

God Is at Work
Nehemiah 6:15 - 7:73

I recently started a full renovation of our hallway bathroom, a project that has been on my list for several years. I actually purchased some of the supplies for that project two years ago, before my hip surgery. As many of you know, I really enjoy that kind of work, and have had multiple projects in the years we have owned the house. But my enjoyment of those projects can have a very specific downside, which is that, often, I don't always finish projects before moving on to the next. I don't always fully accomplish that which I set out to do in a timely way. And I strive to overcome that tendency, as it is, essentially, one of my shortcomings. Thus, when I finish a project, that is a good and proper sense of accomplishment.

As we continue to study to life and work of Nehemiah, I want to emphasize that test good leadership that he exemplifies so well, namely, the test of accomplishment! For leaders, it is often very accurate to emphasize that the proof of good leadership is in the pudding. That test is a good challenge for us as well, the test expressed by the probing question, "What have you accomplished? Have you done what you set out to do? Nehemiah proves himself faithful, and in a very practical study of this text this afternoon, I want to begin by examining...

I. THE FAITHFUL LEADERSHIP OF NEHEMIAH.

Nehemiah is such a good example to follow. So many demonstrations of godliness and trustworthy reliability. So many descriptions of obedience and perseverance. What becomes so obvious is that,

A. Nehemiah accomplished quickly what he set out to do.
He actually finished the work he started. In an astoundingly

short period of time. 52 days.

v.15

All of that, despite the opposition he faced, from without and from within. The conspiracy of his surrounding neighbors, led by Sanballat and Tobiah, was very dangerous and threatening. Then there was the oppression from within, the unjust usury demanded by some of the Jewish nobles from the poor farmers of the land. From all sides, he was under attack, even the attack of the subtle traps and false prophets which we studied last Sunday. But in the face of all those things, Nehemiah remained faithful. And he finished the wall.

Now, some would say, 52 days is impossible, but I should emphasize that the restoration work had already begun before Nehemiah. Yet there were many breaches and gaps in the wall and the wall needed to be higher. Only the eastern wall was built from its foundation. To the north, west, and south, the ruins of the old wall were used. And in special circumstances when people are aware of the dangers around them, they are able to work much more rapidly than in normal circumstances. Also, Jerusalem was likely much smaller than generally accepted.

So 52 days of work is entirely within the realm of possibility, although with obvious emphasis upon the speed with which Nehemiah accomplished his purpose. There is good leadership in that. There is great virtue in the grace of diligence and faithfulness. Those who prove their reliability and dependability by finishing the tasks they begin are praiseworthy. And worthy of our imitation. We should be stirred by this, realizing that often our failure to accomplish the things we want to accomplish is caused by our own sloth or spiritual neglect. And so, in the NT, in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are exhorted,

Eph. 5:15 "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools

but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”

Redeeming the time, “making the best use of the time.” Yet so often we need to confess that many opportunities simply pass us by. Not so, with Nehemiah. He learned of Jerusalem’s plight. He prayed for their needs four long months before he could approach the King of Persia. Then he was given permission to go to Jerusalem himself, and he left immediately. Now, within two months, he had completed the work assigned to him. What a great man of action. What a faithful leader.

Let me make a broad application from that example. The immediate, specific application would be to recognize the frequency with which we waste the time and opportunities presented to us, but in the big picture, with your whole life in view, I want you to consider the value of working for the kingdom of God all your life, and to consider how profound a thing it is to be able to face death with the confidence and satisfaction of the Apostle Paul,

2 Tim. 4:6 “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Surely Nehemiah would be able to say that as well. For he accomplished that which God had given him to do. But this isn’t just a good story about a good man with a good moral. The obvious reality is that this was God’s work.

B. Nehemiah depended upon the Lord’s help to accomplish his work.

So much so that even his enemies knew it!

v.16

Wouldn’t that be great if the enemies of the church of Jesus

Christ today, those people who oppose the work of the church, might see the church prosper and become disheartened because they could see God at work! So why doesn’t that happen? Certainly, the sinfulness of men blinds them to that reality, but too often it is that the church fails to depend upon God. When we don’t depend upon God, so no one who opposes us is aware of God.

We depend upon ourselves, don’t we? We depend upon pragmatism, practical wisdom. Worldly wisdom. We measure our success by worldly standards. We evaluate our methods by what works. We build churches with all sorts of human efforts and following all sorts of human instructions. And they grow. But no one stops and takes notice of the work of God! Because we’ve hidden God from public view.

