

Rebuilding the Wall

Nehemiah 3:1-32, 4:1-6

A number of years ago, I distinctly remember a sermon preached at one of the meetings of General Assembly. The sermon was first thing in the morning, 8 or 8:30 AM, as the assembly began each day that year with preaching. The preacher was one of my professors in seminary, and he was already known as a very hard worker. He had left the seminary because of his commitment to the church at large and pastored a church for a number of years that desperately needed his wisdom and his leadership, and his energy. He left that pastorate in his mid-50s for what was the great passion of his heart—the theological training of men in Africa, a ministry in which he was engaged for the next 27 years.

Palmer Robertson could have remained in a successful and comfortable life here in this country. He could have become a celebrity, an author, a popular conference speaker. But his work would be done in Africa. Since returning to the states 7 years ago, he remains a tireless worker in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus particularly in his continued biblical and theological writing, a work in which he is actively engaged as he approaches the age of 90.

I still remember that sermon. The focus was upon the work of the gospel, and his text was Joshua 10, when Joshua was battling the Amorites. Joshua asked the Lord to cause the sun to stand still because he still had work to do. So we read,

Josh. 10:13 “And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies.”

I remember his gentle but direct application, chiding even the members of the General Assembly who were begrudging the 8

o'clock hour when then had to begin the business of the assembly again. The sermon was a call to work, a call to pray and a call to labor in the cause of Christ. It was a commitment of life very similar to Nehemiah.

Rise up and build! That was the focus last time, three weeks ago when we last met together. Nehemiah would build the wall of Jerusalem which lay in ruins. But first, of course, he would pray. Nehemiah prayed to the God of heaven, and then he rose up to build. His labor was, in the old covenant, an external and outward labor, a part of the external and outward shadows that prefigure the internal realities of the new covenant.

Remember what we have studied so far. Nehemiah was grieved at the poor condition of the nation of Israel as the nation was established in her own land after the exile. Remember what he saw.

Neh. 1:3 “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

Remember how Nehemiah prayed in that first chapter. Then he went to work. He asked the King to release him from his duties as the chief cupbearer, and free him to go to Jerusalem personally to oversee the rebuilding of the wall, the very symbol of the strength of the nation itself.

Neh. 2:4 “So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers 'graves, that I may rebuild it.”

And he stirred up the people to build.

Neh. 2:17 “Then I said to them, “You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with

fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.” 18 And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king’s words that he had spoken to me. So they said, “Let us rise up and build.” Then they set their hands to this good work.

Our text this afternoon is the account of that building, and it is a rather dry and historically factual description of the different workers who gave themselves to that labor. Lots of names and lots of people. But there is much in it for us to learn, and much for us to apply to our own lives and to the life of our church.

The subject is work. Our work. The work that we do as Christians. But let me stress first, right at this point, that great doctrine made evident in Ephesians 2, the doctrine that we are saved by grace through faith, not by our own works.

Eph.2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Not a result of works. Never forget that. Also we know this, Tit. 3:4 “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”

“He saved us, not by works of righteousness which we have done.” Don’t ever forget that, and I cannot declare that to you too often. It must be the foundation of all that we believe. But don’t let that keep you from having the motivation to work very, very hard.

Today we come to a description of those good works done by

the people of God under the leadership of Nehemiah. And the first thing that is abundantly obvious, and what must be made perfectly clear, is that,

I. OUR WORK MUST BE SET APART TO GOD.

Our work must be sanctified. Consecrated.

v.1

Note that Eliashib the High Priest was working! And mentioned first. He who would have had the most important position in the land, and the most important work, he was one who didn’t put himself above the hard physical labor of rebuilding the temple. Despite the high and holy position he held.

Relating to that, Matthew Henry says this as an exhortation to me particularly, along with my fellow ministers, “Ministers should be foremost in every good work; for their office obliges them to teach and quicken by their example, as well as by their doctrine. If there be labour in it, who so fit as they to work? If danger, who so fit as they to venture? The dignity of the high priest was very great, and obliged him to signalize himself in this service.”

And so we read that the priests repaired the sheep-gate, so called because through it were brought the sheep that were to be sacrificed in the temple. It was, therefore, a very appropriate thing for the priests to work on, under the leadership of the high priest.

And it was sanctified. It was made holy, separate. It was devoted to God, for his service and for his glory. Consecrated. We use all those words today. And the principle applied to us is the very same,

A. We must work for the glory of God.

This is a very important principle, one that transcends the immediate context of our passage. For Nehemiah in the Old Covenant, it was outward and external work in building the temple, yet work that represents the internal realities of the New Covenant. So it's not just the work to build the church building that is dedicated to God, it's not just the so-called spiritual work that we do that is consecrated to God, but everything we do!

