

Introduction:

- A. (*Off stage:* Well, it looks straight to me. I'll bring a level.) (*Sees the people.*) Shalom! What's going on *here*? Where'd you come from—the Arabian Desert!? We're rebuilding the walls. ... All the walls, all the way around Jerusalem. And all the gates, too. ... We are. All of us. Jews. Nobody else. This is our city and our job. Almost everybody is pitching in. *I'm a priest!* I mean, what do I know about building walls? I just work on the Sabbath, right! ☺
- B. Have you ever been here before? No? Well, these are the Temple courts. **I don't have time to give you a walking tour but you can see pretty well from over here...** You must've come in through the Sheep Gate [*behind*]. That's where we bring in all the lambs for sacrifices here at the Temple. This is Mt. Zion, the highest point of the city, as you can see. Just past those two towers [*pointing right*] is the Fish Gate. It's where the fish market is. The wall goes quite a bit further before it turns south and then cuts back. Do you see that tower way down there [*pointing far out and a little to the right*]? That's the Tower of the Ovens. It's where all the bakers live. They're working overtime these days! After that the city is very narrow. That's the high rent district down there. It's where the High Priest lives and other important people, too. [*Pointing far out and left*] There's a steep ridge over there on the opposite side so we're running the wall along the top to about that big tower over there. Most of the homes up at this end [*near and left*] are where we priests live. That's why I'm working in this area. My home is right over there.
- C. Oh, look! Do you see the man on the horse down there? **That's Nehemiah, son of Hacaliah.** He's the mastermind of this whole undertaking.

Quite a story! Arrived just a few weeks ago, from Persia. None of us knew him; why, he'd never even been here before, so far as I know! He was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes! Imagine! One of God's chosen people at the

right hand of the ruler of Persia, the mightiest king on earth! But Nehemiah was terribly upset about our trouble and disgrace here in Jerusalem. He prayed—that guy prays *a lot!*—and the God showed him great favor. The king not only let him return but gave him an armed guard and access to all the materials we need. Isn't that amazing! Our God prompted the most powerful man on earth to help *us!*

Nehemiah's an amazing leader! Shortly after he arrived he called a meeting of all our leaders and he told us it was time to rebuild the walls and the gates. Just like that! You see all this rubble? It's been like this for 140 years, ever since Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and carried all our people into captivity. Our fathers returned 70 years ago and they were able to rebuild the Temple, but nothing much came of efforts to rebuild the walls. So we got used to living like refugees in our own city. But it has been humiliating. It's a disgrace!

But then in comes this guy Nehemiah. When *he* said we could do it; that God's gracious hand was upon him, well, we believed him. So you know what we all said? "*Let's start rebuilding!*"

First thing he did was lay out the plan. He had already assessed the situation. He had ridden around the whole city at night when no one would notice. He divided the wall into, I don't know, maybe 40 sections and assigned each section to a group of people. Some sections needed more repair than other sections but it was all a disaster. The really hard part of the job is repairing all twelve gates. We have to reset beams, make the big wooden gates, and then set the bolts in place.

Those of us who live in Jerusalem are all working near our homes. The Jews helping us from outlying towns take the sections where there were no homes.

Maybe you'll get a chance to meet Nehemiah. He's a remarkable man! Look over here (*left*). Let me show you what we're doing...

- D. **This is our section: Its 8 feet thick and it'll be 20 feet high.** We've been at it 36 days now. Nehemiah says we can

finish the whole project in two months or less. That sounds crazy, but so far he knows what he's talking about. I'll tell you one thing we've realized...

I. WE'RE NOT JUST REBUILDING WALLS. WE'RE REBUILDING A PEOPLE FOR GOD.

[Greet Eliashib, the High Priest] Shalom, Father... Doing fine, thank you. Just taking a little break. I'm telling these folks what God is doing among us... With you as well. Shalom.

That was Eliashib, the High Priest. He's the most important man in the city...in the whole *nation*, and he's out here working on the wall along with all the rest of us. And he's not a young man anymore! But he works as hard as anyone.

A. **If we're going to do a great work for God, we each have to do our part!** We're all in this together. All these men right around here are priests like me. When we've repaired the Sheep Gate we're going to have a special dedication service. For us priests the job just isn't finished unless you have a service! We plan it while we work; what songs we'll sing—stuff like that.

