

Nehemiah: Working the Task

REVIEW: We are working our way through Nehemiah, and seeing the burden that God placed on Nehemiah's heart for his home country and their plight. From Nehemiah's reaction to his homeland being in ruin we asked the question, "What has God put on your heart? What breaks your heart that you could be involved in?" That first week we looked at human trafficking as an example of what God may break our heart for, and asked how we should be involved.

Over the next two weeks we saw how Nehemiah prepared for the task. He had a huge job in asking the king to be allowed to rebuild, displaying courage. He went further in showing boldness and asked for supplies to rebuild. Nehemiah had a plan, and was working his plan. Last time we watched as Nehemiah arrived to Jerusalem, and how he formulated his plan on site. We saw how he motivated the people that had grown weary and tired. By the end they were ready to attack this building project.

INTRO: Today is going to be a fun day! If for no other reason, you get to watch your pastor try to pronounce names of people and places that are far from common names today. There is also a lot in this chapter that points us to life today, and life in the church. While there is not a direct relationship, there are some interesting parallels between this chapter and the church.

Nehemiah 3:1-32

I. Opening thoughts

- A. The third chapter of Nehemiah is a detailed account of who built what
 - 1. Nehemiah lists all of this out, probably for the sake of posterity - so that all people would know who helped to rebuild Jerusalem
 - 2. The third chapter lists a lot of names and places, and might be considered boring
 - a) I will admit it publicly, Chronicles are not the books I gain deep insight into God
 - b) Many times I have to read them in front of a window, on a sunny day with a pot of tea next to me
 - c) All those names are a snooze
 - d) However, Nehemiah is different
 - 3. It is easy to get lost in the names or bored by them, but the variety of names show us some great things, if we will be taught by them
- B. The other thing to note about all these names is that Nehemiah himself (there is another Nehemiah mentioned) is not among the names

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1. Nehemiah is not calling attention to himself like, “Check me out! I just rebuilt this wall in record time! It’s okay, you can bow down before me. I am that awesome
 2. Nehemiah is giving recognition to those that did the work
 3. He is displaying an incredible amount of humility in this
 - a) Which is a lesson in itself
 - b) Leaders lead with humility
 - c) Leaders express appreciation to those that work hard under their leadership
 - d) Leaders understand that it is those working for them that make them look so good
 - (1) I had lots of people tell me how wonderful Good Friday service was - and it really was - if you missed it - you really missed it
 - (2) My response was, “Thanks, I had nothing to do with it. Tell Lewellyn how much you enjoyed it. She did the planning”
 4. For many years people have told me how wonderful our youth group is, and how I do such a great job with them
 - a) It wasn’t me, it was them
 - b) They were the easiest students in the world to lead
 - c) I would praise them every chance I got
- II. The purpose of the work is not to rebuild Jerusalem, the purpose was God’s glory
- A. Look back to Nehemiah 2:17 “Then 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 a disgrace.”
1. The neighbors loved to mock the Jews because of their ruined city
 2. The Jews claimed that their capital city was “the joy of the whole earth” (Ps 48:2)
 3. If God loves Jerusalem so much, why is it a mess? What kind of holy city is that? What kind of God would be happy with Jerusalem?
 4. The city was attached to the idea of the glory of God
 - a) That was true of other religions too
 - b) Their god must be great or small depending on the greatness of their capital
- B. Here is our first touchpoint with the church - the church is largely ignored today
1. Many people only pay attention to the church to condemn or mock it
 - a) “If you are so holy, and really follow God, why are there so many scandals”