Wouldn’t it be different if every time we needed something, every time we had a problem or a shortage, or whatever, that we would devote ourselves to prayer and the word. Wouldn’t it be different if it was really obvious to people that the success of the church is because the people of God met to pray, and that the place where they met to pray shook! Because God was among them. When Nehemiah worked to build the kingdom, the people saw the work of God! They knew that God was working, for otherwise it wouldn’t have gotten done. They could be sure of that.

God is at work, and we must depend upon his help, for the work of the kingdom is his work. He has given us much to do, and we must be responsible to do it. But it is his work. Such is the stirring example provided by Nehemiah.

There was another aspect of his leadership that deserves to be mentioned here.

C. Nehemiah resisted the temptation to give in to the pragmatic concessions of reconciliation with Tobiah.

Some of his own people, his own nobles, were in contact with Tobiah, and they were trying to convince Nehemiah that Tobiah wasn't so bad. They were trying to establish relations between Nehemiah and Tobiah, glossing over the horrible opposition that Tobiah had given to their work. They wanted to persuade Nehemiah of the good intentions of Tobiah. To them, he wasn't such a bad person.

v.17

We see Tobiah's shrewdness, in forming connections and alliances among the people of Israel, most clearly by marriage. By marrying Israelite women!

v.18

Therefore, with Tobiah's ability to gain the confidence and trust of some of the people in Jerusalem, he would be much more likely to win the acceptance of the leader. But Nehemiah would not be fooled by such hypocrisy, despite their best efforts.

v.19

They represented Tobiah as a respected and honorable leader, worthy of correspondence, and even twisted and perverted Nehemiah's own words in order to win the approval of Tobiah. Actually, Tobiah misused his friendship with these Jews in an attempt to influence Nehemiah to concede to reconciliation with Tobiah.

Pragmatic concessions. Build a stronger team by joining with Tobiah, they told Nehemiah. But he would have nothing of it. Tobiah was a wicked, evil God-hater, and Nehemiah was not frightened. That's strong leadership!

And strong leaders such as Nehemiah are able to do something else. They identify and appoint others to have responsibilities of leadership. So here we see,

II. THE FAITHFUL LEADERSHIP OF OTHER OFFICERS.

v.1-3

First,

A. The appointment of temple workers.

The wall was finished and the doors were put in place. Now was the time for the appointment of personnel. Gatekeepers. It was normal to have gatekeepers for the temple. Here they are given responsibility to watch the city gates as well, to protect the people from dangers from without. And the gatekeepers are identified along with the other temple workers, the singers and the Levites.

That reference is a problem for some, who assume that the mention of the singers and Levites was a later addition to the text when it was being copied, and others presume that the singers and Levites were mentioned because of the necessity to be ready for a service of worship for the dedication of the wall. I don't think you even have to get that complicated in explaining the singers and the Levites, for under the present extraordinary circumstances, it seems that Nehemiah committed to normal temple workers the duties of keeping watch over the walls and gates of the city.

The point is, men were appointed, probably by representatives of the people under Nehemiah's oversight. The temple work had been neglected, and there had been many oversights in the faithful worship of God, and Nehemiah would be sure that those things were made right. The worship of God would be properly in order by these appointments. And they were, therefore, essential!

Then Nehemiah appoints governors, overseers. In verse 2 we see,

B. The appointment of administrators in Jerusalem.
v.2

They were given the charge, they were given responsibility. And there was sufficient work to appoint two men. To them he committed the care of the city, and gave them in charge to provide for the public peace and safety.

I think immediately of the constraints put upon Moses' leadership after the Exodus from Egypt. His father-in-law Jethro gives Moses some wise advice, seemingly the same advice Nehemiah followed.

Ex.18:17 "So Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you do is not good. 18 Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself. 19 Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. 20 And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. 21 Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. 22 And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."

Get help. Appoint administrators. Good leaders are not afraid to share responsibilities, nor do they indulge in what we would call micro-managing. That is, watching over in close detail all the work that is done by those who are appointed to help. Wise leaders get wise helpers, and the character and trustworthiness of those helpers is therefore crucial. Notice the qualifications Moses was given. "Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness."

It's really the same basic list as that required for elders and deacons in the new testament church of Jesus Christ.

1 Tim. 3:2 "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous."

In Nehemiah's case, we have the men identified by name.

Neh. 7:2 "...that I gave the charge of Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the leader of the citadel, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many."

The qualifications are obvious. A faithful man. A man of faith. And a man who feared God. Look ahead just a bit,

Neh. 13:13 "And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouse Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah; and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and their task was to distribute to their brethren."

They were considered faithful. They were considered reliable. A wise leader seeks out such men. So let me exhort you to live your life in such a way that others consider you to be faithful. Carry out the affairs of your life so that others would look upon you and consider you to be reliable! These are great virtues,

great marks of godliness and spiritual maturity. Not just what you know, not just how well you present yourself publicly, but how reliably you carry out the duties you are assigned.

