

Builders

Nehemiah 3

Well, here we are again with another list of unpronounceable names, this time combined with an equally exotic set of locations. And the problem isn't just that we've never been to Jerusalem – so many years, so many destructions and subsequent re-buildings have passed that archeologists still debate the locations of each of these walls and gates. So, why does any of this matter to us modern American Christians? And why would God want all these details to be put into the Scriptures in the first place?

Well, let's think for a moment about how books were made in the ancient world. Paper was expensive and books had to be copied by hand, which took a long time. Given that, it would have been much more practical for Nehemiah simply to have condensed this entire chapter into one sentence: everyone got busy working on the walls. But naming each of these people and listing their individual achievements was important to him, not least because every one of God's people is important to God. Just as you keep pictures of your kids and grandkids on your refrigerator or on your phone because you love them and because it gives you an opportunity to talk about them, this list is an example of how God loves all His children and is, in a sense, taking this opportunity to brag about their achievements.

And there's another lesson that all these sorts of lists can teach us: that the Bible is a reliable source of historical information. This isn't a once-upon-a-time story: these were real people who built a real wall in a real place. And sure enough, archeologists have confirmed what today's passage describes, finding at least one place where the construction can still be examined. And as we would expect, Nehemiah's wall turned out to be a bit of a slapdash effort – back in the 1920's archeologists described the gaps between the stones as “very roughly filled up with chips and with large quantities of mortar. The stones have no smooth finished face,” so “the wall face presents a series of openings and cracks.” But that stands to reason, given the amateur builders and the speed with which they finished their task.

Okay, so as we read today's passage, I hope our faith in the Bible's accuracy is strengthened. And I hope we will let the wonderful truth sink in that God loves all His children and is proud of us when we serve and obey Him, no matter how halting or imperfect our efforts may be. But believe it or not, there are also a lot of specific lessons we can learn from this passage. After all, as we've been studying this book over the last few weeks, I hope we've come to realize that we are also called to build – not a wall with stones and mortar, but a Church with the living stones of believers in Christ. So perhaps there are some principles we can glean from all the details in today's passage, some principles that we can apply to our own efforts to build up the Kingdom of God. Maybe we can learn something from the identities of these ancient builders.

At the very least, I know all of us ruling and teaching elders can. For how does this passage begin? The high priest and all the priests took it upon themselves to rebuild one of the gates, and part of the wall. They didn't appeal to their high status to exempt them from the difficult and dirty work rebuilding the wall required: mixing the mortar, lifting the stones into place. They didn't complain that they were too busy offering the daily sacrifices to sort through the stones to find ones that were large enough and in good enough shape, or to clear away of the rest of the rubble. In spite of their status as religious leaders, they were willing to get their hands dirty, just like the rest of the folks on this list.

And lots of other leaders did the same thing. Verse 12 tells us that Haloehesh, the ruler of half of Jerusalem got involved. Verse 14 says that Malchiah, ruler of part of Beth haccerem also participated. Two rulers of Mizpah are mentioned in verses 15 and 19, the ruler of half of Beth-zur is mentioned in verse 16, and the rulers of both halves of the district of Keilah are included in verses 17 and 18.

In other words, most of the religious and political leaders set a good example for the rest of God's people, not just planning and directing, but pitching in to help finish a task that everyone understood was urgent and vital. And that's still an important lesson for leaders to learn today, isn't it? Aren't we all more willing to join in a task when those in charge are working just as hard as we are? It's no wonder that Jesus said the best way to be a leader is to be a servant.

But servant leadership also involves humility, and that's not the easiest thing for some leaders to demonstrate. Look for example at verse 5, where we learn that the nobles from Tekoa weren't willing to get involved. Why not? Perhaps they were jealous of all the energy and resources that Nehemiah had been able to muster up so quickly – who did this nabob from the imperial court think he was? Or perhaps they didn't want to get involved in building a wall around Jerusalem when their own town still lay defenseless some ten miles away. Or maybe they didn't want to help because it wasn't "their" project, because they weren't in charge. Unlike the priests, who didn't seem to mind a layman like Nehemiah taking the lead, they refused to bow their necks to the work of the Lord. Pride doesn't look very good on others, so maybe we shouldn't wear it ourselves.

But if us ruling and teaching elders can learn a lesson in servant leadership, a lesson in humility from this passage, there are some lessons here for the rest of the members of the church as well. For if we leaders are tempted to insist on being in charge of everything, the rest of the members are all too often willing to sit back and let the preachers and elders do all the ministry of the church. This is especially common among us Presbyterians who insist that our pastors have lots of education. It's all too easy for us to think that evangelism and outreach should be left to the preachers and evangelists and church planters – the so-called "experts."

