

SERMON

Working Partners (Nehemiah 3:1-32)

Turn with me to Nehemiah 3 on page 486 of the Church Bibles. We will begin to read from the first verse. Remember that Nehemiah has arrived in Jerusalem and after he rested and then reconnoitred the situation he hit on a plan

“Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."” (Nehemiah 2:17 NIV)

A very simple plan to **rebuild the wall of Jerusalem**. And so we come to chapter 3 of what some call, the memoirs of Nehemiah. We begin at verse 1

“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. The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them. The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. 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. The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.” (Nehemiah 3:1-5 NIV)

We only have a further twenty-seven verses to go! The list seems endless, but as those who are with us in the evenings will know, I love this sort of chapter. Nehemiah is my sort of guy – he is into details, and don’t despair as he does this again in chapters 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12. What fun and joy we have to look forward to!

But I do realise that others are not fascinated by lists such as we have here in chapter 3 and as this is a reader’s nightmare with all the names, I have decided not to read all of it, but we will read portions of it as we go along. Yes, we will be looking at chapter 3 of Nehemiah because if we do not we will miss some of the gems that are in it. Never despise a list for so often there are gems in the list when one digs a little, but today we do not even really have to dig.

This morning I want to look at this portion of Nehemiah by making a series of statements and then looking at those statements.

Earlier this week Sue, Darren and myself were at the London Baptist Association Ministers’ Consultation. It was a good time and as a conference we looked at our Baptist DNA. One of the things that came out of the conference for me was that in our Baptist DNA was the desire to reach out with the Good News of the gospel to others. The Good News that Jesus came to earth, that he lived and then died so that all those who follow him can know their sins forgiven. But also that he rose again showing victory over death and that he promised to send us God the Holy Spirit to be with us, to guide us, to help us. We have such great news but sadly we at times do not share it. We not do feel that it is my place Building up the Kingdom of God. And so come the first of the statements

“It’s not my job” – That is for someone else to do. But we have already heard in verse 1 of Nehemiah 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.”

(Nehemiah 3:1 NIV)

And again in verse 22 and 28

“The repairs next to him were made by the priests from the surrounding region.”

(Nehemiah 3:22 NIV)

And verse 28

“Above the Horse Gate, the priests made repairs, each in front of his own house.”

(Nehemiah 3:28 NIV)

The priests were not builders, but they knuckled down to it and built. But we may say that they had a vested interest because they wanted the walls built so the people would go back to building the Temple. But then we read more, look at verse 8

“Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section; and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, made repairs next to that. They restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall.” (Nehemiah 3:8 NIV)

So we have goldsmiths and perfume-makers who are now builders. And then in verses 31 and 32 we read

“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; and between the room above the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and merchants made repairs.” (Nehemiah 3:31-32 NIV)

So working alongside builders we have, priests, goldsmiths, perfume-makers, merchants and also Levites, Temple helpers as mentioned in verse 17.

“Next to him, the repairs were made by the Levites under Rehum son of Bani. Beside him, Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, carried out repairs for his district.” (Nehemiah 3:17 NIV)

They were not saying “It’s not my job”, they just got on with it. Presumably someone had to show them what to do.

When Sue and I were first married and moved into our first home, I then found out the three most dreaded letters in the alphabet...D I Y. Houses are always it seems needing DIY and there always seemed to be shelves to put up, or this to be fixed or done. My parents told Sue that I was a wonderful man, but practical things, DIY – that’s another matter. My mum would always bring up the first screen I made at school, out of wood, that was great except for one problem – it didn’t really stand flat and wobbled. But as parent do, the fire screen stood in front of the fire during the summer months for several years, then they got a gas fire instead of a coal fire. Looking back it might have been to get rid of the fire screen without hurting my feelings!

So when we were married and I had to do some DIY, and could not get out of it, I also had Terry. Terry was brilliant at all DIY and beyond. So I would ring him up and say, "Terry, I thought I would do this and do it this way." At the other end of the phone there was a little pause and then Terry would say, "You can do it that way" which I learnt was Terry being kind to me and really thinking, "What a weird, longwinded, rubbish way to do that job." But then he would tell me how to do the task in hand properly and sometimes come round to instruct me, but never do it. So, slowly I learnt.

So in the days of Nehemiah, the builders would instruct the non-builders in the art of building – I was going to say give them a crash course, but that would not be appropriate to a wall wanting to be built up.

So with us, we can never say that it is not my job to build the Kingdom of God, to talk to other people about what God means to me, what Jesus means to me. It is talking about the relationship that I have with someone else. No-one expects everyone to be one who preaches to people, but we can all talk about our relationship with Jesus and what Jesus has done for us and what Christianity mean sin our lives and the positive effects it has in my life and work, etc, etc.

Some however may say

"This work is beneath me" – I leave it to the others. And there were those who were there, who thought this. 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." (Nehemiah 3:5 NIV)

The nobles didn't want to get their hands dirty, or work under others. We are above all this. However as Paul says about the Kingdom of God

"...all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:27-28 NIV)

We are all together and there is not a hierarchy where some do and some don't. We are all called to do. The great commission of Christ is to us all, to be ambassadors for him. To take his message out to people who are lost.