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- b) “If God is so great, why is the church so weak?”
- 2. Whether we like it or not, the glory has departed for the church in general society
 - a) It has done so not because God is weak
 - b) It has done so because God’s followers are weak - not really following God, not really sacrificing, not really seeking spiritual vitality
- C. The reality is that the purpose of all ministry is the glory of God - not the glory of a leader or leaders
 - 1. We have talked at length about that with eldership
 - 2. It is a hard lesson to hold on to when the attention and the fame comes for what you are doing in ministry
 - 3. God is in control. That means the glory is God’s
- III. What is unique about the work is the way they got the wall up
 - A. We already mentioned that the chapter lists many names - 38 individuals, and 42 groups
 - 1. All of these workers were assigned tasks to work on the wall
 - 2. In fact, the wall was split into about 40 sections
 - 3. If you figure the high end for the length of the wall
 - a) Scholars figure they had to rebuild between 1.5-2.5 miles of wall
 - b) So we take the 2.5 miles - that is about the distance between here and American Tree following M53
 - c) If we only look at the wall rebuilding as this 2.5 mile stretch, it seems overwhelming
 - 4. However, splitting it up into about 40 sections, you and your crew are now responsible for a section of about 330 feet
 - a) That is the distance from here to about the post office following the sidewalks down Bristol to St. Clair, up Van Dyke
 - b) Much more manageable
 - 5. And every group and individual was assigned a task
 - B. Relating this to the church is easy
 - 1. D.L. Moody once said (and this is back in the late 1800’s) “A great many people have got a false idea about the church. They have got an idea that the church is a place to rest in...to get into a nice cushioned pew, and contribute to the charities, listen to the minister, and do their share to keep the church out of bankruptcy, is all they want. The idea of work for them - actual work in the church - never enters their minds.”
 - 2. And yet Paul tells us that the church is like a body - many parts, but one big whole
 - a) If one part is sick, the body suffers

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- b) The body needs all parts to be whole and healthy
- c) And all parts answer to Christ - Christ sets the goals and the tasks
- 3. Part of the reason the people in Nehemiah finished the task is they obeyed the same leader
 - a) That leader's goal was the glory of God
 - b) The same should be true in church - Christ is our head, and seeks to glorify God the Father
- C. Something that you would not pick up on depending on your English translation is that the word sometimes translated "built" is actually "rebuilt" - as it is in our pew Bibles
 - 1. In other words, they were not using all new materials - although they obviously had to use some - the gates for example
 - 2. The reality for the church is that it does not have to invent clever new things to become relevant
 - 3. It is in going back to the old truths of the gospel that will make the church great again
 - a) So the message of the gospel is what makes the church great
 - b) The method of carrying the message is like the new materials - it may change over time, and with the needs
- D. The word "repair" is used about 35 times and has the sense of "to make strong and firm"
 - 1. So when Nehemiah started work, he, and his workers were not looking for a "quick fix"
 - 2. They set out to make it solid, they were building to the glory of God so it had to be done to the absolute best of their ability
- IV. Let's take a closer look at the people doing the work
 - A. Did you notice that God uses all kinds of people?
 - 1. Priests and rulers
 - 2. Professionals and craftsmen
 - 3. People inside and outside the city
 - 4. Men and women
 - a) Although one caveat on that, the Hebrew could be referring to the people the man rules, using daughters figuratively
 - b) However, I find that unlikely because when a city like Jerusalem is in that state of disrepair, and the task is so great, it seems as if all people, male or female would come to help
 - B. If the task was for the glory of the Lord, it seems natural that the priests would be leading the way
 - 1. In fact, the high priest Eliashib was named first
 - 2. Probably to note that Nehemiah had the cooperation of the high priest

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3. It also shows that manual labor is just as much ministry to the Lord as his priestly duties
4. They worked on and around the sheep gate - the place the entrance for the sacrifices of the Temple would come into the city.
 - a) Their hearts would be in the work because of its association with the temple
- C. Some people were listed as not working
 1. The nobles of Tekoa refused to work
 2. Yet the other men of Tekoa did come in to work
 3. Men also came from Jericho, Gibeon, and Mizpah
 4. It was risky business helping rebuild Jerusalem
 - a) They could have stayed at home in the safety of their hometowns
 - b) Instead, they put the city of Jerusalem's needs ahead of their own
 5. Again, this should remind us of what God calls us to
 - a) To take the gospel and build the kingdom of God is risky business
 - b) God calls us to put the kingdom's needs AHEAD of our needs - even if that need is safety - sometimes especially if that need is safety
- D. Several times you read in the chapter that this group or that group worked on a section of the wall near their homes
 1. Great for a short commute
 2. But even better for motivation to make sure the walls are built for the glory of God and the safety of the city
 3. Many of us know that our faith needs its strongest and fullest expression at home
 - a) Hopefully we are working hard to make sure that is true in our home
 - b) I promise you that your children will pick up on what you do or don't do with your faith
 - (1) When I was praying the other morning, the person I was praying for brought this idea to mind
 - (2) Dads and moms, your kids are shaped to a large extent by how you behave - the model that you set in your home
 - (a) That got me thinking: have your kids ever caught you and your spouse praying together?
 - (b) They come walking in the kitchen, and the two of you are holding hands and praying over some matter that has just come up
 - (c) Imagine how that will shape them for the future
 - (d) It will become commonplace - "Oh, mom and dad are praying again"
 - (e) But what a beautiful thing to model for your kids

