

Nehemiah 3:1-32

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Date: 07 July 2013

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[0 : 00] Turn to the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. I think I may need to start saying go to since so many people are doing this digitally now. So we get the hipsters covered. Go to the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, although that still doesn't quite cover it because many of you are only carrying your New Testament today.

Hipsters, so you're out of luck this morning. Thank you. We've been working our way through Nehemiah and we've come now to the beginning of chapter 3.

And we've seen so far as the story unfolds for us, those of you who may not be quite caught up to where we are, just as a quick recap for you. Nehemiah has been part of the Babylonian captivity. He was born in captivity. He is living here in the story in a town called Susa, serving as the cupbearer to the king, Artaxerxes, who is the Persian king.

Persia has now become the world power. Babylonia is no more and they are now in control. And he is serving as the cupbearer to the king some three months journey from Jerusalem.

[1 : 08] And he receives word, we see at the beginning of chapter 1, from his brother that the wall around Jerusalem has yet to be rebuilt. The people have been returned, they've been living in the land, and yet there's still a shame, a mockery, and this breaks his heart.

In fact, we see in verse 4 that he sits down and he weeps and he mourns for days. Not simply because they weren't safe, because his people potentially could be attacked, because they were being mocked, but more so because his God was being shamed.

Recognize that at this time, the visible manifestation of God's goodness, his character, was found in his people. Much the same way it is today, which is how we draw the parallel.

It's now found in the good of his church. We build in a much different way, which we've talked about and will continue to. But this is the state of things. This is why he's so broken over this report.

And so we saw his prayer, the last part of chapter 1, that it was a persistent prayer. It was saturated by God's character.

[2 : 20] It was motivated by God's promises. And that it was humble and intercessory. It was a prayer on behalf of the people of Israel. He recognized that without God, nothing could be accomplished.

The task that was ahead of him, what he was looking to do, knowing that God was going to use him to go back to Jerusalem and lead the rebuilding of the wall, was a massive task.

You see, King Artaxerxes, 13 years previously, had issued an edict stopping the building of the wall. And for him to stand before the king and ask for him to go back on his word, was to ask the king to shame himself, to say, I was wrong.

Let me set it right. And this was not something you did in these days. And so the task ahead of him was massive. And he knew that without prayer, without God going with him, nothing would take place.

But yet he planned. We look at that last week, right? He knew that he needed to go. He knew how long he needed to go for. You see this in chapter 2. He knew exactly what provisions he needed from the king.

[3 : 33] So even though as he prays and he knows that God must move and act in the situation, he also planned. He set a very careful course for how this task needed to be accomplished, all the while recognizing God's providence.

We can see in verse 8 of chapter 2, the last half, says, and the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. And so he travels to Israel with an armed guard, takes them approximately three months, surveys the wall, continues this planning and praying process, and then speaks to the people of Israel.

And when he encourages them, verse 18, it says, and I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good. They said, let us rise up and build.

So they strengthened their hands or they set their minds to the task for the good work. And that's where we find ourselves this morning, right at the cusp, at the edge of them rising up, strengthening their hands for the work.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for the blessing of your word. I thank you that the proper preaching of it and the proper hearing and application of it is a work of your spirit.

[4 : 52] And so we pray this morning that you will act and move through us to accomplish your goodwill. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. So it was my original intent, as we set out, to talk about the work that they did and the work that they did in the face of opposition.

But I decided late this week to drop out the work they did in the face of opposition and to treat that next week as it just seemed to be a little bit too much. So we're going to skip around just a little bit. And I apologize to those of you who really love it when I go verse by verse. But we're going to skip over the end of chapter 2 from verse 19 down. And we're going to just hit right into chapter 3.

And we're going to cover all of chapter 3 today, taking a look at the work. I'm also not going to read you the text as I normally would. Because it would take me about 15 minutes to fumble over all of these names.

I just make a fool of myself fumbling over Hebrew names. And it really wouldn't help that much our understanding. So what I want to do is encourage you to read the text for yourself later on.

[5 : 58] And let me draw your attention to some different parts of it. At first glance, we look at something like this. And it just really seems to be a list of names. Names, positions, where they built.

It starts out with the building of the Sheep Gate. And it ends with that. You'll notice as you read, going counterclockwise around the city, there's an account of every section of the wall, how it was built, and who, in fact, built it.

But there's so much in here for us to glean out for ourselves. It's a simple point. This morning will probably be a shorter sermon. But I think it's a very, very important point for us to see.