Down there *[to the right]*, just past the Old Gate, **Uzziel**, one of the goldsmiths is working. He knows about as much about construction as a priest! I mean, here's a guy used to making small, delicate things and he's lugging boulders around. And he never complains. Oh, and here's another good one! Right next to him is **Hananiah**. *He* makes perfume! I think Nehemiah double-checks their work! 😊 And down there by the Tower of the Ovens, that's where **Shallum** and his *daughters* took on a whole section. Those girls work as hard as anyone!

There are a lot of people from other towns. Down there *[to the right]*, those guys have all come up from **Jericho**. They left their families and are working right alongside us. Just past the corner down there are the men from **Gibeon** and **Mizpah**, and way down there at the point there are some others, from **Beth Zur** and **Keilah**, I think.

I'll tell you who has really earned everyone's respect: it's the men from **Tekoa**. That's about 11 miles south of

here, down near the border. These guys don't even live here and they're breaking their backs out there. There—right down there before the Old Gate [*right*]. They're even way ahead of schedule, and have volunteered to take the section over there, just this side of that high tower [*far and a little left*]. **But you know what? Their noblemen won't help.** We think it's because they're too proud to listen to the supervisors. [v.5] I'll tell you one thing: when this is all done, they may still be rich, but they'll never be respected again! **If you're going to do something for God, we all have to do our part, rich or poor, mighty or lowly.**

[*Listening. Shouting offstage:*] You got the level? I told you it was straight. If it wasn't for me you guys would be building a *ramp* instead of a wall. [*Laughs. To the visitors*] We kid around but...

B. ***Working like this, we're building respect and love for one another.*** We've always been countrymen, but we weren't connected. Pretty... tribal. We didn't respect each other. A lot of griping and criticism. But you work side by side with folks *for the Lord* and something changes between people.

Take Meremoth... He's working just down the line a ways [*to my right*]. He's a priest, too. I've known him forever but never cared much for him. I always felt like he tried a little too hard, if you know what I mean. Awhile back Ezra put him in charge of handling all the gold and silver and other things for the temple. Maybe I was just jealous. (Cf. Ezra 8:33) But I've got a new respect for him. He's almost done with that section of the wall down there and he's already planning to pick up the slack over there [*left & down*] by the East Gate. **While we're building these walls up, we're tearing down the walls between us.** That's good!

C. You know, when I started on this, I figured I'd learn a lot about construction, but **I never imagined I'd learn about being holy.** Of course, we Jews grow up knowing that as God's people we're supposed to be holy—set apart for him—especially as priests, but frankly, we didn't think much about it. But Nehemiah and Ezra the priest have been demanding we change some things we never thought about before. They don't see holiness just as things we do in the

Temple. **They made us thing about holiness with money and marriage.**

Like this big meeting we had the other day where they **chewed us out for charging interest on loans to the poorer workers** here who are giving up income while they work with us. Fact is, some of our people were foreclosing on the property of others. It got so bad that some of the poor people's kids were sold into slavery to the Gentiles. Nehemiah and Ezra just about blistered our ears on that! Hearts, too, I guess, because that business has stopped. They said it was all about being holy.

Then there was trouble with the marriages of some of the men. Like **Malkijah** (v.11). He's working down near the Tower of the Ovens, just above Baker St. He's a Levite. *He* should have known better, but he had taken a pagan wife. I mean, here's a man committed to God's service and his wife doesn't even worship the LORD! She has idols in their home! But when Ezra led us to make a covenant putting away all our pagan wives, Malkijah did it. It was painful for everyone but it had to be done. That section of the Broad Wall where he's working? He told me that every time they add another course of stones to the wall he thinks about being set apart to God. After all, **if we're not holy, we're defenseless**—no matter what kind of walls we build. **It's actually holiness that binds us together.**

You're wondering about the guards? Yeah, I guess you don't usually see guards with spears at construction sites, but we've had some trouble here. Every since my father moved back here after the exile we've been surrounded by Samaritans, Ammonites and some Arabs. They moved in when we were forced out and they still figure this land is theirs. But of course it isn't! God gave *us* this land and this city. Mt. Zion here is the Mountain of the LORD.

