

The Glory of the Tedious

Nehemiah 3

Nehemiah has been a great story for two chapters. In the first, we were introduced to a man who grew up in a foreign land but who now carried a burden in his heart for the city of his ancestors. Jerusalem had broken-down walls. The neighboring nations laughed at the Jews' notion that she was a mighty city. Of more immediate urgency, a city without walls could not protect itself.

Nehemiah wanted to do something about the situation in Jerusalem, but he was a royal cupbearer in the Medo-Persian capital of Susa, 800 miles away. A good cupbearer was a valuable servant. Nehemiah wasn't going anywhere apart from an act of kindness on the part of King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah prayed that he would find favor in the king's eyes. That was all he could do.

Chapter Two takes up the storyline four months later. Nehemiah was serving wine to Artaxerxes when the king noticed that he seemed sad. This frightened Nehemiah, because servants were expected to wear a happy face in the king's presence so as to never drag down "the royal mood." Still, Nehemiah shared the burden of his heart. Not only did he receive the king's blessing to go to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls, he also was named the governor of the region. The king provided Nehemiah with a military escort as well as with letters authorizing the royal bureaucrats to provide him with all the materials he would need. God had answered Nehemiah's prayer.

Nehemiah had barely moved into his new office when he ventured out by night to inspect the damage to Jerusalem's walls. Only after he has seen the severity of the damage and fully understood the scope of the task did he approach the priests and the city officials with his plan:

¹⁷Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." ¹⁸I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work. – Nehemiah 2:17, 18

There was electricity in the air. Even the regional thugs that would oppose the Jews in their rebuilding efforts were powerless to rain on Nehemiah's parade. The people embraced the cause. They were pumped. They were ready to work. But how enthusiastically would they work?

A union shop steward was addressing a union meeting...

"Comrades. We have agreed on a new deal with the management. We will no longer work four days a week."

"Hooray!" goes the crowd.

"We will finish work at 4 PM, not 5 PM."

"Hooray!" goes the crowd, again.

"We will start work at 10 AM, not 9 AM."

"Hooray!"

"We have a 150% pay rise."

"Hooray!"

"We will only work on Wednesdays."

Silence ... then a voice from the back asks, "Every Wednesday?"

Now, it was time for the rubber to hit the road in Jerusalem so far as this massive work project was concerned. It is fair to say that Chapter 3 of Nehemiah is something less than a riveting read. In fact, it is a bit tedious. It speaks of parts of an ancient wall that seem to mean very little to us today. It is filled with the unpronounceable names of individuals that mean nothing to us. Whenever you commit yourself to reading the Bible cover to cover in a year, Nehemiah 3 is one of those chapters that cause you to ask, "Is it okay to just skim some parts?"

But, isn't that how life is? Planning and dreaming generate much enthusiasm, but knuckling down and getting to work is not so romantic. But, read chapter three this week anyway. Once you muddle through the names and the places you don't recognize, I suspect that you will still recognize a scene filled with life and activity. The walls of Jerusalem have lay in ruins for one and one-half centuries. But now, Jerusalem is a community abuzz.

Verses 1-7 describe the work that takes place along the northern wall. This was the most vulnerable side of the city where Babylon had laid siege, so this was also the part of the wall that had sustained the greatest damage. Verses 8-13 describe the work done on the western wall. Evidently, these walls and gates needed some repair, but not so extensively as the northern wall. The only reference to repairs on the southern side of Jerusalem is in verse 14. The Dung Gate was repaired. The refuse of the city was carried out of this gate and dumped into the smoldering Valley of Hinnom. This valley was a natural defense, so the damage to the southern wall was not too bad. Finally, verses 15-32, record the work done on the eastern wall. This was the religious, governmental and military section of the city, and like the northern exposure, it was a mess.

That is all I want to say about specific points of reference on that ancient wall. If we get bogged down in those things, we will not have time to apply this ancient project to the life of the modern church community, and we need to do that. I want to spend time this morning focusing on some characteristics of this ancient work that still speak clearly to faith communities today.

