

Cooperative, Community Construction – Nehemiah 3:1-32

Scripture Reading: 1Corinthians 12:14-20

Introduction

As you just heard, I took compassion on Nathan this morning and had him read a companion text rather than our sermon text

But since I did that, I encourage you to open your Bible now to Nehemiah 3 because that is where we will be spending the majority of our time – if you are using one of the pew Bibles, you will find it on page 399

If you have been reading through Nehemiah in preparation for the sermons, you will have noticed that chapter 3 is one of those sections of Scripture that is easy to bypass

After all, it's a list of obscure people names and places that cause us a great deal of amusement as we contort our mouths in trying to pronounce them

In the end, it reads like listening to the list of people that the winners thank at an awards show – people who are completely obscure and largely forgettable outside of the immediate context

Still, we find it to be a logical continuation of the narrative that carries on with a full account of who worked on what part of the wall

But, when you read on past Chapter 3 you notice something odd because, while Chapter 3 speaks of the work on the wall in the past tense, as an accomplished task, we find that the wall isn't actually finished until the end of Chapter 6

So what is going on here?

What we have in Chapter 3 is like one of those movies that use a motif called a "flash-forward"

A flash-forward movie begins by showing the situation as it exists at the end of all the events of the story and then goes back to fill in the details and show you how the characters wound up where the movie started – ...at the end of the story...

So we have this summary account that's stuck in between the people agreeing to help Nehemiah rebuild the wall at the end of Chapter 2 and the detailed narrative of the events that happened during the rebuilding that starts in Chapter 4

Remember, Nehemiah apparently wrote this book sometime later after these events had taken place – kind of like a memoir – remember Nehemiah was in the government and governmental officials still write those kinds of books

Still, up to this point, we have been following the actions of Nehemiah where we saw him pray for God to act and then take action by heading to Jerusalem as a governor under Artaxerxes once he got the green light

And then, all of a sudden, as Chapter 3 opens, we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of a construction site and we may well wonder what there is for us in this list of builders and their work

But what we are going to see today is that this chapter shows us an example of what God's people can be and do – what we can be and do as a church – which is a powerful and united force attempting and accomplishing great things for God

So there should be a very powerful incentive for us to learn from the example of these rather ordinary Judeans and be just as dedicated to fulfilling God's call for us in our time as they were in theirs

And what we are going to see is this:

To accomplish the purpose God has for us as a church we need to have understanding and action, people who are involved and responsible, and willing to labor with cooperation and contentment

These elements are all present in the account before us so let's look first at how, if we want to accomplish God's purpose, we must have understanding and action

I. Understanding and Action

There is a reason why people pick a destination and use a roadmap of some kind to get there rather than driving around aimlessly

And there's a reason a contractor relies on a set of blueprints to guide them as they build

Otherwise, you would be relying on little more than random chance that you would achieve the desired outcome

And the same thing is true when it comes to accomplishing God's purposes

The plain truth is, success is unlikely if you don't know what you're trying to accomplish and why

Now for Nehemiah and the Judeans, the task was fairly straightforward – they were building a defensive wall that would encircle the city of Jerusalem

Since they all knew what the wall should look like it was unlikely that one someone would take off and start building something completely different or that one person would build a picket fence while another built a bulwark

However, things aren't quite so simple for the local church today

Sure, we know that we are to be about the Great Commission which tells us to make disciples as we are going about our daily lives which involves evangelism and training people to obey the commandments of Scripture (Matthew 28:19-20)

And we are to do those things because we are following the two Great Commandments to love God and our fellow man (Matthew 22:37-40)

But that's a rather generic vision and each local church has to consider specifically how God would have them live it out in their specific set of circumstances – the make-up of their community, the spiritual gifts within the church, etc.

And then there are so many things that don't fall neatly under the headings of evangelism and teaching that still need to be done for the church to continue to function that it becomes imperative that all the members are on the same page

For that to happen an overall vision must be developed and communicated by church leadership and people must be motivated to work toward completing it

Nehemiah had communicated the vision when he told the Judeans to take a look around them at the ruined wall and he motivated them to help him rebuild by connected the dots for them that rebuilding the wall would remove the disgrace they were suffering because of their former disobedience –

The wall was more than a civil engineering project because it had spiritual significance in the lives of the Judeans

Likewise, we know that the whole world is in disgrace and under condemnation because of sin as we read in Romans 3:23

And we know the shed blood of Christ is the cure that makes possible the removal of the disgrace and condemnation just as surely as the Judeans knew the cure for the derision they were suffering was rebuilding the wall

But we have to realize that knowing doesn't fix anything – it's just the first necessary step – and that once we understand what is needed we must take action

