

January 24 2010

Nehemiah 3

Introducing- “The Team”

Reading: Psalm 90- 12-17

So far in our study of the book of Nehemiah we have learned a great deal about Nehemiah. We have noted his godly concern, his pattern and persistence in prayer, his willingness to lay comfort aside, his thoughtful preparation, his preview and his readiness to proceed. **The character of Nehemiah is a great study because it reveals how God can use any person who is prepared to trust Him and depend upon Him.** There is still more to learn about this man, his passion for God, and his relationship to that God who is Lord of all. However, chapter 3 of this story is not about Nehemiah. **Chapter three is about the people** who have returned from Exile in Babylon to the Promised Land. These are God’s people and they are struggling to fulfill God’s purpose. They know they are part of God’s amazing program but they are facing an uphill battle as they seek to rebuild the ruins of God’s city in a difficult and hostile environment. I won’t push the illustration too far but in one sense they are **Nehemiah’s congregation or his team.** In another sense, **they are you.** You also are a congregation, a team, seeking to build God’s church but, at the same time, facing challenges from both outside and from within. As we walk through this third chapter, which is just a list of names, my prayer is that you will see yourselves in some of these people and identify some areas that you can feel good about and some areas by which you need to feel challenged .

Last week James pointed out that after Nehemiah said **“Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace,” [Neh 2:17-18]** the people responded with **"Let us start rebuilding," [Neh 2:18].** It is always wonderful when people

collectively grab hold of a vision and show a willingness to really throw themselves into the task. Is that you? I want us to remember that these same people, while engaged in this great work for God, were also **rebuilding their own lives** which included

- **rebuilding their own homes**
- **building their own businesses or**
- **starting to work their own land**

which hadn't been worked for 70 years. I mention this to show that there were good reasons why many of these folk could have said, "I know that this task is something important to God but I have my own things to look after." They chose not to take that road but to do what the Lord Jesus, in Matt 6:33, taught his disciples many years later

Matt 6:33

33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

I remember with a great deal of pleasure how this congregation came together when we took up the challenge of major renovations to this building in the early 90's. Almost for a whole year, every night and at weekends, work parties came to clean up the work of the day and haul lumber into specified areas for the builders to assemble the next day. As the project moved on people came out to clean and paint and make the new renovations ready for use. It was a great time of working together and the benefits of those labours are still being enjoyed today. It is really amazing what any group of people can do when they work together. In the portion of Psalm 90 that was read to us those people were asking God to bless the work of their hands but they recognized it was God's work. Nehemiah had made it clear that this was a God appointed task and his congregation threw their collective efforts behind it. I pray that the congregation at Oaklands may never see the

day that God's work falters because the people are not willing to make His work a priority in their lives.

Look at the first verses of this third Chapter with me.

Neh -3:1-32

3 Eliashib 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.

2 The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them.

3 The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. 4 Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired the next section. Next to him Meshullam son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs, and next to him Zadok son of Baana also made repairs. 5 The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.

This whole chapter continues to read just like that. It is a series of names followed by the name of a gate, or section of the wall, that those people, or families, built. The description of the builders and the wall begins at the sheep gate and at the end of the chapter v31 it says.

Next to him, Malkijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and the merchants, opposite the Inspection Gate, and as far as the room above the corner; 32 and between the room above the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and merchants made repairs.

So the description of the wall starts at the sheep gate travels around the whole city and ends at the sheep gate. Although the city walls have undergone many changes in its history, and the ancient City has expanded many times, in November of 2007 a Hebrew University archaeologist Dr. Eilat Mazar. uncovered a section of the original wall built at Nehemiah's time 2,500 years ago,

In those first few verses that I read there are a number of things that jump out at us, which are indicative of the whole chapter. First, did you notice who heads up the list of builders mentioned in verse 1?

3 Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate.