Over the last few months I have been visited by some Jehovah's Witnesses. I am not sure why as I did declare who I was at our first meeting. Maybe I wasn't convincing enough when I said I am a Baptist Minister of the church round the corner. However I know that the Jehovah's Witnesses go around knocking on doors, telling people about their faith because they are desperately trying to earn their place on the new earth when the end comes. Should we not be wanting to talk to people because we know that that person is going to hell? The JWs talk to people for fear of themselves not reaching paradise, we should be talking to people because we know they are not going to reach paradise.

Others though did respond to the building work who were of what we might call high office. Verse 9

"Rephaiah son of Hur, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section." (Nehemiah 3:9 NIV)

And again in verse 12

“Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.” (Nehemiah 3:12 NIV)

And from verse 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 Fountain Gate was repaired by Shallun son of Col-Hozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah. He rebuilt it, roofing it over and putting its doors and bolts and bars in place. He also repaired the wall of the Pool of Siloam, by the King’s Garden, as far as the steps going down from the City of David. Beyond him, Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of a half-district of Beth Zur, made repairs up to a point opposite the tombs of David, as far as the artificial pool and the House of the Heroes. Next to him, the repairs were made by the Levites under Rehum son of Bani. Beside him, Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, carried out repairs for his district. Next to him, the repairs were made by their countrymen under Binnui son of Henadad, ruler of the other half-district of Keilah. Next to him, Ezer son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, repaired another section, from a point facing the ascent to the armoury as far as the angle.” (Nehemiah 3:14-19 NIV)

All these rulers, there to help, there to pitch in and build. Hopefully we never think of ourselves too high and mighty to talk to someone else about the Kingdom of God and help grow the Kingdom of God.

However others might say as an excuse

“It’s not me, I’m not cut out for it.” – True, but we have already seen in the building of the walls that we have goldsmiths and perfume-makers. I wondered if they invented a perfume called eau-de-brick or parfam-de-BO, or cologne de builder’s bum? Alongside these there were merchants and priests and Levites. All of them could have said, “It’s not me, I’m not cut out for it.” And alongside all these we read of another group in verse 12

“Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.” (Nehemiah 3:12 NIV)

Were the daughters the shot putters types with huge biceps? I think not. I think they were normal everyday daughters who pitched in with the building of the walls.

Some of the folks in Jerusalem could have said

“I am not worthy to build the walls” – What do you mean? Well in this chapter in Nehemiah, in verse 11 we are introduced to Malkijah, son of Harim, he is mentioned in Ezra 10 as being one among many who had married a foreign wife. In verse 4 we have Meremoth, son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz. Hakkoz had been thrown out of the priesthood. Nothing in our past put can stop us doing God’s work now. When we accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour, then we begin with a clean sheet. All our sins, when we confess them are gone, and so no-one can say, “I am not worthy to build the walls” or “I am unworthy to help build up the Kingdom of God.” Nothing makes a greater impact on people is when they see a friend or relative changed by God – that speaks volumes to them.

What Malkijah and Meremoth must have felt is that it was a privilege to be included. Do we see telling others as a privilege – something we can do with God? The work of building the wall was no picnic, it was gruelling with long hours, heavy labour, but it gave them the privilege of joining in the priceless opportunity to work with God. Do you see building up the Kingdom of God a privilege, a priceless opportunity, or just a gruelling chore?

We could continue through the chapter picking out things like the fact that the people of Jerusalem were united in their building, but they were also individuals, building their bit, some outside their own houses, some on portions of the walls not near their houses. But as we near the end of the sermon this morning I want us to look at verse 20

“Next to him, Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the angle to the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest.” (Nehemiah 3:20 NIV)

Baruch went at it like a bull in a china shop, he was earnest, zealous, he went all out for it. Others were so enthusiastic that they finished their bit of wall and went on to another part. Just because they had finished their bit, they did not stop with the work still needing to be done. One of the saddest things I heard of was when a meeting in a church was discussing whether to hold another Alpha course or not. One comment was:

“I’ve been to three Alphas already, I’ll be bored if I go to another one.”

But for me the saddest comment for me was:

“My husband became a Christian through an Alpha course, so I’ve no need to take anyone else to one.” My work is finished, my enthusiasm has gone – but with God the work goes on, the fire should always be there.

We have an Alpha course at the end of this month – have you thought who you might invite? Have you even given it a thought?

I wonder if any did say

“What’s in it for me?” – What’s in it for me – WIIFM. What reward do I get? What reward did Dr N Beattie, Mr E J Barnard, Mr Rattenbury, Mr Ashbolt, Mr Van Petegem, Mr R B Billing, Mr L R Hardway, Mr P Iszatt and Mr T Sibley get? Who were they? They were present in the first deacons’ meeting of this church. Their reward is us. We are their legacy – the Working Partners of ADBC. We are still here. Our reward we will never see, but our legacy should be a church on this site in another hundred years’ time. However are we willing to work, Building for the Future, to build the Kingdom of God here in this place now and in the years to come by telling others about Jesus and the relationship will all have with him.