The Judeans needed to build and we know that our job is to tell others about how they can be forgiven and made new through the sharing of the gospel

Then we know that we are to live new, unashamed, God-honoring lives and demonstrate the love and holiness that are a part of our identity as God's people and to teach others how to do likewise

Understanding *and* action are both necessary if God's work is going to be successfully implemented and carried out successfully

But it is also necessary to have the involvement of all believers and everyone taking responsibility for doing what they can to further the goal

II. Involvement and Responsibility

Notice that the first name in the roster of builders is that of Eliashib the high priest who built the sheep gate along with his fellow priests [**Neh. 3:1**]

While building projects weren't a part of the usual priestly duties, Eliashib and his fellow priests were at the forefront leading the people by example

As we go through the roster of builders we are going to see that this attitude prevailed and there weren't many who fell back on the ages-old dodge of saying "That's not my job"

And Eliashib underscored and affirmed the spiritual significance of the work by consecrating the wall which means they publicly recognized the wall was special and uniquely dedicated to God's glory and service and they did so at the outset

That needs to be our attitude as well when we set out to undertake any endeavor as we read in **Colossians 3:17** that *whatever* we do whether in word or deed must be done in the name and for the glory of our Lord with thanksgiving

And that means each and every one of us

It's vital that all segments and members of the body be involved as we share God's love with the world around us

Because it's not just the job of the pastor but all believers who are to be laboring toward the goal and the idea that the pastor alone has the task of doing spiritual ministry is unbiblical

We do see the unique and discernable gift given to "pastor-teachers" in Ephesians 4:11-13 so that *every* member of the body can be equipped to do the work of ministry

In our Scripture reading from 1Corinthians 12 Paul spoke of the different members of the body and the unique contribution of each of the different members

And since each member makes their own, vital contribution to the effectiveness of the body; no one can claim an exemption from getting involved

Back in 1963, Oklahoma football coach Bud Wilkinson was quoted as saying that football is:

"Twenty-two boys on the field badly in need of rest and 40,000 people in the stand badly in need of exercise"

And far too often the same can be said in our churches as many are content to sit in the stands and watch others labor

But that wasn't the case for the Judeans

In all, 41 separate groups are mentioned in the roster of builders including priests, Levites, temple servants, goldsmiths, a perfumer, merchants, government officials, private individuals, a father and his daughters, as well as those who lived in nearby cities such as Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, and Mizpah

I don't know that it's wise to make a strong argument from silence but the people the list names are, for the most part, just regular folks and there isn't a master stonemason mentioned among those who were called out for special notice

It seems that everyone jumped in and did what they could where they could thereby adding their vital contribution to the project

Except, that is, for one notable group

Look with me at verse 5 [**Neh. 3:5**]

*And next to them the Tekoites repaired, **but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord***

The people from the city of Tekoa were more than willing to join in and work

Actually, they are mentioned again down in verse 27 rebuilding another section of the wall also so the people of Tekoa were, for the most part, willing to go help – but not everyone

The nobles from Tekoa refused to serve

It's not that they only worked half-heartedly – they adamantly refused to do anything at all

Literally, the Hebrew here means they wouldn't submit to what the Lord wanted them to do – they were rebellious
We aren't told why but maybe they thought that manual labor was beneath them or maybe they thought they had a better plan or they didn't like the fact that Nehemiah had come from Susa to run things

But, whatever their reason, they wouldn't bow to what the Lord wanted them to do and they live on in infamy as the only people mentioned in this chapter who refused to work

I want you to also notice that each of the groups who worked is credited with the specific task they completed

Whether they chose where to labor or were assigned a specific place isn't disclosed but they each took full responsibility for completing a gate or a section of wall

It doesn't seem there were any who didn't work on a specific task and by taking on specific responsibility each was made accountable for their work

As we read through the list we see that people often built next to their own home which makes a lot of sense

For one thing, they would be close to home limiting the amount of time spent getting to and from the worksite

But it also meant they would likely be sure to do the best possible job on the section that would serve to protect them

It would seem they would also do their level best just out of a sense of the pride they would feel every day as they looked at what they had constructed

And there is nothing at all wrong with being motivated by a personal benefit – we aren't called to be purely altruistic in our service and personal interest can be a really strong motivator – especially when the goal is a collective interest

People just naturally work harder and more skillfully when they have the right incentive

When we look at a **map** of the wall during this time we see that some of the sections were large and some were smaller but each person or group of people took on the responsibility of completing their part

That brings us to our last main point – that once we have the understanding that leads us to action and people getting involved and being responsible –

If God's purpose is going to be accomplished the people must also demonstrate cooperation and contentment

