



September 28-29, 2019
Pastor Mark Toone

For the City: Shoulder to Shoulder to Shoulder

Nehemiah 3

How many of you have ever attended a commencement ceremony? They are brutal, aren't they? Three hours of mind-numbing boredom as name after name after name is intoned...interrupted by ten seconds of personal pandemonium as you cheer for the one you came to see. So booooooring! Did any of you peek at this week's text? You might have felt the same way. Boorroring, huge list of names. Well, you might be in for a surprise. There are some nuggets in here that I hope will inspire as Nehemiah continues to mentor us on what it means to be "for our city."

Nehemiah, a Jewish servant in Babylon, has received a call from God to rebuild Jerusalem's wall...a wall that has laid in ruins for 150 years. Last week, Nehemiah took a few hand-picked leaders to examine the wall secretly...in the middle of the night. Great leader that he was, in the end, Nehemiah's vision had become THEIR vision. "Let us rise up and build," they said. In chapter 3 we discover how they pull that off. Believe it or not, there are some nuggets to be found here. Neh 3:1-14. (Abbreviated version!)

Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred...And next to him the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built. The sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate...and next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz repaired. And next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, son of Meshezabel repaired. And next to them Zadok the son of Baana repaired. And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.

Joiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Beso'deiah repaired the Gate of Yeshanah... And next to them repaired Mela'tiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meron'othite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah...Next to them Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, goldsmiths, repaired. Next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, repaired, and they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. Next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired. Next to them Jedaiah the son of Haru-maph' repaired opposite his house. And next to him Hattush the son of Hashab'neiah repaired. Malchijah the son of Harim and Hasshub the son of Pahath-moab repaired another section and the Tower of the Ovens. Next to him Shallum the son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired, he and his daughters.

Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate...and a thousand cubits of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate. Malchijah the son of Rechab, ruler of the district of Beth-haccherem', repaired the Dung Gate.

OK...that's enough! This IS the word of the Lord! (Thanks be to God)

These are pictures of the Jerusalem wall. It dates ONLY to the 1500s but it gives you an idea of its scale. Imagine these stones torn down and lying in massive piles around the entire city. THAT was the task to which Nehemiah was called. He helped the people who had lived in that rubble all their lives catch a glimpse of a new future. And then, he divided up the work into 41 smaller chunks and handed out the assignments. We discover some very inspiring stories along the way...and one huge disappointment.

First, did you notice where Nehemiah started? Who is the very first builder mentioned in the list? Eliashib the High Priest. Nehemiah understood a crucial principle: you lead with your leaders. No person was more highly esteemed than the high priest. No one had more influence. We don't know if Eliashib toured the ruins with Nehemiah, but between the end of chapter two and the beginning of chapter three, Nehemiah won the heart of this key leader. And good for Eliashib for being willing to take off his high priestly garments and put on his work clothes and get dirty! That's humility!

This was certainly the humble heart of our Great High Priest, Jesus. The New Testament speaks with amazement about God the Son who "came not to be served, but to serve;" who deigned to touch the filthy leper; who knelt to wash his disciples' feet. There is nothing high-falutin' about the call to Christian leadership. There is nothing we preachers or elders should ask of you that we are not willing to do ourselves. We are called to lead, not to lord over you...which is why I share with you my own journey ...including my failures... in this call to love and serve our city. You have every right and reason to expect that we walk our talk...and I hope that when we do, you will join us.

There is something else worth noticing: EVERYBODY HAD A PART TO PLAY! Some of these guys must have been construction workers! The citizens of Zanoah, for instance, built 500 yards of wall! One-third of a mile! And seven other groups finished their section...and then built ANOTHER section. They were knocking out the work!

I was on the High School Mexico build eight times...and every time, no matter how hard we all worked, Bart Brynstad's crew was always done first...and then off, helping others. Hanun and his team were Nehemiah's Bart Brynstad...a wall-building machine.

But there were others in there schlepping rocks who might surprise you. In verse 12, we meet Shalum, a ruler of Jerusalem. This was HIS city being repaired; he had a vested interest. But Shalum didn't have any sons. He had only daughters... and daughters couldn't do construction work...right? Verse 12: "...Shallum the son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired [a section], *he and his daughters.*" Girl power! I love that! I have a daughter like that. I guarantee you, Rachel Toone would have been standing on top of that rock pile, hammer in hand! Their culture cried out, "You have only daughters. What can they do?" But God declared, "Shallum, today, your daughters are wall-builders." And they were.