An ancient city wall was the defense and glory of that city. In the case of Jerusalem, God's city, a strong wall meant separation from the pagan influences that sought to pollute her, security from the violent attacks of her enemies that sought to destroy her and, therefore, freedom to enjoy life in a community of brothers. In the same way our churches and our individual lives need to be protected by strong spiritual defenses. I have referenced the early church in previous messages. They "... devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Where believers are devoted truly devoted to these things, they tend to be separated or holy, they tend to be secure and they tend to enjoy one another.

It is important to note that when we speak of strong spiritual walls around the church, we are not speaking of a cloistered community that keeps us from interacting with the sinners of this world. We have a mission to the world and even Jerusalem had gates. But those gates also had to be strong and fortified so that interaction with the world could be closely monitored. The objective is not to withdraw from the world but to guard ourselves from worldliness.

We have talked about building a church community that is healthy, holy, strong, secure and joyous. It is exciting to talk about. It is exciting to picture it in our mind's eye. But what does the job look like once the rubber hits the road? Nehemiah 3 paints an exciting picture.

I. Building Together Is a Holy Work

¹Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. – Nehemiah 3:1

It is no accident that Nehemiah begins his account of the actual building activity by describing the work of Eliashib, the high priest of all the people. He and his fellow priests rebuilt the Sheep Gate at the eastern end of the northern gate. This was where sheep for commerce and for sacrifice were herded into the city. Even as the priests began the work, they “dedicated” or sanctified this gate and this section of the wall. This was a work set apart for God. In fact, it was God’s work. Later, a more thorough dedication of the completed wall would take place, with singers and musicians and all sorts of fanfare. But, even at the very outset of the work, a conscientious priest acknowledged God’s ownership of the project and submitted it to His care.

Building walls was just the kind of project that could shift from being a noble divine cause to being a prideful human cause with just the slightest bit of prayerlessness or unguarded motives. How easy it is for us to lose sight of the fact that the church is God’s enterprise. Let us always be conscientious about sanctifying our labors to God, lest we begin to covet the glory of the successes, or, as we are prone to do, to look for scapegoats when our plans do work out.

II. Building Together Is a Humbling Work

The account began with the priestly contribution, but they were not the only leaders present. There were also rulers and supervisors over the districts into which Jerusalem was divided. Those who turned out for the task did so because they felt that the safety and purity of God’s city was a shared concern. However, when I first read this chapter, the most conspicuous illustration of participation that leaped from the page was actually an illustration of non-participation:

“... The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors”. – Nehemiah 3:5

These nobles may have agreed that building walls was a good thing to do. Maybe they would have been willing to write a check had the king not already provided all the necessary materials. All that was required was labor, but these characters did not see themselves as laborers. They were too high-born and too accustomed to comfort to present themselves humbly for real service.

I don’t know that these nobles were the only Jews who did not make themselves available to the need at hand, but there was something about their haughtiness that bugged Nehemiah enough to record their non-cooperation. Their pride would become their only legacy. Jesus’ Apostles were not noblemen, but when they suspected that their Lord was going to establish a kingdom, they drooled over the prospects of personal prestige and fortune.

²⁵Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” – Matthew 20:25–28

III. Building Together Is a Responsible Work

²The men of Jericho built the adjoining section ... - Nehemiah 3:2

This section of the wall was the northeastern section. Jericho lay 17 miles northeast of Jerusalem. According to verse 7, working on the north wall were men from Gibeon and Mizpah, two towns due north of Jerusalem. Various district leaders oversaw repairs near their own districts. Uzziel, a goldsmith, and Hananiah, a perfumer, worked on the northern part of the western wall. Some archaeologists insist that the industrial section of the city lay just beyond that wall. Throughout the chapter, we see people working on sections of the wall near their houses. The balance of the priests and Levites are found busily laboring at the eastern wall near the temple grounds.

You can see that it was a simple, but efficient plan. Out-of-towners worked on the first part of the wall they came to when they approached the city from their home villages. Those in the city were responsible for whatever part of the wall lay at their doorsteps or affected their vocations.

Imaginations can go wild when believers seek God's will for their lives, but usually, His will is not that elusive. Come to Christ. Abide in Him. Pursue holiness. Minister where you are. There is a place for specialization. One key to building a healthy church that we will consider is that of "gift-oriented ministry." People learn what their spiritual gifts are and they exercise them loyally. But, the knowledge of my gift should never be in conflict with the simple notion that I am first of all a servant. Some things just need to be done. Too many Christians today beg off from helping as needed by saying, "Oh, it's not my gift." There is a place for specialized "giftedness," but there is also a place in the church for people with the hearts of servants to simply pitch in.