The priests were not builders. They were the ones who performed sacrifices and looked after the services in the newly constructed Temple. They had sacred work to do but here we see that they took up the challenge of getting involved with a very physical task. They did not hide behind their sacred duties. They got down and got dirty doing the job of building. It would have been so easy for those who were set aside for sacred tasks to have said, "This physical work is not for us. That is not our gift." There are many times in the life of a city or a church that we are called upon to do things that are outside of our normal calling, or, outside of our area of giftedness. Sadly, today, there are times when people hide behind that phrase, 'It's not my gift – or it's not my thing' to avoid participating in a task, which may not be their primary calling but, at that moment, could well do with their help. The sheep gate was close to the area where the sheep, which were kept for sacrifices, entered the city and the Temple area. These priests accepted the challenge and got on with the job. Did you also notice that they did not make the mistake of seeing this task of building as being any different from their normal role of serving God? They turned it into a spiritual act. They dedicated what they built.

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.

They understood that whether you serve in the Temple, or out there on the building line, it is still a spiritual task and you are still serving God. Therefore, whatever you do, you can, and ought to, dedicate it to God. **When you are part of the people of God, and**

your goal is to glorify your God, there is no task that is not a godly task. Brother Lawrence, that great believer from an earlier era expressed the sentiment that he was able to worship God in his kitchen peeling potatoes, or washing pots, just as well as the times he spent in Chapel. With the priests setting the example, as all spiritual leaders are called to do, there were others who also set aside their specialized gifts and, and their social standing, to grab hold of bricks. In the verses, from the end of the chapter that I read, we saw that the **goldsmiths and the merchants** were hard at building and in verse 8 we read about the **perfume makers** taking up the challenge. As you read through the other verses you discover that there were

- **mayors and governors,**
- **rulers of territories, and half territories,** in fact
- **people from the whole spectrum of society,** that came together to carry bricks and huge stones, to move rubble and mix mortar. V12 tells us that

12 Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.

This was no time for social or sexual differences, there was a job to be done and everyone played their part. What a delightful picture this paints for us; everyone putting themselves and their differences aside to accomplish a God given task. That is how it should be in the church. People come out of the world, from all levels of society, and from all levels of work related ranks; they come with varied individual spiritual gifts and with a variety of physical abilities but, whoever they are, **they all come to be servants of the Living God and therefore they all stand before Him, and serve Him, as equals.** It is when a church community sees itself as humble servants ready for service that amazing things

can happen. Does that picture describe you? Are you by your humility and willingness to serve helping to create that kind of atmosphere?

You may have also noticed, in those first verses that I read, there was one word that kept popping up. In fact, it occurs five times in verses 2-5

2 The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them.

3 The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. 4 Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired the next section. Next to him Meshullam son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs, and next to him Zadok son of Baana also made repairs. 5 The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.

It is that little word “**next.**” In fact the phrase ‘the adjoining section’ in verse 2 is exactly the same Hebrew word and could have been translated as ‘the next section. That Hebrew word-next- is used 26 times in this chapter. Right through the chapter you read ‘**the next section was built by this man –and next to him these people built and next to them.....,**’ and so on. I want us to really understand and see the importance of this connectedness. They were all building their own sections but they were all a part of the whole. **They were all individuals, building individual sections, but they were interdependent.** They were building this wall as a team. If one person built solidly but the person next to them built poorly the whole wall would be compromised. It was essential, if the wall was to offer protection for God’s people and be a reflection of God’s power and strength that each section needed to have the same integrity and strength. This is another picture of the church. **The Church is a team that ought to reveal to the world the strength and integrity of God.** We either contribute to that reality or we compromise it. We each need to build strong healthy spiritual lives, as individuals and as families, so that the local community of believers is all that our Father wants it to be. If I,

or my family, spiritually collapse, we compromise the whole image of the church. One of the many reasons why we need to encourage and support one another, as we build God's church together, is because, collectively, we are God's showcase. We are building our spiritual foundations, and erecting our spiritual lives together, next to one another. We need one another to be strong. Are we all committed to this task?

