

All hands on deck!
Building for the Glory of God
Nehemiah 3:1-32
11th February 2024
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Introduction

My first full-time job, age 18, was a factory labourer at Yale Locks in Willenhall. When lunch time came many of us headed to the canteen where I learnt one of my first lessons about the world of work: the factory was divided into blue collar and white collar workers. The canteen had two sections, one where blue collar employees, like myself - manual workers - were allowed, and another area where the office workers, the white collar employees, dined.

Two different worlds, and if memory serves me correct, two different menus as well.

Isn't the world of work a strange place? Everyone was working for one single aim - earning money by producing locks - and yet the factory was sharply divided between those who used pens, paper, computers and one part of their minds, and those who used hands, feet and another part of their brains.

One lesson we learn today is that in the church, there must be no white collar, blue collar divide. In Christ, where there is "neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free", none of the proud divisions we observe in the world have any place.

In Nehemiah chapter 3, people from all classes and backgrounds work together with one single common divine aim, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. An orchestra of instruments playing in harmony to produce one melodic symphony. The only discordant note is played by the nobles of Tekoa, "*their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.*" (v 5) The ordinary folks of Tekoa were prepared to work, but the rulers wouldn't; they weren't prepared to obey their supervisors. Perhaps they thought practical labour was beneath them? Perhaps the supervisors came from an inferior rank of society so they refused to obey them? Whatever the reason, the nobles of Tekoa were the only ones who played a duff note!

The Rebuilding of the Walls

On the surface Nehemiah chapter 3 looks like a long list of hard-to-pronounce names, right? But there is so much more beneath the surface, let's take a tour...

We should notice the order

...there is order, for a start! Nehemiah's report is an orderly account which runs anticlockwise from the Sheep gate, all the way around the walls ending back at the Sheep Gate.

Everything we do together in the church should be done in an orderly way, for God is a God of order. Paul complained about the chaotic way the church in Corinth was going about it's meetings, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace." Some people think that the church should be laid back and disorganised in its affairs. But - thank God! - that is not how heaven runs the universe! "The sun will rise today, but then it will take a break for a few days" "summer followed spring last year, but this year we'll mix it up!" No, God is a God of order. (Of course we can be over-organised and leave no room for the Spirit of God to lead us. And we must avoid that extreme too.)

We should notice the Sheep Gate

It cannot be an accident that Nehemiah's list begins and ends at the Sheep gate—through which sheep were brought from the fields to the temple and sacrificed as a reminder that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of our sins! For us New Covenant believers, the Sheep Gate is a reminder of Jesus, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Is there a believer among us that needs a reminder this morning? By one sacrifice on the cross, the Lord Jesus has atoned for all our sins, past, present and future!

Is there someone who needs to know God's forgiveness for the very first time? How can this happen, by coming to God, turning sincerely from your sins and trusting in Jesus Christ.

We should notice the first builders on the list

Eliashib, the high priest and his fellow priests. Spiritual leaders are not above getting

their hands dirty, right? Indeed spiritual leaders should set an example and be known as the first and hardest workers in the church of Jesus Christ, right? For in the church of Jesus Christ we descend into greatness.

I remember an older man joining a church I once pastored. He was a humble man, willing to mow the lawns and clean the toilets. (There were some who thought such tasks were way beneath them). A strange thing happened. Folk in the church noticed the humble servant-heartedness of this brother and came to me and said, “you should appoint him as a deacon!” They understood the words of Jesus, *“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Matt 20:26-28)

We should notice that they dedicated their work

After they built the Sheep gate the priests dedicated it, prayed about their work, they gave it to the Lord - the only written example of dedication in this chapter. They were setting an example, “we’re working in God’s strength and for his glory.”

From the sheep gate onwards, a vast company of Jews rebuild the walls. We should all notice the following:

We should notice about the people, that all sorts of people were engaged!

We have the priests, nobles, perfume-makers, temple-servants, goldsmiths. We find large groups, “the men of Jericho” and we have people who work on their own, Malkijah repaired the Dung gate, verse 14. (Called Dung gate for a reason! And Malkijah who was ruler of a district was prepared to rebuild it!) We discover families working together—Shallum and his daughters (verse 12). Some people repair parts that are right next to their house, verse 23, but others live miles away and yet are happy to help.

We should notice about the work that many different kinds of labour are required

Walls had to be built: some from scratch some just required repairing. There’s carpentry for the gates and ironwork for the bolts and bars. There are supervisors,

verse 5. No-one had a natural aptitude or gifting for the work. Perfume makers had to turn their hand to bricklaying, goldsmiths to ironwork, priests to carpentry, and so on. We should notice that some people were able to do just a little, but others had the strength to do much more: Hanun and the residents of Zanoah not only rebuilt the Valley Gate they repaired 500 yards of the wall (verse 13). The men of Tekoa are mentioned twice. Why do you think they did two stints? Nobles!

We should notice the harmony

Apart from the la-di-da nobles of Tekoa, there is tremendous harmony between the workers. We keep reading “next to him” or “next to them.” They all had to communicate with each other about how their bit of the wall was going to connect to their neighbours bit. Same number of courses, not higher, not lower, and so on.

Finally, we should note Baruch, verse 20, because it says he zealously repaired! It showed! Did he whistle while he built? Did he arrive early and leave late? Somehow everyone knew he had devotion, passion, gusto, fervour and zest!