So we're going to talk this morning about the work. So the first point I want to make to you from this is that they worked. And Nathan, that seems kind of obtuse. Of course they worked if they built the wall.

They had to build to build the wall, right? But haven't we said up to this point that they were encouraged by the providence of God? They saw that the good hand of the Lord was upon them, moving and working.

[7 : 04] And yet, they worked. And I fear sometimes as a church that believes heavily in the sovereignty of God, maybe to err sometimes.

That we so believe God is going to move and act that we fail to actually work. That we don't see that it is God that uses us to accomplish His goodwill.

That we sit on our hands just waiting for something to happen, when in fact He's tasked us to get it done. Hear me carefully. God is sovereign.

He is providentially in control of all things. Nothing happens apart from Him. So when we work and accomplish things, no praise belongs to us. It all belongs to God because He's using us to accomplish His will.

But yet, we must work. They worked. You see the words throughout the text? Repaired. Built. And rebuilt. So there was a lot of work to be done, but know that the wall wasn't completely in shambles.

[8 : 06] There were portions of it that were still in fairly good shape. You'll see that the word repaired is used repeatedly. So the rubble was there. It just needed to be stacked back up. And not to make light of the task ahead of them.

It was quite a task. But they just needed to repair the wall. The gates were burnt. Most of them, it says, they had to be built. They were made of wood and they were burned down.

The bolts had to be set. The locks had to be put in place. They had to actually be built. And we see that some sections of the wall were simply rebuilt. So they were completely torn down.

There were gaps in the armament. And they had to be built completely. So this language of work, and you see it as it goes in this pattern, that they worked side by side, shoulder to shoulder, if you'll allow, working on this wall.

They completed what hadn't been completed in 90 years in 52 days. We'll see that in chapter 4. They completed the wall in 52 days.

[9:05] I'm going to draw your mind back to this language in verse 18 of chapter 2. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. And this language, this Hebrew language, was a way of stating that they became resolute.

They set their eyes on it. This was the controlling thing in their life. Certainly they still had to clean up the house and cook and take care of the kids and do these things.

But the driving activity in their life in this time was to rebuild the wall. My mind was drawn to a couple of New Testament texts, like 1 Corinthians 9.24, where Paul says, Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?

So run that you may obtain it. And Philippians 3.12-14, he says, It's not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus had made me His own.

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

[10:18] See that language of pressing and straining? A language of work. Charles Spurgeon once said, The man who does not make hard work of his ministry will find it very hard work to answer for his idleness at the last great day.

I'll give it to you again. The man who does not make hard work of his ministry will find it very hard work to answer for his idleness at the last great day. They worked.

And this is the call for our lives as well. To work. To put our head down. And to go. There's some aspects of their work as well I want you to see.

They worked without regard to their positions. So look at your text. We see that the priests worked. Still performing their priestly duties in verse 1, in verse 17, and verse 22 of chapter 3.

We see that the priests worked. We see that the nobles or the rulers worked. Rebuilt. Verse 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19.

[11:27] I think I covered all of them. We see that the nobles, they stooped to work. Except the nobles of the Takawhites in verse 5. Who would not stoop to serve.

So the nobles, they worked. The temple servants in verse 26. Put themselves to work. These people recognized that the goodness, the physical, visible goodness of God was worth stepping out of their trade.

Of the position that had been given to them. It would have been shameful for any of these people to have lowered themselves to physical labor. But in this case, the glory of God circumvented that.

They went above and beyond. They did more than in physical labor they would have had to do for their position. Secondly, they worked without regard to their gender.

Notice in verse 12, we see a picture of this. Let me find that. Shalom, the ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, he and his daughters worked.

[12:37] Ladies, be encouraged by that. The work of God is yours as well. They worked without regard to their zip code. I couldn't think of a better way to say this.

You see the Takawhites in verse 5. The Gibeonites, the Marantothites, and the Mizpahites in verse 7. Aren't you glad now I didn't read the entire chapter? People who lived in towns that were not in Jerusalem.

They were in the area. Gibeon and Mizpah was about 8 miles outside of the town. Quite a few hours journey to the town. The physical building of the wall didn't fit these people in any way whatsoever.

It didn't protect them from attack. But they knew, for the sake of the glory of God, that they should work. And so they worked without regard to their zip code. They came from where they were to build for the glory of God.

I hope that's an encouragement to some of you that drive a little far to get here each day. They worked without regard to their fair share. There's two rather amazing men that are recorded here.

[13:47] In verse 8 and 30, we see a man named Hananiah. So look at him in verse 8. Next to him, Hananiah, one of the perfumers, repaired and they restored Jerusalem as far as the broad wall.