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4. But let me make this application a little wider
 - a) What about our neighborhoods? We talked about the home, what about our neighborhoods?
 - b) What about our neighbors? Do you know them? Do they know you?
 - (1) Have you expressed your faith in some way to them - offer of prayer, invite to church, etc.
 - (2) What are you doing to work in your neighborhood to make it strong?
 - c) Acts 17:26 “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.”
 - (1) God appointed a time and a place for you to live
 - (2) What are you doing to improve the neighborhood for the glory of God?
- V. Even the places of where they worked help us see our lives and the life of the church
 - A. He started with the Sheep Gate
 1. We already said that animals would be lead through this gate including animals for sacrifice in the temple
 2. This is the only gate in which we hear that it was “sanctified” or set apart for special service
 3. When we mention sheep, it reminds of us the the Lamb of God who was eventually sacrificed for our sins to permanently remove the penalty of sin
 4. While probably not intentional by Nehemiah, he began the section on the rebuilding of the walls with the sheep gate and ended with the sheep gate
 - a) Anyone recall a name of Jesus that matches that idea?
 - b) Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end
 - (1) This is how the Holy Spirit operates
 - (2) Even without Nehemiah knowing that he was in a small way pointing to the Messiah, Nehemiah left us a wonderful “easter egg” in his book
 - B. The “Old Gate,” called “Jesh a nah” gate in the pew Bible was identified with the “mishneh gate”
 1. It means new quarter - so most likely that quarter of the city is new
 2. It is an interesting thing that the “Old Gate” leads to the “New Quarter”
 3. 2 Corinthians 5:17 “Therefore is anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come.”

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4. Again, perhaps not intended, but interesting illustrations for us pointing forward to the work of Christ
- C. There is the fountain gate
 1. Flowing water is equated with the Holy Spirit in different places in Scripture
 - a) John 7:37-39
 2. We can be reminded of the Holy Spirit when we hear of the fountain gate
- D. There is also the water gate
 1. If the fountain gate can remind us of the Holy Spirit
 2. The water gate can remind us the Word of God
 - a) Several places in the NT talk about the Word of God's cleansing effect on us
 3. The water gate was also the site of the "Bible conference" in the book of Ezra
 - a) The priests read the law of God to the people explaining it
 - b) Over time they had forgotten God's law, and the water gate was the site of the revival
 4. I'll admit that this may be taking pushing the illustration beyond its limits, but this is interesting
 - a) This is the only gate not said to have been repaired
 - b) Perhaps an allusion to the fact that the Word of God stands forever?
 - c) Again, probably pushing the illustration farther than intended, but it is interesting
- E. There are other gates - these are just the most interesting for our study, but our final one is the East Gate
 1. Today it is most likely the Golden Gate
 2. Tradition says that Jesus entered the temple on Palm Sunday through this gate
 3. Both Jewish and Christian tradition connect the coming of the Messiah to this gate
 4. Ezekiel saw the glory of God leave by the East Gate, and the Lord will return the same way (Ezekiel 43:1-5)
 5. It is a great reminder that the Messiah has come!
 - a) He came the first time
 - b) He entered Jerusalem being praised as Messiah - even though a week later He was crucified
 6. It also is a great reminder that the Messiah will be coming again
 - a) His first arrival, only proves His next
 - b) He said He will be back

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- c) So we need to be ready for His return
- VI. That brings us to the end of our look at Nehemiah chapter three
 - A. This sermon has been shorter than many
 - B. However, can you believe how many things are in Nehemiah three that you might just gloss over if you did not take the time to examine it more closely
 - 1. Even a chapter filled with names and places is not insignificant
 - 2. God has a meaning for those things, many of which can remind us of
 - a) The Messiah
 - b) The church
 - c) And how we play a role in God's plan for building His kingdom
 - C. The question I will leave you with is, "How are you a part of this kingdom building?"
 - 1. If you are shining a pew with your backside, you need to get to work
 - a) The nobles of Tekoa were the only ones listed as not working
 - b) Do you want to go down in the heavenly history books like those guys?
 - 2. There are so many sections of the kingdom that need work
 - a) This goes back to week one and God breaking Nehemiah's heart for Jerusalem
 - b) What breaks your heart?
 - c) What needs to be sacrificed from your life so you can become a kingdom builder?