Nehemiah's congregation realized that every part of the wall needed to be strong so I am not surprised by another phrase that keeps popping up. Three times, in verses 9, 23, and 29, we read so and so built **by his house**, verse 23 tells us the builders were '**by their house**' and verse 30 mentions, '**by their living quarters.**' It seems that wherever possible the builders were assigned sections of the wall that were either adjacent to or in front of their own homes.

All the city dwellers wanted a strong wall but, if your home were close to that wall, you would surely want to make sure that, if there was a breach, your home would not be the first to be attacked by the enemy. Every builder should build his best but you can surely see that the incentive to build solidly by your own home would be very high. If that were true for these builders of a physical wall it should be just as true for those of us building spiritual walls around our families. When the enemy breaches any family in the church the whole church feels the effect. That is why the great task of parents is to make sure that they build the spiritual foundations and walls of their own family with integrity and strength. A strong church is built up with strong families. Are you actively engaged in building your section of God's kingdom by making sure that the spiritual lives of you and your family are secure?

Like all congregations, the people of Nehemiah's day, had some personality challenges. In those opening verses there was one sour note. It occurs in verse 5

The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.

It appears that there was no shortage of workers from this group, in fact later on in the chapter we read **27 Next to them, the men of Tekoa repaired another section.** The ordinary people of Tekoa, got involved, worked hard and even took on extra labour but, it seemed that their leaders, or the term 'Nobles' could mean people of rank or wealth, did not take the same interest. We are not given the details but it seems that Nehemiah may have appointed supervisors, or foremen, over each section to maintain some consistent building standard or codes, and that presented a problem for these Nobles. Perhaps they resented having someone put in authority over them? Perhaps they had their own ideas about how to build? Whatever it was they wouldn't work under the people put in charge. The fact that the people went ahead anyway tells me the problem was not the supervisors but the attitude of those Nobles. Whatever their reasons these nobles would not humble themselves to work under others. I do hope that you never back away from a task simply because your pride has been hurt, or because you feel you can do a better job of leading than the one put in charge. Pride destroys communities. In the New Testament Peter says;

1 Peter 5:1

5 Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Sometimes being asked to work under some one whom we consider is less competent, or less worthy, than ourselves, can be a healthy thing for us.

I applaud these people from Tekoa because they did not allow the poor examples of their nobles, or leaders, to quell their enthusiasm and dedication to the task. It is so easy to use

poor leadership as an excuse for not getting involved. There are times that, like these workers, we need to forget the poor examples we see and just do what God wants us to do.

I have one other group to applaud that we did not read about. They are found in

Neh 3:14

14 The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of Recab, ruler of the district of Beth Hakkerem. He rebuilt it and put its doors and bolts and bars in place.

The dung gate was the gate through which the refuse of the city was carried and dumped in the valley below. I think that there would be many who would find it to be an uninspiring epitaph to be known as the person who built the Dung gate. However, in God's sacred word this man Malkijah, who was a ruler and prominent man, and I'm sure he had helpers, is listed along with all the others who built the wall, as the man who built the Dung gate. His may not have been an elegant task, and this gate may not have the stature or pre-eminence of other areas but it had to be as strong and as well built as any other part of the wall. When the building assignments were given out Malkijah could have responded with "Oh no! Not the Dung Gate." I can hear echoes of my kids saying, "How come I always gotta take out the garbage?" Some jobs are not so attractive, or as glamorous, as others but they are still essential. I am eternally grateful for those who recognize that God does not ignore those who serve in those unglamorous, unrecognized, and often forgotten areas but, like Malkijah, they do a great job and God notes their names in His records. I believe this congregation has, and always has had, some wonderful Malkijah's. My prayer is that it will never lack those who are willing to serve in those, unglamorous, tucked away, but extremely important areas.

Are you an active member of God's team, working together to build something substantial for God?