And then notice verse 30. After him, Hananiah, the son of Shalamiah, and Hanan, the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another section.

Didn't just build their section of the wall, but when they finished said, We got more. We can give to this effort. Let's build another section. You see again another man by the name of Ben-Wai.

We see him in verse 24. Ben-Wai, the son of Hinnadad, repaired another section. And as I look back in the text, I don't remember this guy's name anywhere in here.

I don't recall him ever building an original section. And so I hunted and I hunted and I looked and I looked and realized that in verse 18, we see his brother.

[14:48] After him, their brothers repaired. Bavi, the son of Hinnadad. Notice now in verse 24, Ben-Wai, the son of Hinnadad. And so, as the record shows, Ben-Wai helped his brother in the building of that section of the wall.

And when they completed, he moved on to build another section of the wall. So they worked without regard to their fair share. They worked without regard to their skill sets.

These men, none of them are recorded as trained wall builders. None of them masons here. Notice in verse 8, you have a perfumer. A person who made perfume.

That's Hananiah, in fact. The man who built two sections of the wall. We see goldsmiths in verse 8, verse 31, verse 32. We see a gatekeeper rebuild his own gate that he was in charge of in verse 29. We see merchants in verse 32. And as previously mentioned before, we see rulers and priests and temple servants all lending to the work that was before them.

[15:58] So they worked. And they worked without regard to all of these things that would tend to be excuses for them and for us.

Now let me caution you. As I've said before, I am not suggesting that the work before us as the church, the way in which we can glean value from this for our lives, is that we are to build a building. It's not what I'm suggesting to you. That our great endeavor is to build this property and make it beautiful and make it tall and make it wide and full of natural light.

That's not the task that's in front of us. In fact, I'm not even really suggesting that the major task in front of us is the building of this particular congregation, what I would call the church.

We're careful to use that language properly. This building is not the church. We're the church. I'm not even really suggesting that. That it's all about building Christ's family church.

[17:02] As an example of buildings, I, this past week, learned of a church building in Texas that has in it a 75,000-gallon aquarium.

The name of the church, just because they deserve to be picked on, is the International Body of Christ Church. They built a 75,000-gallon aquarium and around it a \$40 million building.

It's rather spectacular, to be totally honest with you. There's two tunnels that go through it to go into the room that they meet in. They have a full-time biologist on staff to care for the fish.

And this thing, and in big letters over the top of it, it says, follow me and I will make you fishers of men. What a cool idea. I mean, one of you brings that idea to me. I'm like, that is an awesome idea. That is so cool. We would never, ever, ever do it. But what a very, very cool idea. And they have above it, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.

[18:00] And what I say to that is they get it, but they don't get it. Right? That is not what we are meant to be doing now as God's people. God's glory is not contained in buildings.

Right? God is not honored with a big, flashy building. God is honored in the lives of holiness of His people. I'm also not suggesting that everybody's ministry will look the same.

Right? These people put down their trades. They weren't making perfume or gold. They weren't selling their goods. They were building. They all became builders. I'm not saying that all of us are going to look exactly the same.

Right? All of them looked the same. They were either, I guess in this way, gate builders or wall builders. Those are two categories that they were doing. Right? In the simplest of terms, that's not the way we're to work.

God has gifted us in various ways. Turn with me to Romans chapter 12. We'll leave Nehemiah behind for the morning. Turn with me to Romans chapter 12.

[19:06] Or go to, I ought to say. Romans 12, verse 3. 1 Corinthians 1.

Romans chapter 12. Verse 4 through 7. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Now note, all of these different things that are happening here. The different varieties. Right? Varieties of gifts. Varieties of service. Varieties of activities. Right? But the same Spirit. The same Lord. The same God that empowers them. That puts them into action. That initiates them. With the singular task of honoring God Almighty. That's the big thing. That's the wall building. Right? Bringing honor to God Almighty.

[20 : 30] How are we doing that? In all of these various ways. Turn to Ephesians chapter 4. We're going to begin in verse 11.

Remember here, just before this, we see that Christ ascended on high. What does that mean? Except that He descended bringing gifts to men. Right? For the church. Verse 11. And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. Okay. Right? There's a lot there. But I want you to see the bridge here, the connection of what's happening. We see the gifts given to men. He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers.

For what? For a work. For the equipping of the saints. For ministry. And what is that ministry? Building up the body of Christ. Christ. There's that language of building.

