

“Doing the Lord’s Work”
Nehemiah 3-4
August 23, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

No sooner did Nehemiah issue his stirring call, “Let us rise up and build” (2:18), than we read of the priests beginning the work on the portion of the wall that most concerned them, the sheep gate through which the sacrificial sheep came to the temple (3:1). Once it became clear that God was behind this and calling them to this work, it began without delay. No study committees were formed to consider the matter for the next several years. It was just, “Roll up your sleeves and get to work.” When God calls you to get to work, it is best to get to work without delay.

Why was this wall so important? Why is this book included in the Old Testament? Is it just a lesson in good management practices? Some read the book in that way. While it is true that Nehemiah was a skilled leader and manager, that is not the reason it is included in our Bibles. This wall was not just about the defense of Israel’s capital city. Jerusalem was the location of God’s presence on the earth because it was the location of his temple. The wall was important because in its day, Jerusalem was the outpost of God’s grand project to reclaim his fallen image-bearers and the entire earth. The joyful presence of God in the garden of Eden was lost when Adam and Eve sinned. But God graciously did not give up on his fallen, broken creation. He launched a project to return humanity to their intended design to love God, worship God and live with God. God would make a home with the descendants of Abraham. He would give them a land and put his presence there in the form of his temple. That’s why Jerusalem is important.

How is it, then, that we roll up our sleeves and “build the wall” today? We do so as we labor to build God’s current outpost of his grand project, and that outpost is the Church. To do God’s work today is to build his Church through the mission he has given to us in what is commonly called the Great Commission. We build, in other words, by making disciples.

I. Unity in the Work

Chapter 3 is another one of those long lists of names in the Bible, this time giving us the names of those working on the wall, together with the section of wall they were assigned. It is an example of unity in diversity. There is a unified purpose, and there seems to be an enthusiasm in working toward that purpose. A clear sense of mission is very unifying. I have recently become so convinced of this that I have decided that my next sermon series will be on the

topic of the mission of the Church, a series we'll begin as soon as we finish with Nehemiah early this fall. It is vital that we understand the mission God calls us to as a church, and such a common purpose serves to bring great unity.

There is also diversity in this list of names, which gives some indication of the enthusiasm with which this project was embraced. All kinds of average people joined this work. There didn't seem to be many skilled stone masons listed. Instead, we read of various tradesmen such as jewelers and perfumers. There were various merchants mentioned, and one man even brought his daughters to the task. Construction work such as this was typically an exclusively male domain in this day. Priests were also involved.

In the 1960's, an archaeological expedition dug down to the walls built in Nehemiah's day. The archaeologists were struck by the poor quality of the construction, giving evidence to support what we read in this chapter about the use of all these unskilled laborers. Isn't that the norm for the church? God uses just average people to accomplish his work of building the church.

There is one other similarity between this labor force and today's church. In most churches, you can find a group of people who contribute nothing to the work. What they do sometimes offer is their criticism of the work done by others. Verse 5 of chapter 3 describes such a group. **“And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.”**

The Covid-19 pandemic is lasting much longer than any of us would want. The limitations it places on us have potential to do spiritual harm. Disruptions to our normal church life can easily result in people drifting away from the Lord as corporate worship transitions to a virtual format and face-to-face fellowship declines or becomes non-existent. We are going to be confronted with some brokenness in need of repair. Just as Nehemiah faced the challenge of these ruined walls, we are going to face the challenge of spiritual damage done to people in the wake of this pandemic. Spiritual isolation brings ruin that is just as real as the ruin by Nebuchadnezzar's army to the walls of Jerusalem. That repair work can begin even now as we labor to keep up with one another and encourage one another to maintain faithfulness to the Lord in these trying times.

II. Opposition to the Work

Chapter four returns to a theme common in Nehemiah—opposition. Once more, the opposition originates with some powerful men, governors of the regions surrounding Jerusalem. Sanballat and Tobiah are named. We're also told that they are joined by the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites (v. 7). The geographic areas represented by these men and regions are north, east

and south of Israel, every direction except west where the land of Israel met the Mediterranean Sea. So Israel was surrounded by opponents.

Two different efforts of this opposition are mentioned. The first is mockery and shame. **“What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?”** J. I. Packer helps us understand each of these questions. **“What are these feeble Jews doing?”** “See what a poor, incompetent lot they really are!” **“Will they restore it for themselves?”** “The task is beyond their ability!” **“Will they sacrifice?”** “Do they think that a few devotional exercises will cause this wall to rise as if by magic?” **“Will they finish up in a day?”** “Do they have any idea how long this will take them?” **“Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?”** “Don’t they know that burned stones (probably made of limestone) crumble when exposed to heat?”

Shame and mockery are powerful things precisely because there is partial truth in them. Undoubtedly, the Jews did feel themselves weak in this effort. They were not skilled builders. The task was beyond their ability. The rubbish was indeed a formidable obstacle. But God was in this effort, and that made all the difference. The Church today is in a similar position. The vast majority of those outside the Church view us as having very little to offer our world in the way of solving the challenges faced by our society. They’re happy to allow us to gather for worship, but don’t think our religious beliefs have a place anywhere outside our church buildings. Our beliefs, they contend, are just private matters that need to be kept private. We are viewed as weak and irrelevant. The real power, they contend, lies in the political arena.