And then there was Uzziel the goldsmith; a craftsman. He had an artist's eye and a gentle touch. He could create gold pieces of exquisite beauty with delicate tools. Uzziel said, "But Lord, I'm a goldsmith. I don't work with heavy stones." And God said, "Uzziel, today you are a wall-builder."

Uzziel had a friend next door. Hananiah was a perfume-maker. In a world that was smelly and rotten, Hananiah produced ointments that disguised some of that stink; that made things more beautiful. Hananiah said, "Lord, I don't work with heavy timbers. I am a perfume-maker." And God said, "Hananiah, today you are a wall-builder."

Uzziel and Hananiah never made the Jerusalem Warriors football team. They never went to the front lines of battle. They were gentle, artistic souls who delighted in creating beautiful things. Not exactly the type you might recruit for a construction crew. But there they are in verse 8, laboring side by side, repairing their two parts of wall. And I'll bet it was the most beautiful section of the entire city! Have you ever used the excuse, "That's not my spiritual gift," as a reason to get out of doing something you find difficult or distasteful? This goldsmith and this perfumer teach us that sometimes, God says, "I don't need your expertise; I need your obedience! I need your hands dirty!"

There they all were, great and small, strong and weak, gifted and clueless, influential and inconsequential... all working together...all sharing in the vision of a restored Jerusalem...a restored people of God. Chapter 3 is a long, detailed, cornerstone of everyone who worked to accomplish the restoration of God's city. All of them working hard; all of them doing what they could do....all...except for one group.

Did you notice them? Verse 5: "And next to [Zadok] the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord." Of all the names in chapter three, the nobles of Tekoa are the only ones mentioned because they did NOT work. Perhaps they considered menial labor beneath them. Or maybe they didn't want a commoner telling them what to do; they were nobles, after all. Or maybe they were Guardians of the Rubble; they liked things the way they were; they hated change. Whatever the reason, the nobles of Tekoa raised their noses in contempt ...but wouldn't raise a hand to help.

By the way, if you drop down to verse 27, you find an interesting postscript to the story of the snooty Tekoa nobles. "...the Tekoites repaired another section opposite the great projecting tower as far as the wall of Ophel." What happened when the leaders of the Tekoa people refused to lead? Others stepped into their place. The nobles would not work. There was a vacuum of leadership. So...God raised up others who made it happen. The people of Tekoa became so excited about what they had accomplished, they said, "Give us another section. We're on a roll!"

What is the moral of this story? Lead, follow or get out of the way. The Body of Christ always works. If the persons who have been blessed with authority will not exercise that authority... will not use their God-given gifts to lead...God will take away their authority and it give it to someone who will. And, like the nobles of Tekoa, you'll be left watching from the sidelines as the rest of the people of God accomplish great things.

You might have noticed I didn't start my sermon as usual. For the last three weeks, I've started by asking you to raise your hand if you've begun to look at your city in a new way; if you've been intentional about noticing your neighbor. We've given you tools to help remember because we know people learn in different ways. T-shirts, decals, a prayer app...and last week, a "For The City" card.

Different ways to help you say, "I want to see my city and my neighbors with new eyes. I want God to use me to bless my city."

And many of you HAVE raised your hand. But hundreds of you have not. Not yet. And if that is you, this morning....as we read this story about all these who played a part in restoring Jerusalem...I want you to reflect on this question: *Why* haven't I raised my hand yet? I'm not trying to shame you. But I do want you to grapple with this question. Because there are many in this body who *never* raise a hand. Never offer to lead...never offer to volunteer, never offer to pray, never offer to give, never offer to invite. Never!

Perhaps you feel unworthy. Perhaps you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps you feel indifferent. Perhaps you feel entitled. Or perhaps you've come to assume that others will do it; that others will carry the load. And, of course, we will! But if we could capture this vision of everyone...everyone...working, side by side, doing their part, large and small...everyone caring for their city, everyone noticing and loving their neighbors, everyone praying God's favor upon their city... how much MORE could God do through us. So...what will it take for YOU to raise YOUR hand someday?

Just as the people in our story worked shoulder to shoulder to accomplish God's work of restoration, we sit here shoulder to shoulder, each of us, as different as we are, a part of the Body of Christ. When we pass the elements to one another, it is a reminder that God has called us into a redemptive community...into family. But imagine this: what if the person next to you received the plate, took their cup, took their bread... and refused to pass it on. They just held on to it? They got theirs...and that's all that matters. It would be a breach of our covenant, wouldn't it? A rending of our communion.

Every one of us must do our part, passing the elements on, one to another to another, so that all might be nourished by the feast of our Lord. In the same way, every one of us has an essential part to play in the redemptive work that God wants to do in blessing our city. As you receive the elements...and pass them on...think about that. Pray about that.