Therefore the Apostle Paul exhorts us in,

1 Cor.10:31 "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

That means the work that you do as an employee, or in business. It is to be done for the glory of God, consecrated to God. It means the work you do in your homes, whether that is the work a mother gives to her children, or the time and energy a father gives as the head of his house, it is consecrated to God. It means the most menial of tasks in this life assume eternal proportions. There are eternal implications for everything that you do, for everything is to be done, in the motivation and attitude of your heart, for the glory of God. Similarly we read in,

Col.3:17 "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

Don't ever think that something you are doing is unimportant, or valued but slightly by God in terms of its spiritual value. Not if you are acting with a desire to honor God. Not is the work you do is set apart for God, set apart as being offered to him as an expression of the sacrifice of your whole life.

Think about your own life, and the many things we occupy your time and consume your energy. Think about the things you do in life, your works, things that would normally be classified in both categories of spiritual and secular. All is to be done for the

glory of God. All is to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus. All must be consecrated to God, set apart as done unto the Lord. And so the appropriate exhortation in,

Col. 3:23 "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ."

And in that regard, relating back to the work of Nehemiah in building the wall,

B. We must work for the kingdom of God.

Again, I'm relying a great deal upon the context for my application, and want you to realize, therefore, what that context is. The immediate situation was the rebuilding of Jerusalem. And that rebuilding was represented by the rebuilding of the wall and gates, such a vital aspect of a fortified city in that day.

We have a lengthy description of that wall, with so many individual portions mentioned. Just look at that list of names in verses 2 through 32, the end of the chapter. The precision of the order with which the work was done surely reveals to us truth about the character of God himself. Jerusalem was being built. Jerusalem was being restored, fortified. Perfectly. For God had ordered it.

But don't miss the forest through those trees. The big picture is that this city whose wall was being rebuilt, this city named Jerusalem, was the city of God. It was, on earth, the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God. And so the legitimate application you should gain from this passage is that you, also, must work for the kingdom of God. You, also, ought to work to build, and rebuild, the city of God. For us today, in the New Covenant, it isn't an earthly city or an earthly building, but a spiritual one. Thus, it is an earthly kingdom, but rather a kingdom

which Jesus says is “within you.” It is a spiritual kingdom, but no less real a kingdom.

And we all need to be faithful workers in that building, that kingdom, just as all these various people were in this long list of workers in Nehemiah 3. And what is that building today? Where is that work done today? What is the house of God today?

Well, it’s not a building made of brick and mortar, but it still a house. The house of God today is still very real, even though it isn’t a physical building. It is the church. As Paul explains in,

Eph. 2:19 “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

So as you read through this list of builders in Nehemiah, recognize that that wall does, in many ways, represents the church. And the question then becomes, “Where are you stationed?” “Where has the Lord positioned you along that wall?”

When you read Nehemiah, and I didn’t take the time this afternoon or make the effort to pronounce all those difficult Hebrew names, but when you read this chapter, consider reading our own church membership roll. Where are you on that roll? Where is your place in this wall that is being built? Wherever it is, wherever he has placed you, whatever gifts and abilities and opportunities he has given you, whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Let’s look a little closer at the nature of that work, how it was

performed.

v.20

There is an additional Hebrew word in that verse, not just building or making strong, but a word of intensity. Often describing anger. Or zeal. I believe the plain meaning is explained by those words of the Apostle Paul,

Col. 3:23 “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.”

II. OUR WORK MUST BE DONE WITH PERSISTENT DILIGENCE.

And what about those who refuse to work that way, who lacked such diligence? Well, we’re told about them as well.

A. Those who refuse to work are rebuked.

Neh. 3:5 “Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.”

Indeed, Nehemiah writes those words as a rebuke, for there were some, described as the nobles of the Tekoites, who refused to “put their shoulders to the work of the Lord.” Literally, they refused to “bring their neck to the work.” And literally, it is the work of their lords, plural, or their masters. Though certainly that work is the work of the Lord, the singular Lord God of heaven. Yet they refused to work. And were rebuked.

Neh. 4:5 “Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.”

They refused to put their necks under the yoke of servitude, as if their high position somehow exempted them from that servitude. But my friends, that is precisely the yoke to which we are called as God’s people today, the yoke of slavery. We are called to be

bond-slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You who proclaim the name of Christ, you who claim to belong to Christ, you have become the slaves of God. You are are a bondservant to Christ. A bonds slave to righteousness. You are to place yourself under his yoke, and though that yoke is, in fact, easy and light, though our master is kind and benevolent, though our slavery is in actuality a delightful and non-burdensome service, still those who reject that service, those who refuse to work diligently, to the best of their ability, for the kingdom of God, face God's rebuke. So work hard, as unto the Lord! With this encouragement, that,

B. Those who are willing to work will accomplish much.

Notice what was accomplished under Nehemiah's leadership.

