

A Study of the Book of Nehemiah

Working with Others in Service to the Lord (*Nehemiah 3:1-32*)

“How desperately sad is the fact that the church is known by schism, not unity; ignorance, not knowledge; and indecisiveness rather than maturity. How it must break God’s heart to see us continue in such a poverty stricken condition in light of what He has done, stands ready to do, has the resources to accomplish, and has defined as our calling in Christ.” ~ R. C. Sproul

I. Overview

Chapter 3 of Nehemiah contains a litany of names that are difficult to pronounce, information that is repetitive and appears rather meaningless, and obscure locations that are largely forgotten today. Thus, it is little surprise that some of the most prominent books on the study of Nehemiah fail to discuss this chapter. And yet, a closer observation of this chapter reveals several important principles both for leadership and for unity within God’s people. In so doing, these principles afford the opportunity for God’s community to come together to accomplish great things for His glory!

II. Accomplishing Great Things for the Lord (3:1-32)

Despite fierce opposition, extreme disunity, and horrific conditions, Nehemiah successfully rallied the Israelites to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem in less than two months! Note the following overall principles from this chapter:

A. This project began with spiritual direction and leadership.

Already Nehemiah has noted the Lord’s leading and blessing on this project (see vv. 12, 18, 20). This divine oversight was further noted in who was mentioned first in the names of the builders—Eliashib the high priest (v. 1). This reference to the high priest sets precedence for the entire chapter (as his name is also mentioned in v. 20). Nehemiah also mentioned the Levites (v. 17), the temple servants (vv. 26, 31), and the priests (v. 28)

In ancient Near Eastern culture, the king himself would carry bricks for the building of a temple. For the Israelites, it was the High Priest, not a local governor, who was mentioned first. For Nehemiah and the Israelites, this project was dedicated to the King of Kings. After all, it was His project and His glory.

A question we must answer before going any further in this study pertains to the validity of this project. Is it right for the people of God to build a wall around themselves to keep out the infidel—to be physically and culturally isolated?

In order to answer this question, we must be careful to note that ancient walls served as a symbols of identity and solidarity. As noted by one scholar, “The building of these walls would be a testimony to God’s power rather than to their own, and to their determination to

be a holy people, separated from others by their faithfulness to him” (McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 88).

B. This project required participation from the entire community.

In addition to the religious leaders, this text highlights various groups were involved in the reconstruction of these forty sections. So great is the list, that one scholar calls their cooperation “one of the Old Testament’s finest pictures of its ideal of Israelite brotherhood” (McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 89). These groups include the following:

- *Family units*. In verse 12, Nehemiah mentioned that Shallum’s daughters assisted in this building project. This reference indicates that entire families were involved. It could also imply that Shallum had no sons (see Num 36:8).
- *Particular towns*. Nehemiah listed several local groups who participate in this project (e.g., sons of Jericho in v. 2, the sons of Hassenaah in v. 3, men of Tekoa in vv. 5 and 27, and the residents of Zanoah in v. 13).

It should be noted that no leader from Tekoa assisted. The text does not mention why? It could be that they felt a lack of involvement was politically prudent, especially since they lived outside of Jerusalem. Or perhaps these leaders from Tekoa simply did not want to make any sacrifices or be involved in manual labor. Regardless, their unwillingness to cooperate serves as a valuable reminder “that sharp differences of opinion within the wider Jewish community were never far beneath the surface” (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 204).

- *Non-Israelite God-fearers*. Interestingly, we find Gideonites and Meronothites assisting in the rebuilding of the walls.
- *Crafts and Trades*. The names of the builders also include members of particular guilds (e.g., the goldsmiths in vv. 8 and 31-32, perfumers’ in v. 8, and merchants in v. 31-32)
- *Ruling Officials*. Various different leaders are mentioned in this list: Rephaiah in v. 9, Shallum in v. 12, Malkijah in v. 14, Nehemiah in v. 16, Hashabiah in v. 17, Binnui in v. 18, and Ezer in v. 19. These men appear to be nobles who oversee particular surrounding areas of Jerusalem. It was remarkable that Nehemiah was able to win such widespread support from the various administrative leaders in the area.

C. This project was performed as one.

Everyone was working together to complete this task. For instance, observe who was present at, or near, the Sheep Gate in verse 32. Both the high priest and his fellows were found working side by side the craftsmen and men of trade. This cooperation beautifully displays unity among God’s people in completing this entire project.

A phrase that occurs throughout this chapter is “next to him.” “All these different people—people who otherwise wouldn’t have worked together on anything—now are all together” (Keller, ‘Laboring for a God,’ *God’s Word, Our Story*, 56).

D. This project required sacrifice and personal investment.

Several of the builders were assigned a section of a wall or a gate which was in close proximity with where they live (see vv. 21-24, 28-30). One commentator observes, “By arranging for each man to work close to his own home, Nehemiah made it easy for them to get to work, to be sustained while on the job, and to safeguard those who were nearest and dearest to them. This relieved each worker of any unnecessary anxiety. It also insured that each person would put his best effort into what he was doing” (Barber, *Nehemiah*, 49).

E. This project was lead by humility and encouragement.

Nehemiah quickly gave honor where honor was due. He was quick to give credit to over 75 individuals and 15 groups in this chapter! What is amazing is that Nehemiah knew his people, and he was careful to work alongside them. His leadership prowess was further displayed in knowing the accomplishments of many of these individuals.

And yet, despite Nehemiah’s incredible leadership skills and ability to recall names, he walked in humility. As he identified with his people (2:17), Nehemiah was only implicitly referred to as the overseer of this project in this chapter. He sought collective involvement and relinquished tasks to various groups and individuals.

III. Intersect

A. As believers, the Lord has gone to great lengths to ensure that we are all part of one Body—the Church. We each have our own ministry, but together we are united as one. The call to love is a requirement, not a suggestion.

Ephesians 1:15-16 -

B. Unless all the gifts are used, the community will have difficulty doing the work that God has given it to do. Failure to work with other believers or recognize their worth is ultimately an affront to the Lord.

1 Peter 2 -

C. Eyes focused on the Lord’s work recognizes the importance of God’s people. We need to encourage one another.

1 Thessalonians 5:11; also, see Prov 16:24 and 25:11 -

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

To what extent are you involved in your local church? Are you utilizing your talents, your abilities, and your personal resources in building up your church?

Take some time to read Ephesians 4:1-16. Note particular ways you could better contribute to your local church.

“On Sundays God wants us to do more than sing songs together and have wonderful worship experiences. He wants to knit the fabric of our lives together. For many, church has become all about me – what I’m learning, what I’m seeking, what I’m desperate for, what I need, how I’ve been affected, what I can do. We see ourselves as isolated individuals all seeking personal encounters with God, wherever we can find them. Sadly, this reflects our individualistic, me-obsessed culture. Rather than seeing ourselves as part of a worship community, we become worship consumers. We want worship on demand, served up in our own time, and with our own music.” ~ Bob Kauflin