Galatians 6:2 says that we are to carry one another's burdens. That doesn't call for a gift but only a loving heart. Galatians 6:5 adds "each one should carry his own load." There is no conflict between these two ideas. It is basic Christianity to help each other with the big stuff of life. But, it is also basic Christianity to shoulder personal responsibility and duty with a cheerful heart.

IV. Building Together Is a Family Work

In verse 3, "the sons of Hassenah" team up to repair the Fish Gate, a gate on the north wall where fish from the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee were brought into the city. In verse 12, one Shallum, a ruler of a section of Jerusalem, works on his section of the wall with his daughters. We see instances in this enterprise where the work was a family endeavor.

Families are the strength of congregations, and families benefit from church health. That should not surprise us when we consider that one of the most precious descriptions of the church in the Bible is that it is a "household" or a "family." The natural bonds that exist within families are only strengthened when God rules the home. Family life is elevated when it revolves around the things of God rather than around the disjointed personal goals of the family members. The home has rightly been called the best nursery for raising up tomorrow's servants.

V. Building Together Is an Inspiring Work

This entire project would be completed in only fifty-two days. Zeal could not have been in short supply, but one individual over at the eastern wall seems to have caught Nehemiah's eye:

²⁰Next to him, Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the angle to the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest.

Did this Baruch face special unrecorded circumstances or challenges? Was this recognition the equivalent of a “Camper of the Week” award? In some way, Baruch must have been exemplary even in the midst of what was already an enthusiastic experience for the whole city. Whatever his first assignment had been, it was either not recorded or it was included under the heading of some other leader. But, whatever it was, he finished it and moved on to “another section.”

We cannot know why Baruch was singled out as zealous, but we can speculate as to what lies behind any noteworthy zeal for God’s work. A man zealous for God is grateful to God for the blessings of his life as well as for his salvation. He has made the essential connection between a profession of love for God and the demonstration of that love expressed toward others. Such a man believes that the remedies for humanity’s various dilemmas rest in God. He is not dragged down by the indifference of others because he knows that he works for God. Whenever a man brings zeal to the Lord’s work, he is often a catalyst for awakening zeal in the hearts of others.

An Observation about Functional Structures

I have been identifying in *Nehemiah* some of the eight characteristics of church health that the Pastoral Team has been exploring. One leaps forth from our text this morning; “Functional Structures.” The “nuts and bolts” of Nehemiah’s program was not sophisticated but it was highly functional. Most who saw the need made themselves available. They shouldered the tasks right in front of them and they worked with Godly zeal. They knew this was God’s work.

Like the nobles of Tekoa, there may be some who are unwilling to join the effort. Perhaps, they do not own the need. Perhaps, they have been comfortable for too long. But the many were willing to trust God to empower them for the work, and a remarkable accomplishment was completed in less than two months largely because the mechanics of the project were simple.

We are trying to take the ministries of this church in such a direction that ministry leaders over specific areas of the church’s life are as free as possible to activate teams of people to plan and implement the activities of their ministries. The REAP structure for ministry team leaders is simply intended as a venue for reporting activity and soliciting prayers and ideas. The idea is to avoid bogging God’s servants down in encumbrances of policy, approval and getting permission.

Let me say one other thing about the tedium of reading a passage like this. Admittedly, it does not suit the modern attention span. Some of these names are tough to pronounce and impossible to remember. But never forget that God loves to record names. And, even though for us, most of these people are lost in our efforts just to plod through the narrative, know that God can recite all their names without even peeking at the page. He knows His own. He remembers every service they render in His Name. He recalls every time they have trudged through doubts, discouragements and distractions just because they wanted to honor Him with their obedience.

There are many chapters like this in the Scriptures that are hard to read because of all the odd names. That should actually encourage us. It means that if God has not forgotten their labors of love, He will not forget our names either. Honor Him with your service, your gifts as well as with the resources of your life. They may not seem like much, but God knows our names.