III. Cooperation and Contentment

Let's be honest and admit that not everything in the kingdom of God is pretty

Some of the Lord's people are malcontents who rarely if ever, seem to be satisfied with their role in the church or the performance of others and some Christians excel at complaining and standing on the sidelines offering unhelpful criticisms

We aren't a collection of perfect people after all we are only a collection of forgiven sinners and bad attitudes and behaviors haven't been eliminated from the ranks of the saved

Church unity is a very precious thing and should be prized and efforts should be made to preserve it where it exists and to promote it where it doesn't presently exist

After all, we are called to be building the kingdom of God together with the help of God's Spirit and for God's glory

Therefore, there can be no place for the jealousy and pride that so often mar the efforts of many churches

We need to realize that there are no small jobs in the church because every contribution has meaning and significance in achieving the ultimate goal

To use a sports metaphor we might compare the quarterback of a football team with an offensive lineman on the same team

I defy you to tell me of a quarterback who could be successful in his role without a complete offensive line

We all know what would happen if, say, the right tackle decided his role wasn't important and he wasn't getting any glory and he either refused to show up or didn't do his job – the quarterback and the team would surely suffer

All the members of a team have a job to do and have to cooperate if they are going to be successful

And the same is true in the local church – every member has a God-given role to fulfill and a member without a ministry is a mystery that defies what we see in Scripture

The reality is that not everyone is called to preach and teach; not everyone is called to a leadership role and some might be tempted to think their contribution doesn't count for much in the grand scheme of things

But I can tell you if no one was responsible for mowing the lawn and trimming the bushes the church would look quite unattractive in short order and our ministry would suffer for it

If no one cleaned the church and replaced burned-out lightbulbs and if no one took care of the things that break around here we would soon have a dark and dirty building that was falling down around our ears

If we didn't have volunteers to staff our nursery our littlest family members wouldn't grow up knowing they are loved by the members of the church

If you look at the work of the ministry – the work of achieving God's purposes for Brick Church – as a chain made up of links of various size and strength and beauty, I would defy you to tell me which is the most vital link

See, God doesn't operate within an egalitarian system where everyone is assigned identical tasks or expected to do equal work – rather God assigns different work to different people and equips them accordingly

Still, he expects everyone to labor in the church according to the gifts he has given them as we see in **Philippians 1:27-28**

It pleases God immensely when his people work together in one accord, with one heart, and one mind to achieve what he has given them to do without grumbling

Let's face it, God is able to bring to pass anything he wants simply by willing it – after all, he spoke the entire universe into existence

But God predominantly chooses to achieve his desired ends through the cooperation of people

And although he sometimes uses select individuals for great tasks, he most often seems to prefer to involve as many people as possible rather than a select few

And just as you can't pick one link in a chain and call it the most important, every section, every foot of the wall had to be solid for the wall to be solid

I would imagine that the different sections of the wall bore the marks of those who built it and that it wasn't completely consistent but, in the end, because they all worked with one mind and dedicated their work to the Lord, the wall was strong and provided an adequate defense

Conclusion

When it comes to serving the Lord I think a good case could be made that the most important ability is availability

A person with little talent and few gifts who has a passion and drive to see God's work done will accomplish far more than a gifted and talented individual who doesn't get involved with the work

To accomplish what God has for us requires us to have understanding that leads to action and involvement

It means individuals need to take on the responsibility of doing what God has gifted them to do in a spirit of cooperation and contentment

But as we conclude I want to mention one other necessary attribute

As you read through Chapter 3 did you notice that there is one prominent name missing?

It's Nehemiah

Given that Nehemiah authored the book it's interesting that he makes no mention of his own involvement in building the wall either as a builder or as the organizer and supervisor of the project

He kept his name out of it and gave all the credit to the people

We can compare his attitude to that of Nebuchadnezzar who was responsible for the destruction of the city's walls in the first place

In **Daniel 4:30** we see him boast –

“Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?”

And the text tells us that “while the words were still in [his] mouth” his doom was announced by a voice from heaven and he was driven into pitiful insanity for a long while

But Nehemiah, when the work was completed gave glory to God saying –

“This work [has] been accomplished with the help of our God” [Neh. 6:16]

Nehemiah 3 is a great illustration of what we would call “every-member ministry” where we see how a great work was completed by non-professionals who threw themselves into the work

People who, once they understood the task before them, got personally involved and took on the responsibility of doing what they could do and how they all cooperated to see the project successfully completed without rancor and jealousy

We also have a job to do here at Brick Church and a ministry that begins here and radiates outward from the crossroads where we stand and we must follow their example and be dedicated to it

Then when everything is said and done, we must exercise proper humility and give God the glory for whatever we accomplish on his behalf because it is he who works through us

Let's pray