But this passage should put such a notion to rest. For example, in verse 8 it says that goldsmiths and apothecaries (perhaps better translated as ointment-makers or perfumers) were wielding a shovel and a trowel – but what did such highly-skilled and specialized craftsmen know about building a wall? In fact, there are no masons or carpenters listed anywhere in this chapter. But it didn't matter that none of the people were specifically trained to the task at hand – everyone just pitched in and got busy.

In the same way, as we all seek build the kingdom of God, inviting others to believe the gospel and submit to the Lordship of Christ doesn't really take all that much specialized knowledge. After all, if you know John 3:16, you can tell folks about the love of God and why Jesus died for them. If you know the Apostles' Creed, you can explain the basic facts of the Christian faith. If you know the Lord's Prayer, you can help someone learn to pray. If you know any hymns you can help someone learn to sing praise. And if you want to go into more detail, you can always turn to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms or the EPC's Leadership Training Guide – you don't have to go to seminary to understand and explain the essentials of the Christian faith.

Oh, and don't let anyone tell you that women can't be just as effective at building the church as men can. How many of us first learned about Jesus from our mothers and grandmothers, or from women who taught our first Sunday School classes? For example, a few folks still remember Miss Marie

Gibert, a Presbyterian home missionary who used to drive her car along the country roads in Southwest Claiborne County, picking up children and carrying them to Bethel Church for Sunday School. Just so, verse 12 says that Haloheh's daughters got right in there with their dad, helping build that wall along with the menfolk.

So, we can learn from this passage that everyone in the church must be actively involved in building up the church, leaders and members, men and women. But we can also learn an important lesson about where each of us are called to minister. Verse 1 tells us that the priests rebuilt the sheep gate – that was the gate where people brought sacrificial animals into the city, so it was very close to the Temple. In the same way, verse 10 tells us that Jedaiah repaired the part of the wall closest to his house. Verse 23 says that Benjamin, Hashub and Azariah made repairs close to their houses. Verse 28 says that the priests did the same thing, as did Zadok in verse 29 and Meshullam in verse 30. In other words, all these folks took the responsibility to work on the part of the project that was closest to where they lived.

And that is an excellent principle for ministry today, no matter who we are, no matter where we live. After all, Jesus told us to love our neighbors, and God has placed each one of us in the middle of a unique web of relationships. Sure, there are a lot of folks that all of us know, living in a small town like we do. But because we don't all live in the same house, each of us has different next door neighbors. We all have different family members, and we have slightly different sets of friends, colleagues or clients. So sure, each one of us may not think we know more than a few folks who need to know Christ or know Him better. But if you were to put all our friends and acquaintances together, we could make a tremendous impact in our little corner of the world just doing what some of the folks in today's passage did, just building the kingdom close to our own homes, just sharing Christ with those around us.

But of course, some of the other builders ventured further afield. Verse 2 says that some of them came to Jerusalem from Jericho, about 15 miles to the northeast. And even though their nobles didn't make the trip, the men of Tekoa, about 10 miles to the south, came to work on two sections of the wall, according to verses 5 and 27. Verse 7 says that men came from Gibeon and Mizpah, towns that lay to the northwest. In other words, folks came from all over the region to help rebuild the wall, just as Nehemiah had come all the way from Susa in faraway Persia.

So, just as this passage encourages us to get busy building up the kingdom of God right where we are, among our own circles of family, friends, and neighbors, we can't ignore the needs that are further away. It's our responsibility to help our Presbytery plant churches in Austin and New Braunfels, Texas. It's our job to help Hector Reynoso and the folks at Genesis Church in Mercedes, Texas raise the funds for their new sanctuary. It's our job to support the work of our Presbytery's Engage 2025 missionaries as they seek to proclaim the gospel to Muslims in the Middle East. We may be a small church, but when we combine our efforts with the other 50 churches in our Presbytery, we can make a big difference for the gospel.

But let's also be aware of kingdom needs that lie across denominational or cultural lines. Maybe we can help a small Baptist church put on a VBS, or participate in a community food pantry or Christian counseling center that many different congregations support. We can provide funds and volunteers to help folks with home repairs through Christian Volunteer Services or Hands of Hope. And all of us can encourage other small congregations just by showing up to a summer revival meeting, or a National Day of Prayer service or a community prayer meeting.

But these are just a few suggestions, and every way of advancing the Kingdom of God doesn't require as much coordination and planning as the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. Sure, it's important for all of us to follow the lead of our sessions and presbyteries, but there's lots of work for each of us to do right where we live, spending time with folks who need to talk, lifting up those who are discouraged, sharing a word of Scripture or saying a simple prayer. As today's passage makes abundantly clear, everyone has a part to play in the work of the kingdom, leaders and followers, men and women, serving folks who are close at hand or halfway around the world.

So, let's ask God to give us the grace truly to follow Jesus, the Messiah who left all the comforts of Heaven to come into our broken world, the Son of God Who laid down His life on a cross to show us sinners just how far our God is willing to go to forgive us and welcome us home. And let us work together to show His love to the world.