[22 : 05] Right? Building up the body of Christ. Does that include Christ's family church? It absolutely does. But more than that, it includes the church universal.

Building the body of Christ. Right? You might say, well, this just includes the maturity of those who are already believers. He goes on to explain that, right? That we should grow up into mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

So we won't be children tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, by the deceitful scheming of men. Right? We get all that. That's for the believer to grow up and to mature. But notice as he begins to conclude this thought, that when we're all joined together, built up in that way, joined and held together by every joint, what's going to happen?

The body will grow. The body grows so that it builds itself up in love. Right? Right? So that includes the advancing of the kingdom of God. Right? So I'm not saying that the work ahead of us, the work that all of us should be doing, is the building of a building.

I'm not saying that our parts in that are going to look exactly the same. Some of you are especially gifted at turning conversations to spiritual things. I've seen it happen.

[23 : 19] A lot of you in this room are really gifted at doing that. Not everyone is. Ought we trust God to work and move through us? Ought we put ourselves in situations being expectant that He might turn a conversation to spiritual things?

Absolutely. But if you have a friend who has led countless thousands to Christ, and you hold a few in your hand, don't be ashamed of that. You're being used in a different way.

What I am saying, though, is that we are all called to work. We're all called to be disciple-making disciples. Growing up into Christ-likeness.

Seeing that come to bear in other people's lives. To be holy and to bring about holiness. A couple of weeks ago, kind of as an aside that I hadn't planned, I told you that the phrase feel called is a phrase I don't care for.

It's worked its way into our vernacular. People ask me that often as a pastor. When did you feel called to be a pastor? And I honestly haven't known how to answer the question because I don't understand it.

[24 : 33] Feel called? What does that even feel like? Like, what are you talking about? When did I feel called to be a pastor? And I recently read a book which is of great help to me. Kind of set my mind at rest to know that I wasn't the only crazy one thinking in this way.

The gentleman does a wonderful, elaborate study of calling in the Scriptures. We are all called to be Christians and to make other Christians.

Right? To be disciple-making disciples. That's the calling on all of our lives. And the danger then with language like feeling called, because I don't know what that feels like. Honestly, you shouldn't know what it feels like because we're all called.

If you think you're waiting for some divine mountaintop moment to get active in the work of the kingdom of God, you're never going to set yourself to the work. You're never going to strengthen your hands waiting for some feeling to come upon you that that's something you should be doing. We are all called to be disciple-making disciples. We're given different tasks in that. I've been given the task of standing in front of you and doing my very best by God's grace to expound the Word of God to you.

[25 : 49] To do other things to lead this church. Your task will look different than that. There's a pretty sure bet that I'm the only person in this church that's going to do this consistently.

I'm thankful for all of the giftedness in our church to help me out to fill in when I'm sick and just tired. But as a general rule, there's going to be one guy that gets up here and preaches on a consistent basis.

So what is your role then? You're called just the same. It's not something we feel. It's something that's true. It's something that's been told to us in the Scriptures.

We've been called to be Christians. We're called to make Christians. Get to work. Don't just plan to work.

Trust in the providence of God. Strengthen yourself to work. Get ready to it. Say, I'm going to work. I'm going to do it. And not work. The work is the obedience, carrying out the faith that's been granted to us.

[26 : 51] I want to tie it back in together. I'm going to keep doing this for us. 1 Peter 2. I think you'd appreciate turning there. 1 Peter 2.

That is Christ. Cornerstone that was so important to set the foundation, to make sure that the walls were built straight. This was the most important piece of the building. The cornerstone was set properly.

Everything else worked out the way it was supposed to work out. And that's the language here. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone which the spiritual house is being built upon. But I want you to see that there's not a clergy-laity distinction in here.

There's not a those-who-feel-called-to-be-minister and those-who-don't language in here. That's why we're careful about the way we say things around here.

That's why we will never in this church have an altar call. We may have an invitation of sorts. It may look different than our typical Lord's Supper. But to use the language of altar call would seem to communicate to you that I am somehow a priest that stands between you and God.

[28 : 25] It would seem to communicate that the sacrifice has yet to be made in Christ. And ladies and gentlemen, the sacrifice has been made. Christ has made the once and for all sacrifice.

In His language, it is finished. It's part of what was meant by that. We see in the beginning of Hebrews, He's seated at the right hand of the Father. He's not having to continue to make sacrifice. It has been done. We have no need of an altar in our meeting places any longer. I don't want you to think ever you have to come through me to get to God.