The Work of The Gospel!

It's time to apply Nehemiah chapter 3 to ourselves in 2024. We're not building walls, no, the task of the church is to go out and make disciples, Jesus said “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28)

In other words, go into the world with the Gospel, preach the Gospel, share the Gospel, and then when people believe, take care of them, teach them, build them up, disciple them, gather them into groups to encourage one another in their faith.

This is our work!

Let's flesh out the lessons of Nehemiah in 3 steps:

(1) Every believer has a spiritual Gift

Every believer has been given some spiritual gift to use to serve the Lord. Did you know that? “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

The New Testament uses the illustration of the church as a body, where each one of us is a hand or a foot or an eye or an ear. *“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying (speaking forth the word of God) let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving (what a broad category) let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”* (Romans 12:6-8) If we add from the lists of 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, we end up with:

- Prophecy
- Serving
- Teaching
- Encouraging
- Contributing to the needs of others
- Leadership
- Showing mercy
- Able to help others
- Gifts of administration
- Evangelists
- Pastors
- As well as deacons and elders

And these lists are probably not exhaustive. You have a spiritual gift, isn't that wonderful! Find it and use it! Some of us use to sing:

*There's a work for Jesus,
ready at your hand,
'Tis a task the Master
just for you has planned.*

*Haste to do His bidding,
yield Him service true;
There's a work for Jesus
none but you can do.*

You say, that for one good reason or another you cannot do very much! That's OK. Due to illness or difficult family situations – we all understand, and so too does the Lord. But surely, everyone can give! A little? Have you noticed on the weekly sheet that our weekly expenditure is a lot greater than our income? We're using up our reserves, we need more people to commit regularly, monthly, weekly. Could you give? And surely, everyone can pray! Take one of these sheets and pray!

Everyone has something to give!

And may I add here, that if we do not serve, it is all too easy to become a critical bystander, pointing out every fault and foible and weakness - of which there are, no doubt, many! Much harder to be critical when you are working shoulder to shoulder with your brothers and sisters!

Sometimes, our spiritual gift will coincide with our natural abilities, but often it does not, and we will be working outside of our comfort zone. The perfume makers and goldsmiths and nobles and temple servants and priests were all working out of their depths! Their 9-5 work was very different from the work God called them to do! Shepherds Moses and David, became leaders. (You know how uncomfortable Moses was being a leader). Farmers Elijah and Amos became prophets. Fishermen Peter, Andrew, James and John became Apostles.

Sometime the Lord calls us to use the gifts we naturally have, sometime he calls us to serve outside our comfort zones. My Yvonne was talking to someone the other week about this very issue. And she said to them, what she has often said to me, "I am always serving outside my comfort zone." "Everything I do is uncomfortable, difficult, nothing comes naturally."

But that makes us prayerful, depending on the Lord for wisdom and for strength.

(2) Every believer's gift is essential!

All it would take is one small gap in the wall, one weak gate, and the enemy could pour in and destroy the city. Every part of the wall was essential.

And in the same way, in the church, every spiritual gift is essential!

The body can't hear if the ears aren't functioning, the church can't see if the eyes refuse to see, and the body can't move if the legs go on strike!

Two examples from Church History

In the early days of Methodism, every-member ministry this was John Wesley's desire, "The Methodist Episcopal Church is not a spiritual restaurant, where persons enter to feast upon the good things of the kingdom; but it is a spiritual workshop, where persons who enter are expected to work for Christ."

Charles Spurgeon, "The Metropolitan Tabernacle was not, as some have assumed, merely a highly popular preaching centre. It was not a church whose people largely came in from some miles around, and after listening to a marvellous exercise in Christian oratory, returned to their homes and seldom thought about the place again until the following Sunday morning.... The Tabernacle was a great working church. The vast majority of the members lived in the heavily populated area of London... many so near that they could walk... Apart from the sick and infirm, there were very few who came only on Sundays..."

Everyone's gift is essential! And so...

(3) Every believer should be challenged to serve!

We thank God for the way his people serve here at MPC, so many of you, weekly, faithfully, sacrificially, publically, secretly. The Lord knows and he will reward you.

Perhaps you come from a church tradition where this teaching was absent—there are churches that never encourage their folks to serve! May the Lord correct that deficiency this morning and challenge you to find your gift and place.

Parents, encourage your kids to serve! When I was a child, in Pakistan, my parents got us to fold thousands of Gospel “newspapers” wrap them in brown paper, glue on the labels and stamps. Every month or so. Our reward was a bottle of Fanta - a big treat in those days. And so as I grew into a teenager and young adult weekly service was the norm!

Peter Oram has been appointed to encourage the next generation to serve in church life. Parents he will be encouraging your kids to serve!

What about you? Are you serving the Lord? We’ve taken the liberty of putting on your seats a form, could you fill it in? No pressure. Take it home, pray about it, bring it next week. E.g. Cleaners?

Your gift is wanted! Your gift is essential!

But perhaps you are not yet a follower of Jesus. What work should you do? One day some people came to Jesus with that very question: “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6). The very first work we can ever do for God is to believe in Jesus Christ, God’s Son. And you can do that today, “Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God, I believe you suffered and died for my sins. I want to follow you the rest of my days.” Then tell someone and then get baptised!

May the Lord speak to each of us through his living word today.

Amen.