 6). There was great work to do. But Nehemiah says “the people had a mind to work.” They repaired the walls in less than 2 months. And so many blessings followed. The poor among them became noticed, and were cared for (chap 5). They had a national confession (chap 9). They recommitted to God’s law (chap 10). And by the end of the book, it is easy to see that God has a distinct people—called by his name, living with his purpose.

Do you know how the walls were built in record time? Yes, the people had a mind to work. But there was more brilliance to the plan. Each person built the part of the wall

² Michael Williams, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens*, p. 64.

that was in front of their house. Which part of the wall do you want to be best fortified? Which part of the wall do you check most often? Which part of the wall do you notice most regularly?

The act itself brought the people together. Rich and poor. Old and young. Men and women. One people. One purpose.

So many rich themes in this book. And thus we see the gospel.

Christ was not like anyone else. He lived like no one else. And because of Him, you and I are called into his body—and are called a distinct people (1 Pet 2:9). Jesus was hated by all men, and he says you and I will be hated by all men. But here is the rub: Christ calls us to live within the borders of his kingdom, but to never be isolated from the world. His kingdom sits upon the kingdoms of the world like a third dimension. We live among the world, but do not find our home there. We shine like lights in the midst of a dark world, knowing that our citizenship is in heaven. There are things we will not do; but we resist while displaying the character of Christ in the midst of the broken world, not far removed from it. It is only if we live like Christ lived, and bear the scorn Christ bore, and repay brutality with kindness and hope that the world will see the beauty of the gospel. Our pain is heaven's gain. Those walls belong to Him. For our own good, AND for the good of the world.

A distinct people. Hear the gospel.

Hook Questions:³

1. What difference, if any, does your relationship with Christ make in your marriage, friendships, career, student life, or entertainment choices? Do you regard your distinctiveness as God's own child a source of joy or of disgrace?
2. Is there a visible distinction between your life and that of an unbeliever? Would anyone looking at your life be able to see that you are a believer, or are you a stealth Christian—remaining largely undetected until you drop a gospel bomb? How do you maintain your distinctiveness as a Christian without putting off those who need to hear and see the good news?

³ Taken from Michael Williams, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens*, p.64.