What a horrible thing that would be. I am as flawed as you are. You go to God. You know who you go through to get there? Christ. That final and full sacrifice.

There's no clergy-laity distinction here. Beginning in verse 1. So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy. He's talking about the holy living we should be doing. And envy and all slander.

[29 : 26] Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation. If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. And here we are. Verse 4. And as you come to Him, a living stone, rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house.

To be what? All of you. To be a holy priesthood. To offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame. So the honor is for you who believe.

You will not be put to shame. But for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense. They stumble because they disobey the Word as they were destined to do.

Now verse 9. But you, all of you, all of us, those who have placed our faith in Christ, that is who Peter's talking about here. But you are a chosen race.

[30 : 37] Again, here's the language. A royal priesthood. A holy nation. A people for His own possession. For what reason? We've all been called to this and we're all called that we may proclaim the excellences of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. He's quoting from Hosea. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable so that when they speak against you as evildoers, so they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. And there's the wrap-up to it, right? We're all called to be holy and to bring about holiness in the hearts of people around us.

This is the work that we are set to. If you may or may not be familiar with, I learned it's a myth, lemmings.

You guys know a little bit about lemmings? When I say the word lemmings, these little rodents. And the myth is that spontaneously, they all get this desire.

[31 : 50] He knows why, but there's a, just something kicks off in them and they all rush off of a cliff. Have you heard this? They kill themselves and I've heard lots of things about this.

It's like a population control because they're rodents and they multiply greatly and it's totally a myth. You know who invented it? Walt Disney in a 1958 film called White Wilderness.

Totally a myth, right? Lemmings do not do this. But interestingly, people do. From a desire set down within humanity, all humanity, it rushes towards a cliff to their certain doom, right?

To go right off the edge, to be dashed upon the rocks at the bottom, right? This is what our sin has bought us. And God in Christ has graciously shown so many of us the edge, right?

Shown us the futility of what we were doing. Said to us, the end of this path is surely destruction.

Don't run off the cliff with the others. And what we ought to be doing now, the natural response to that, ought to be to run around on the edge of the cliff warning everyone else, right?

[33 : 02] Trying to show them this very thing. We recognize all along God is providential in this saving work. But, it's still the work given to us to proclaim the edge is close, the doom is certain.

If you go over the edge, you will die. And I think many of us have taken out a folding chair, folded it out, and sat down facing away from the edge of the cliff and we say hey to our friends as they go by.

Hey Bob, good to see you. Hey Sue, grass is looking great. And they rush right past us and off the edge. There is a work set before us.

Your co-workers, your neighbors, your classmates need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Right? Not it just in its simplest form, which is where we start, but in its full revelation, bringing about holiness in their lives.

Right? Seeing them converted and discipled. And we do all of this to the praise of the glory of God. This is the house. This is the wall that we are to be building.

[34 : 18] One that brings great praise and glory to our God. As I told you before, it's not about Christ's family church. It is my hope that a natural byproduct of our time together is that we grow in numbers.

It just makes sense to me that it would. That if we're being healthy together, this is going to begin happening. Right? That we're going to fill this room and have to use an overflow room. Right? That we're going to have to seriously be considering planting new churches because we can't possibly fit any longer in this building.

Right? I think that's a natural healthy byproduct of us being healthy together in our meeting times. Right? Reminding each other of the work that's before us. But hear me clearly. This is not primarily what I care about.

I want Christ's family church to proclaim the excellencies of God. I want people to look at us and say, what are they doing? It's weird and they're growing and they're planting churches and what is happening in this place?

But more than that, it's about the global, the kingdom of God. I just got to tell you, I am so, so glad that we have so many young people come to this place and leave.

[35 : 25] And there wasn't a time in my life I could have said that. That I would have been happy that you guys leave. Because we were working to build something and every time we invested in somebody and they seemed to be somewhat healthy, like get you just in kind of a healthy church member spot and I could finally start saying, wow, now this is a person or a couple I can use.

They'd leave. And it was really hard and sometimes it still is in moments. I still have struggle with that. I want to build. I want to accomplish. But we have sent people all over this world.

And don't say that to boast on me. Just say that to say that God has blessed us uniquely to impact so much and I'm so thankful for it that we can pour a bit and send on and pour a little more and send on.

that someday the work that we do here will see it fully. We'll recognize what has happened as a result of the work that we've done in this place.

Someday, I hope, as we work, as we put our minds to it, as we strengthen our hands and do the work, God will say to us, well done, my good and faithful servant.

[36 : 35] And that will make it all worthwhile. All worthwhile. Let's pray together.