The mockery strategy didn’t work, as indicated by the progress report of verse 6. **“So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.”** So another attempt to oppose this effort was launched, and this took the form of physical violence. The enemies said, **“They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work”** (v. 11). Such threatened violence is made worse by its secretive nature. It’s one thing to have your enemy attack you in broad daylight, and quite another to murder you while you’re sleeping. This touches a primal fear we all have. When you were a child, did you ever have fears about some monster hiding under your bed?

The opposition was not just external. Verse 10 describes internal opposition that arose as well. **“The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”** They were far enough in the building of the wall that it was now clear to them how formidable a task was still ahead of them. And it was a discouraging thought. When this was coupled with the threatened violence from their enemies, the consensus was to abandon the project and leave it half-done. In

addition, the workers who had come from outside Jerusalem were getting pressure from their families back home to abandon the project. It seemed to be something of an irritation to Nehemiah, indicated by the language of verse 12. **“At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, ‘You must return to us.’”** They lived closer to these enemies and probably felt themselves at particular risk due to the fact that husbands and sons were away from home working on this wall.

III. Perseverance in the Work

How did Nehemiah handle such formidable opposition and keep the people persevering to the end? His response is summarized in verse 9: **“And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.”** To put it as simply as I can, he took his fears to God in prayer, and then he got back to work. After the opposition of mockery at the beginning of chapter 4, Nehemiah prayed that God would take his vengeance upon these enemies (v. 4-5). He prayed a common prayer of punishment in the Old Testament, asking that the harm they plotted against God’s people would instead be visited on them.

What should we think about this prayer? Should we pray like this? There are two things we should copy from this and one we shouldn’t. Nehemiah exhibits here one aspect of trusting God that is spoken of repeatedly in the Bible. Vengeance belongs to God and not to us. God alone has the wisdom and the perfect knowledge to exact vengeance. So Nehemiah renounces any vengeance and leaves it with God, and we should do the same. A second thing we can agree with about this prayer for vengeance is to see it as stating prophetic truth about all who despise God’s people. All who despise the Church will in fact come to a bad end.

There is one thing that Jesus clearly changes about our prayers concerning our enemies. Where Nehemiah prayed that God would not forgive the sins of his enemies, Jesus prayed just the opposite and teaches us to do the same. Jesus taught, **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”** (Matt. 5:44). That’s because in this era of grace, God’s normal activity is to defeat his enemies not by killing them, but by converting them to his friends. It would be much easier for him to kill them, because to convert them would require the death of his Son as a substitutionary sacrifice.

The fuel for Nehemiah’s prayers is found in something he said in verse 14. **“Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.”** Did you notice that Nehemiah doesn’t speak to their enemies? Nor does he speak to his fellow Jews about the power of these enemies. He doesn’t call for a city-wide assembly and talk up the conspiracy against Israel. Instead, he talks up the Lord, seeing him as great and awesome. When your fears grow

big, it paralyzes you and keeps you from acting in positive ways that make a difference. When your focus is on the greatness of God, it unleashes vigorous and productive work for the Lord.

My Bible reading plan this year had me reading again this week the story of David and Goliath. When the giant came out to challenge Israel to send out their champion to fight him, we read that **“All the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were much afraid. And the men of Israel said, ‘Have you seen this man who has come up?’”** (1 Samuel 17:24-25). Their focus was on the one whom they feared, and their fears grew. David had a different focus. Prior to the battle, each of the warriors gave a little speech. David’s speech made much of God. **“You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head,... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord’s, and he will give you into our hand”** (1 Sam. 17:45-47).

There is a great deal of fear-mongering going on in our nation right now, and many Christian leaders have joined in that effort. We need leaders, instead, who, while acknowledging the challenges the Church in America faces, will turn us instead to the greatness of God. We need for our God to be big rather than our fears.

Did you notice what happens in the text once that happens? The first thing we read is that God frustrated their plans. **“Our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan.”** Since God is great, in his sovereignty, he had someone overhear this plot and notify Nehemiah of it. God is in control of all things, and he will never allow his people to perish from the earth. He promises that he will build his church, no matter the enemies arising against her. And then, we read that they got to work. **“We all returned to the wall, each to his work.”**

CONCLUSION:

What is it in your life that you’re afraid of now? Take that fear to the Lord in a way that turns your focus from the greatness of the obstacle and toward the greatness of your Lord. And then take action. Perhaps there are doubts in your mind about your ability. Take your eyes off your inabilities and put them instead on the Lord who has loved you and died for you.

Small Group Discussion Questions Nehemiah 3-4

1. Chapter 3 lists the names of those who worked on the wall, along with the section worked by each group. Many different kinds of people worked together to accomplish this task. This teaches us that a clear sense of mission is a great unifier of God's diverse people. What would you say is the mission of the Church today?
2. How would a clear focus on that mission help unify God's people?
3. Sanballat and Tobiah were mocking God's people. What form does the mocking of God's people take today?
4. 4:4-5 contain what is referred to as an "imprecatory prayer," which is a prayer that curses someone. How ought we to think of this in our day?
5. In response to the threat of violence, Nehemiah posted guards. What are the threats that we should guard against today?
6. 4:10-13 describe internal opposition in the form of complaints and discouragement among God's people. What are some common forms of discouragement that we need to be careful to avoid today?
7. Take some time to think through verse 14: "Do not be afraid of the. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome." It was mentioned in the sermon that "when your fears grow big, it paralyzes you and keeps you from acting in positive ways that make a difference. When your focus is on the greatness of God it unleashes vigorous and productive work for the Lord." How might that apply to you?