That is the application., that you prove yourself to be reliable. Dependable. Trustworthy. Faithful, with a faithfulness that springs from a genuine and reverent fear of God. In God's providence, Nehemiah had such men to appoint as administrators over Jerusalem. And so we see,

C. The appointment of guards.

v.3

Jerusalem would still be a dangerous place. There weren't many people living inside the city walls yet, but there were some. And they needed protection. The gates would be locked at night, and not opened until the sun was well risen, approaching even the heat of the day. Wise leadership here, and wise provisions were made for the peace and safety of the people.

But let me keep that in its proper context.

Ps. 127:1 "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."

This was not an attempt by Nehemiah to deny the reality of what it means to live by faith! This was not an effort to protect themselves in their own strength. Rather, it was the way in which they were to live out their salvation, under the providential protection of their God. They were to have guards upon the city.

Let me make two specific applications. One literal, and one more spiritual in nature. First, literally, it is the responsibility of the civil government today to provide for such safety and security.

And Christians shouldn't avoid taking advantage of that protection as it is afforded. In fact, we should pray for it, we should ask God for this protection from our civil governments.

Secondly, from a spiritual perspective, we must guard ourselves from the spiritual enemies that endanger our souls every day. That familiar verse in Ephesians 6 comes to mind.

Eph.6:11 "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

Be on guard!

Eph.6:16 "...above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one."

In the broader picture of the church as a whole, it is the job of the shepherds, the pastor and the elders, to guard the flock. It is, in a very real sense, my responsibility to be on guard for you, as one whose responsibility as it is defined in Hebrews 13 is to "watch out for your souls, as those who must give account." More specifically, Paul urges the elders of the church at Ephesus to "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." He goes on to say in,

Acts 20:29 "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."

Take heed. Watch. Be on guard. The church of Jesus Christ must have such faithful guards today if she is going to be strong. There must be faithful leadership. In Nehemiah's time, and in our

own. Nehemiah does one more thing as a good leader. In the verses that follow, we see,

III. THE REGISTRATION OF THE PEOPLE.

These verses are virtually identical to verses in Ezra chapter 2, and, indeed, Nehemiah notes that he discovered that great registration which had been done at that time.

v.4-6

I'll not read that entire list, nor study it in the detail which we did when we studied Ezra 2, but let me emphasize one of the main points then that is reemphasized here.

A. God identifies each one of his people by family.

And families are generational. That is, when God deals with a man, he deals with him and his descendants. His family, including children not yet born. Even descendants of generations to come. And it is personal. Notice that God stirred Nehemiah to register the people personally, providing that structure even when the number of people was small.

v.4-5

There is an obvious application of that today to the church, which is failing miserably at recognizing individual people and individual families. With the rise of the megachurch, this personal registration is lost. People, in a large mass, become anonymous, and, in fact, many really want it that way. Or they think that they do. They want to conform to the masses, and look just like everyone else, in order to maintain their anonymity. Yet in that, they are starving for intimacy!

But I believe it to be true, that for all the popular hype about huge churches and megachurches, people are starving for a personal identification and personal attention. How sad it is that

such personal attention in many churches is so limited. Too often, even in the church today, we don't identify people personally by families. We identify them by statistics. By age brackets. By status in life. And we separate people according to those arbitrary divisions. We have youth. We have singles. We have young married couples. We have families with children. We have empty nesters. We have seniors. And in the masses of large churches, we separate people according to those lines, when God separates us to identify us personally as families. Something is terribly wrong with that.

Something is terribly wrong in a church where people are not counted as individuals and families. A church where some elders might not even know the pastor; a church where most people know only a handful of other people. Something is wrong with the typical church, where the price that you pay for your anonymity is the sacrifice of intimacy that comes from a church body where everyone knows one another!

God identifies each one of his people by family. May we do the same. And to simply repeat what I said when we studied Ezra 2,

B. God blesses his people with normal life.

Normal life.

v.6 "These are the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his city."

Then, after that long list,

v.73 "So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the Nethinim, and all Israel dwelt in their cities."

They dwelt in their cities. They lived in their towns. Such is the satisfaction of contentment. Godliness with contentment, and answer to the prayer in 1 Timothy 2, “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.”

May we as a church be filled with such people living such normal lives, those who are faithful and reliable to carry out their own tasks, working hard for the good of the whole body. So that even our enemies might “perceived that this work [that we do] was done by our God.” May the world around us look at us and be amazed by the obvious evidence of God at work among us.