Nehemiah 4:6 "So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work."

Would that be a great description written in the history of our church. Wouldn't that be a great description written about us? "The people had a mind to work."

So, as children of God, as citizens of the kingdom of God, work hard! Work diligently and persistently, zealously, for the kingdom of God as it exists in the church today. And years from now, even decades from now, as the history of our church is written and read, may it be said of us,

4:6 "...the people had a mind to work."

One final thought, from chapter 4.

III. OUR WORK MUST BE DONE DESPITE OPPOSITION.

There is almost an inevitability to the presence of opposition.

We shouldn't ever try to provoke opposition, but surely in God's providence, in Satan's wickedness, that opposition will exist. And it did for Nehemiah.

4:1 "But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews."

Likewise, 4:7 "Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, 8 and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion."

I doubt that any of you like making people angry. I certainly don't. I don't like to incite someone to become indignant, furious. I don't like such opposition, and nobody really does. Yet in and of itself, there is nothing wrong with that, but there is something wrong if such opposition causes you to shrink back from the duty of our work for the Lord. As we've seen, Nehemiah and the people didn't shrink back, but rather accomplished their work with God's blessing. Despite the reaction. Opposition existed, and to be sure,

A. We may have to work in the face of those who oppose us.

There have been many times in my ministry in which problems arose relating to secondary issues, and times I've even changed decisions because of particular responses from people, on issues of secondary importance. And there have been times of primary importance, when I knew clearly what I was responsible to do in light of biblical principles, knowing there would be consequences in terms of opposition. And though any wise minister will realize that not every circumstance is of such equally high importance,

yet only a foolish one would find no circumstances of such importance. There have been times that I have had to do my work in the face of opposition, and, at times, personal opposition and even rather vehement opposition.

And the example of this text this afternoon shows us that those times will come, times when we have to work, when we must not shrink back from our work, despite the presence of opposition. For we must realize that our work is set apart to God, and that we are to work in order to please God, not man. And, similarly,

B. We may have to work in the face of condescending ridicule.

Most of the time, this is what we do find in our own lives. Ridicule. Being made fun of, mocked. And that hurts, doesn't it. And many people, desiring to be thought well of, shrink back from their duty simply because of such ridicule. Not Nehemiah.

4:2 "And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?" 3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall."

Sad to say, such empty taunts are often sufficient in our day to cause us to fear, for we are so insecure and so fearful of other men. We are so influenced and controlled by peer pressure, so dominated by a compulsion to conform to the outward standards of those around us, we fail to do the hard work of building the kingdom when we become exposed to such ridicule.

Rather than experience the pain that might come from putting

principle ahead of expediency, we go along with the crowd. We hesitate to stand out. We avoid any appearance of those who might be ridiculed as radical or extreme. This text is a challenge to do what is right, regardless of the consequences. To work hard for the Lord and for his kingdom, regardless of the presence of opposition or ridicule. And yet, to do it in the absence of pride. For especially when there is opposition,

C. We will have to work in humble reliance upon God.

For some people, opposition just makes them more arrogant and more eager to wield power. Such people regularly cause devastation if they are involved in any kind of leadership in the church. The response to opposition, though it must include a commitment to continue working, must never become an excuse for proud dominance. Instead, we need to develop the humble reliance upon God which Nehemiah exemplifies here.

4:4 "Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! 5 Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders."

That is a strong prayer, a prayer for retribution. But a prayer for God's retribution! A prayer for God to take care of the situation. A prayer for God's help. A prayer for help that is requested without any offer of assistance on our part.

When we face opposition, we need to resist the temptation to retaliate in our own strength or wisdom. We need to resist the temptation to seek vengeance. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. That doesn't rule out praying the prayer of verses 4-5. Instead, it rules out the pride of self-serving retaliation. When face with opposition of any kind, we will have to learn to work, and to continue to work, in humble reliance upon God.

That's easy to say, isn't it? And hard to do. But such restraint when provoked is such an important aspect of true, godly, Christian character. And God honors such restraint among those who work for him.

So no matter what the consequences, no matter what the circumstances, work hard for the Lord. Learn to evaluate yourself along these lines. Learn to evaluate how hard you have worked for the glory of God and for the building of his kingdom.

Col. 3:17 "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

1 Cor 10:31 "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Live your lives with one ultimate purpose, to recognize the magnify the glory of God. And so, let me end with this exhortation from,

Gal. 6:7 "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. 8 For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. 9 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith."