

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 5, Chapter 3

When we ended chapter 2 of Nehemiah, he had concluded his assessment of the situation with the destroyed walls surrounding Jerusalem and called together the Judeans of various levels of society to enlist them to the mammoth task of rebuilding. As a leader with authority he could have dogmatically ordered these groups to work. But instead, as a good leader does, he explained the situation, what his plan was, and why they should all work together to accomplish it.

Nehemiah approached them on 3 levels. And to my thinking this is not so much a brilliant strategy as it is a model way to deal with people in general, because he appealed to them in a way that fused the 3 aspects of life that affect all civilized humanity. First, he spoke to them on why, from an everyday subsistence perspective, that everyone would benefit by a rebuilt fortified defensive wall. It would help one and all economically and from a safety and security standpoint. Second, he spoke from a cultural perspective. That is, while his reasoning applied to the Jewish mindset and way of life in Judah, it wouldn't necessarily apply to a different (or more modern) society. Nehemiah explains in the context of then-current Hebrew culture that the sad state of Jerusalem heaped shame on all Judeans. And since in this shame-honor based culture shame was an intolerable societal status that no one wanted, he showed them that rebuilding the walls would restore their honor as a Jewish community. Third, he made it clear that God had a purpose in this project, and in fact Nehemiah received his marching instructions from the Lord. So it is the Lord's will that the Judeans should direct every effort to rebuild the walls of the city that the Lord has placed His holy name upon: Jerusalem. Case closed. All that remained was for each group, family and individual to decide whether to do what was right and pitch in, or to do what was wrong and opt out.

After Nehemiah received enthusiastic support from the community, immediately 3 local gentile rulers began making trouble. They began by mocking what Nehemiah and the Judeans were doing in attempting the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's response was not to threaten them, but rather to plainly lay down the law; these 3 rulers and their people had no right, share,

or claim to Jerusalem. But what, exactly, was Nehemiah responding to when he answered their mocking in those words? That is: we're told in the passage that the 3 rulers mocked what the Judeans were doing, but Nehemiah responded as if the 3 rulers wanted in on the project (and no such words to that effect are present). However I think what we can reasonably assume is that Sanvalat, Toviyah, and Geshem, the rulers of Samaria, Amon, and Arabia respectively, made it clear in their jeering that the lowly Jews had no ability to pull off a project of this magnitude and complexity by themselves; it was laughable. And that if the Jews would only recognize and acknowledge this fact then they could have peace with their neighbors and help to rebuild IF they shared Jerusalem with these 3 rulers; otherwise to them the Jews merely appear foolish and arrogant.

As King Solomon once said: there is nothing new under the sun. The rulers of these same three regions in our day fling the same claims against the people of Israel. How dare the Jews think they can have Jerusalem to themselves? Don't they know that the many powerful regional enemies of Israel find the Jewish position of having full autonomy over Jerusalem an affront to them? If Israel would ONLY acknowledge that sharing Jerusalem with their enemies is a must if Israel ever hopes to be left to exist in peace, then there could be progress. As bold as Nehemiah was in responding that the Samaritans, Ammonites and Arabs have no claim whatsoever to Jerusalem, he knew full well that mere words weren't going to end the matter. But I feel confident that he also never imagined that 24 centuries later, the new rulers from the same regions would continue with their bogus claims over Jerusalem. And I imagine it would have been equally unthinkable to him that Jewish political leaders of modern day Israel would be intimidated to the point of actually being open to the demands of the enemy and that no Jewish political leader would have the courage to loudly and clearly proclaim to the world: you have no right, share, or claim to Jerusalem. We wouldn't be even reading about Nehemiah, today, if he had been an appeaser in the mold of his modern Jewish successors.

Let's read Nehemiah chapter 3.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 3 all

Nehemiah was not bluffing when he spoke those strong but truthful words to Sanvalat, Toviyah

and Geshem that Jerusalem belongs only to the Jews. So here in chapter 3 we get a report of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by the Jewish community that lived in and around the city.

The Book of Nehemiah is usually read and preached as a prelude to a Church building project or when trying to rescue a Church from splitting or going bankrupt. And in scholarly studies the focus is always the topology of Jerusalem in that era and the location of the various gates. However what I'd like us to focus on is the necessary organization and each member of the community doing their part according to their resources and abilities. And further how the majority of other nearby and similar communities often perceive a new work, or especially (as with Nehemiah) the restoration of an old work, as unwanted competition if not a threat.

Beginning with studying the Levitical sacrificial system in the Torah we are introduced to a God-principle that acts as a common thread binding the entire Word of God together: each according to his (or her) means. This principle, interestingly, applies to giving and receiving. But along with this we find that never does the one with the least means get divine permission to opt out of his or her obligations to the Lord. It's only that their contribution (in whatever form) is to be proportionate with their circumstances and ability to give; but give they must. Thus, for instance, a poor widow who sins isn't given a pass when it comes to the requirement of an atoning sacrifice. She must still produce something as inexpensive as a dove, even if indeed in relation to her income it is costly. And in our story it's not that those with the most means necessarily had to contribute by their own physical labor, but they ought to pay for others to contribute labor, or pay for the materials, and in higher proportion than the poor. This principle applies to tithing as well. Studies of church finances over decades and decades in America have shown that this is a neglected or maybe even a lost principle. As a rule 20% of the congregation provides for 80% of a typical Church's income. And at least 1 in 5 people who attend regularly contribute nothing at all. Even more, only 1 in 20 churchgoers volunteer their time and labor; 19 of the 20 decline to help at all. And the usual reason given is: I can't afford to give, or I'm too busy to help. The Lord, in His Word, OT and New, clearly establishes that He does not accept this argument. If perhaps money is presently too insufficient for your needs and too dear to give then contribute your time and labor. Or perhaps one has set an otherwise good goal of enhancing their savings account, or paying off a loan but the money for tithing is channeled to that effort; unacceptable.

And thus as we look deeper into what we just read, we're going to see different socio-economic groups of the Judean people working on different sections of the wall based on their ability to contribute. Some will reconstruct large wall segments; others small segments. Some

will contribute their own labors, some will pay for their employees to work on the wall, and some won't contribute at all (and this is considered wicked). What we find in Nehemiah is that the wall rebuilding project was divided into about 40 sections, and a family or a group adopted one or two of those sections according to their reasonable ability to do the task. The tremendous community co-operation and the willingness of the vast majority of the Jewish society around Jerusalem to participate are on display in Chapter 3. Self interest was put on the shelf for a time; and so with such Godly attitudes prevailing, and with excellent planning and organization, the reconstruction project sped along so fast that it literally alarmed the local antagonists.

Those who attend our local congregation here in Merritt Island, Florida (Seed of Abraham Fellowship) know that it is the rare day that I ever speak on money and giving. I believe that it is the responsibility of each individual to deal with God about this matter; but even more I also know full well that every person listening to me already knows what you are supposed to do. It's only a question of whether you willfully and consciously choose obedience or disobedience to the Lord. Yet for me to present Nehemiah to you and to ignore what is happening here and not to re-apply it in context of the duty of present day followers of Christ to contribute to the community (the congregation) would be wrong on my part. So I'll address this briefly, but in doing so will not mince words.

Having worked for a time for a Mega-church and having full visibility into the finances, and now having the honor to lead this ministry, I can say with pride that this congregation far exceeds the norm when it comes to volunteering and members supplying their time, talents and labor. But when it comes to tithing, we are only slightly better than the typical 20/80 rule. Don't get me wrong; we don't have any outstanding debt or glaring needs and I'm certainly not pleading for more money. Rather I'm trying to say that this Believers' community (which is what a congregation of God actually is) called Seed of Abraham will only ever go so far in achieving what God has planned for us as each of its members personally responds to God's command that you contribute proportionately to your ability to give. And that giving can be of time, talents, labor and money in various proportions according to your situation. It is not often (thank the Lord) that someone among us is in such a desperate circumstance that they can't contribute in one of these ways because that means they probably have a severe health or life crisis.

If I'm pleading at all it is to urge you to be a participating member of this community and not a spectator, and this is for the sake of your personal well being and for the sake of your relationship with the Lord; and that is because these are God's rules and not mine. God will judge you in this regard, not me. You will never answer to me, nor be singled out, no matter

what you do regarding contributing; but you will answer to God at some point and your current lives will almost certainly be affected (even if I can't tell you exactly how and even if you might not realize it). Several folks before the time of Nehemiah tried rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and failed but it was because either the leadership or the community or both didn't approach the project in God's time and in God's way. It was only when good leadership arrived, organization rose from the chaos, and the majority of the people of the community participated in obedience and in heart felt gratitude to God that the task was completed and the entire community benefited as was the Lord's intention. And that's because that's how communities work, how congregations work, and it's how God works. It may not always seem so to us, but because contributing to God's community is a commandment of God (it's not an option) that comes with a blessing when we obey, then it is to our own enlightened self-interest that we do so. How do I know that to be the case?

Malachi 3:10 CJB ¹⁰ *Bring the whole tenth into the storehouse, so that there will be food in my house, and put me to the test," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot. "See if I won't open for you the floodgates of heaven and pour out for you a blessing far beyond your needs.*

As verse 1 begins the explanation of how the work of rebuilding was divided up and organized, and which groups worked on which wall sections, keep in mind that the result would be a smaller Jerusalem than existed before the exile to Babylon. The other thing to keep in mind is that either Nehemiah or a later editor probably created the descriptions of the reconstruction that we see in this chapter from ancient records and without doubt this is an incomplete Cliff-Notes version. It is put here to show how it was accomplished and to help future generations understand who the major families and groups were that participated, and to a lesser extent it provides a history of the method that the walls were reconstructed. And the method was that the project was divided into about 40 sections, and each section was more or less adopted by a family or a group as their responsibility. So we can envision the entire wall being worked on simultaneously, each group working alongside the next, as opposed to a work crew working on one section, finishing it and moving on to the next in serial fashion. Further we need to understand that some sections of the wall were completely demolished and even the rubble was unsuitable to be reused; some parts were partially destroyed and merely needed repair; and other parts were left mostly intact and required some maintenance.

Assuming it is Nehemiah that wrote down the data used for this chapter, he starts his list with ***Eliashav*** the High Priest. ***Eliashav*** was a legitimate and hereditary High Priest; that is, he was the grandson of ***Yeshua*** who was the High Priest at the time of Zerubbabel. Next to Nehemiah, ***Eliashav*** was the most important and influential person in Jerusalem, which is why he is

mentioned first. He and the common priests rebuilt the Sheep Gate. This gate was in the northeastern corner of the city next to the Temple Mount and no doubt this is where the thousands of sheep needed for sacrificing were herded through by the Levites. The priests also rebuilt wall sections that included something called the Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hanan'el. No doubt these were rather typical fortress towers that guarded the entry gates into the city.

Moving in a counter-clockwise direction the next section includes another gate called the Fish Gate. What we know from the text is that verses 1 – 15 are about repairing and rebuilding the old wall as it existed before the exile. But at verse 16 it becomes about the construction of new walls; meaning old walls were abandoned and their location moved somewhat. Then begins a series of “next to’s”. That is, a wall section built by a certain person (actually the name used is meant to denote the leading member of a family or group), and then “next to” that wall section another one section was built with the understanding that where one section ended the next one connected and continued on. So Nehemiah’s plan was that many wall sections were built in parallel, simultaneously, not one section at a time the way a highway is built.

In verse 5 we get the first negative comment that a member of the Jewish community refused to participate and contribute. It is said that the men from Tekoa made repairs but the Tekoa leadership wouldn’t help. About all we can take from this is that some Jews didn’t share the community’s enthusiasm about the project. The town of Tekoa lay to the southeast of Jerusalem and all we can do is speculate as to why the nobles of that town opted out. No doubt it was for economic or political reasons, but what they were we don’t know. However note whom it was they were disappointing by their refusal: the passage says, they “...would not put their shoulders **to the work of their Lord.**” In other words it was God they were disobeying and going against His will, not Nehemiah and the other members of the community. That is what we do as members of a congregation when some of us don’t contribute; it is not a trespass against the congregational leader that we are committing, rather it is a trespass against the Lord and that’s the real problem. The reality is that both Jews and Christians tend to see sins of omission as minor versus sins of commission as more serious. And we tend to have this false sense of security that if we don’t do something we’re supposed to do that we are less liable to suffer at God’s hand than if we do something we shouldn’t do.

In verse 6 the tour of the repaired wall continues with the section that the family of a fellow named Yoyada built, and then M’latyah built the next part. But in verse 8 there is a noticeable change. There we find mention of goldsmiths and perfume makers. In other words, we find that some of the work was assigned to professional craft guilds, not to families. This shows us that

Jerusalem did have a semblance of an economy working and that guilds were formal organizations and not merely casual associations of people who performed the same craft.

Next in verse 9 we find mention of Refayah leader of the half district of Jerusalem. In other words, Judah was divided up into smaller units, like counties or parishes. And in some cases these smaller units had more than one leader because the district was further subdivided for organizational purposes. And it was the people of this half-district of Jerusalem who were responsible for repairing the wall section next to the one repaired by the perfume-makers guild. As we continue to follow the wall line we come to verse 10 and we find that a person built a small section of wall next to his own house, and then another family built another small section. Then in verse 12 Shalum the leader of the other half of the Jerusalem district is mentioned as being responsible for a wall section. And what I like is the specific mention of his daughters being directly involved. All I really want to say here is that while the Lord makes a distinction between male and female, and has assigned separate roles to male and female; He assigns equal value and worth to male and female. But the other side of the coin also exists; we would do well to note that in the Law of Moses a female who sins is just as liable to God to atone with a sacrifice as is a male. So in our story here is it because this man had no sons that his daughters lent a hand? Probably. But we find no implication that Nehemiah or anyone else balked at women working alongside the men of the community to rebuild the walls. This was a community effort so all Jews were welcomed to join in.

In verse 13 we find that the good people of the town of Zanoach were apparently numerous and prosperous enough to take on rebuilding a huge wall section that was 1500 feet long. Let me pause here to reiterate our featured God-principle today: each according to his means. None of these people in Chapter 3 are praised above the others due the size of the wall section they adopted. The people of Zanoach donated this 1500 foot long wall section, but it in God's eyes they gained no more merit than Y'dayah who built a short section next to his home. I spoke to you about this principle regarding giving of our money, time, and talents in proportion to what God has given us. Yeshua validates it using the example of the widow giving the small amount of money called Widow's Mites and seeing it as just as valuable, if not more so, than what the rich gave. What is often missed is that although she was poor, she was still required to give, even though it was small. She gets credit for doing what she was supposed to do in God's eyes. The rich on the other hand are cast in a lesser light because while they gave a lot (which as a good thing), it was small in comparison to their wealth, so they shouldn't be overly proud of their contribution or look down upon those whose means to give were less.

Mark 12:41-44 CJB

41 Then Yeshua sat down opposite the Temple treasury and watched the crowd as they put money into the offering-boxes. Many rich people put in large sums,

42 but a poor widow came and put in two small coins.

43 He called his talmidim to him and said to them, "Yes! I tell you, this poor widow has put more in the offering-box than all the others making donations.

44 For all of them, out of their wealth, have contributed money they can easily spare; but she, out of her poverty, has given everything she had to live on."

As we arrive at verse 15 we get some names of places that are suspiciously similar to identifiable places in Jerusalem today, but the names are not exact and we can't be certain. On the other hand some good scholars think we shouldn't quibble and rather use some common sense to see that, for instance, the Pool of Shelach has to be what was some years later is called the Pool of Shiloam and alternatively the Pool of Shiloah. For one thing, the Hebrew spelling of Shelach and Shiloam is essentially the same. This is exciting to me for a number of reasons especially when we next read of these stairs that go down from the City of David. It's exciting to me because I was there at the archeological dig at the City of David the day the first stair was uncovered, and only a few days after the Pool of Shiloam itself was discovered. And indeed, just as we read here in verse 15, those stairs take you from the upper city down to the Pool. Today, if you have the stamina, you can take Hezekiah's Tunnel from the top of the City of David, descend to the Pool of Shiloam, and then enter into that newly discovered stairway (that has actually become a tunnel because an entire city section was built above it over the centuries) and walk all the way up to essentially the Dung Gate near the Western Wall. Those steps were built at least 2500 years ago and probably a bit more. What a thrill, and what living proof that the words of Nehemiah are accurate even if not everything has yet been verified.

And, by the way, it is at this point that the original wall (built before the exile to Babylon) was abandoned by Nehemiah and a new one was constructed following a different line. And this different line begins at verse 16. We'll not go over every point of the wall or deal with every

gate. Rather I'd like to point out more pertinent matters such as the words of verse 16 that says that the new wall section went by the tombs of David. The tombs of David are referring to the royal burial site where King David and his descendants (and probably some of his ancestors) were buried. It is curious that these tombs have yet to be discovered. Yet the tombs are mentioned in numerous places in the Bible and it would be ludicrous to suggest that they never existed (although because they've not yet been discovered a number of Bible scholars claim David's tombs is Biblical fantasy). It doesn't help that Judaism has identified David's tomb as next to the Upper Room of New Testament fame, on Mt. Zion in the Greek Orthodox section of Jerusalem, far from the City of David. But no serious Bible scholar, Jewish or Christian, gives any credence to that burial chamber as belonging to King David.

As we continue our wall tour, we are working our way back up the hill and closer to the Temple Mount so now we start to see more mention of Levites and Priests involved in the building, or of wall locations given relative to a certain Levite or Priest's house. Once we reach verse 27 we get mention that we are at the wall of the Ophel and that helps us because the Ophel is a readily identifiable area between the upper part of the City of David, and the most southern part of the Temple Mount. And we know that the Water Gate was just before the Ophel, so it too was towards the upper part of the City of David and could not have been down the slope and closer to the Gihon Spring as some suppose.

Next in verse 27 we read that the men of Tekoa repaired a second section of the wall, so as typical of any congregation and community some are able to do more and to go well above and beyond, partly because they have the resources to do so but also because they are so zealous to want to do all they can to fulfill God's will.

By verse 29 we have mention of the Eastern Gate, which puts us back up to the Temple Mount since this is one of most important gates into the Temple area. And by verse 32 we've completed the circuit and we're back at our starting point, the Sheep Gate.

Depending on your Bible version this is the end of Chapter 3 or if you have a version based on the Hebrew Bible (like the CJB) then we still have verses 33 -38. If you have a version based on the Latin Bible or the Greek then these same verses appear as the beginning of Chapter 4. And what we find in them is that Sanvalat, the chief instigator of hatred towards the Judeans, hears that the rebuilding of the wall is underway and he becomes enraged. We see that his

reaction to this news is far greater than what we read at the end of Chapter 2 because then rebuilding the wall was just a hope of the Jews; now the plan is moving to fruition. This time instead of voicing his disapproval to the potential wall builders, he shouts his ridicule to his own leaders and allies. No doubt this was meant to boost morale because obviously it is now appearing that Nehemiah is on the verge of pulling off what Sanvalat thought would be near to impossible. Essentially we are reading of this rather customary Middle Eastern chest-thumping and hugely over-the-top threatening language that we've all seen on Television from the likes of Saddam Hussein, to the Ayatollah Khomeini, to the current leaders of the terrorist groups ISIS, Hezbollah and Hamas. What this is, is an act of face saving. No doubt Sanvalat made an arrogant promise to his people and his allies that Nehemiah and the Jews would NEVER build that wall. Ooops.

So now the issue evolves from discouraging the Jews from rebuilding the wall, to how dare they do it! He wonders if the Jews think they're going to finish today?! He is responding to the startling speed and skill at which these long broken down walls are rising back up; and all this is being accomplished by a people he has no respect for. His ally Toviyah from Amon chimes in by saying that, OK so they managed to build the wall; but it must be so poorly built that if a fox steps on it, it will fall apart.

When Nehemiah heard about these statements of the enemy he prayed. What a wonderful mix of pragmatic political leader and Godly man he was. Why does he go to God with this? Because God inspired this work, and it was His will that was being accomplished. So Nehemiah asks God to vindicate him. Bring upon their enemies' heads what they have wished upon the Jews. In fact, let them face exile for their rebellion in the same way the Jews did for theirs. And Nehemiah's final reason for wanting God to deal harshly with them (because they have insulted the builders to their face) reverts to a cultural one: shame and honor. The enemies tried to shame the people who were simply doing God's work, so now God should take the enemies' honor away from them.

The chapter ends with the remark that the Jews were not deterred by the threats, and they continued building until all the sections were completed and connected. However in an effort to get at least a partially effective wall rebuilt, they only built each section to about half the height that it once had been. So, it was probably 15 feet high or so on average, plenty enough to provide a measure of security for the residents if there were sufficient watchmen placed around the wall.

I love the final words of Chapter 3: there was great success “because the people worked with a will”. That is, the people of the Jewish community committed to a common goal to obey God and to better their community for the good of everyone. They put their hearts and souls into their work. Nehemiah as the leader didn’t take credit. Leadership is needed and it is critical; but it is just one role in a community of many roles that must be filled for proper functioning. In the end, it is the people who make a community succeed or not. It is the people shouldering the load together, lifting up one another, everyone contributing according to their means and not leaving it to the “other guy”.

We’ll begin Chapter 4 next week.