When Sanballat, the leader of the Samaritans, heard we were actually rebuilding the walls he was livid! At first, he was just all talk. "*What are those wimpy Jews doing?*" he said. "*Do they think they can just take off a day or two and rebuild city walls? Can they bring the stones back to life from those burned heaps of rubble?*"

Tobias, who is his Ammonite lackey, chimed in: “*A fox climbs on ‘em and those walls will come tumblin’ down!*”

But we prayed and kept working. When they saw that we were determined, and were making progress, they started plotting to actually attack us. Nehemiah had us pray and post guards day and night. Half of us stand guard while the other half work. But if we heard it once, we heard it ten times—“*Wherever you turn, they will attack us!*”

So Nehemiah stationed guards at all the gaps and then he got up in front of our nobles and officials—all of us—and said, “*Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your homes!*” Our enemies heard about that, and so far they’ve done nothing worse than taunt us. But that’s why we have the guards.

It’s ironic. **We’re building walls at the same time that we’re learning that the walls really aren’t our protection!**

II. GOD IS OUR FORTRESS AND OUR STRONG TOWER!

- A. **If you ask anyone, they’ll tell you that what’s happening here is a miracle.** That *God* is working a miracle! But it’s not like God comes at night when no one is looking and does some of the building for us. Not that kind of miracle. We’ve done it all ourselves. But yet we all know that this is a miracle of God. We’d have never tried or persevered. We wouldn’t even know what to do. And despite all these enemies God has kept us safe. These are all miracles!
- B. **We’re finally remembering that God has always wanted to show people how great he is by how he works among us—by the way he treats us, his people.** We’re talking among ourselves about the LORD again. He seems real to us again and wonderful. We’re falling in love with our God again. We’re singing psalms again, I mean with heart. Listen! You can hear them singing over there... You know that one don’t you? “*Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.*”
- C. These walls *are* protecting us in one way though! **They’re guarding our honor as God’s people.** I don’t know how it is where you live, but here, if your city is in rubble, you’re nobody—and nobody thinks much of your God either. I

mean, what does it say about our God when we go on living like defeated people year after year, decade after decade!? It is humiliating and disgraceful! This is *God's* Holy City. His Temple is here. When other people see us living in disgrace, they think it is because our God is weak. Now these walls are like a psalm that says, "*These people belong to a strong God.*"

[Walk, stepping carefully over rubble] Watch your step. Did you notice what we're building with here? Right... **rubble**. When the Babylonians burned Jerusalem all those years ago, the fire was so hot that these limestone blocks cracked and then their army pulled everything down. They hardly left one stone atop another.

There was no way we could cart all this stuff away *and* quarry new stones. To tell you the truth, there is *so* much rubble that our strength is starting to give out. You know, we're working every day from first light to dark. I haven't even changed clothes in days. We're exhausted. But Nehemiah keeps telling us that God will help us. "*God is our help and strength.*" So we get back up every morning and we use what we have—and sometimes all you have is the rubble. But if God can help us build strong walls from rubble...

III. GOD CAN BUILD STRONG PEOPLE FROM RUBBLE, TOO.

- A. Just like the walls. We're not very impressive—I'll grant you that—but we're stronger than we look.
- B. **You know, it's like... we're the stones—living stones!**
Yeah, and God is building us to be the place where he lives. Deep beneath us, like a foundation, are the ancient stones of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and upon them are the stones of Moses and Joshua, Samuel and David, and all the prophets. And then there's us, rubble people rising like the walls of the Holy City. And someday, our King will come here to live in person. The King David the Second is coming—our Messiah—to take up his throne among us. Maybe someday he'll stand right here by my section of the wall!

So that's what's happening here. Somehow we *are* going to finish these walls because God is our help and strength. And when

we finish, we're going to have a great celebration. We're going to march choirs up both sides of this wall all the way to the temple—singing and playing trumpets and timbrels and harps. We'll all meet at the Temple and offer sacrifices to the LORD. And we'll listen to the Torah. And when we're done, we're going to have a feast. We're going to rejoice like never before, because, like Nehemiah keeps telling us, *the joy of the Lord is our strength*. And *then* we're going to rest! And mark my words, a thousand years from now—*two* thousand years—people are still going to be telling the story of what God did here in Jerusalem!

Listen, it's almost lunch time. Why don't you join us for a bite before I get back to work? I'm sure we'd all like to hear what God is doing beyond our walls.

You know, Aaron—Moses' brother—tells us priests to bless God's people with these words.

*The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.*