

Nehemiah 6:15-7:5

Unfinished Business

In verse 15, we find that the wall was completed, and yet the book of Nehemiah goes on. But why? Since the opening verses of chapter 1, Nehemiah's main focus was to finish the walls around Jerusalem. So, once that was completed, shouldn't that have been the end of the book?

And come to think of it, where it comes to building projects, what is there left for us to do? Our building is more than adequate for our current membership. We have a pastor and a session of ruling elders. We even have handicap access. And you can't get a better or more public location – right on Highway 61.

More importantly, we know what we believe. To understand the gospel, we can rely on the Holy Scriptures, the very Word of God. In addition, we have the Westminster Standards, the most thorough and complete explanation of the Reformed faith ever committed to paper. And since our coming into the EPC, we have a renewed commitment to these standards – all our officers have to study them and subscribe to them. Moreover, we have a vast wealth of position papers and pastoral letters approved by our General Assembly that explain what we understand the Scriptures to teach on all sorts of topics that are relevant to the modern world.

Yes, we are a lot like the folks in Jerusalem at the beginning of this passage. Our theological standards are a lot like the walls they had built around the city – they define who we are and they protect us from error and heresy. Our beautiful sanctuary corresponds to their temple, their place of worship. Like our elders and deacons, their leaders, the priests and the Levites, were trained and ready to assist them in their worship and their efforts to live a godly life. Everything was in place. Everything was ready. So, why isn't this the end of the Book of Nehemiah?

Well, in the first place, the book goes on because the task of building the Church is never really finished. Yes, verse 15 says that the walls of the city were complete, but verse 4 tells us that the city remained woefully underpopulated. Oh, there were plenty of people scattered throughout the land of Judea, as the census Nehemiah decided to take in verse 5 doubtless proved. But isn't it interesting – instead of citing the new numbers, he chooses instead to repeat in verses 6-73 the same list found in Ezra chapter 2, the list of the first wave of exiles who had returned to Jerusalem some 90 years before. Nehemiah thus seems to be making the connection between the Ezra chapter 2 generation that had rebuilt the Temple with the people of his own time who had rebuilt the walls.

So, what's the connection? Well, the previous generation had done their part to restore the proper worship of God by rebuilding the Temple. But after that had been completed, they had chosen not to live in Jerusalem, probably because it was unsafe. Now that the walls had been rebuilt, it was time for the new generation to adjust to the new reality and move into the city. It was time for them to shift gears, to take a different but equally necessary step toward restoring the kingdom of God to all its fullness.

And we have to do the same thing, for every generation faces new challenges. After all, there was a time when all you had to do to plant a church was to put up a nice building in a growing part of town and it would fill up with people. That's just not the case anymore. Statistics tell us that even the most active church members in most parts of the US attend worship only once a month – they're just too

busy with other activities on the weekends. And the younger generation is the least churched in American history – even if they claim to believe in God, they just don't see the point in weekly public worship.

No, what draws people into a real, vibrant relationship with Christ these days is real, vibrant relationships with Christians. This is especially the case for our young people – as they witness the collapse of the culture around them, many of them are much less interested in abstract notions of the truth, or even in professionally delivered programs. Instead, they are looking for sincerity and authenticity. They don't just want to hear about the Christian faith – they want to experience it, to live it out in a community of believers, a community that welcomes and includes them.

But this isn't just true for young people. Indeed, all of us are more likely to attend worship with friends, because we don't just want to be with God, we want to be with God's people. More than ever before, building the church today requires the time and effort to cultivate and nurture relationships with an ever widening circle of fellow believers. Are we willing to shift gears, to take the next step, to adjust our priorities to fit this new reality?

Well, if this book isn't over because the task of building the Church is never finished, it's also the case that the task of defending the Church is never finished. After all, walls are only as strong as the armies that defend them, and Jerusalem as a whole was woefully underpopulated. That's probably why Nehemiah drafted the Levites, even the ones that sang in the Temple choir, to leave some of their Temple duties and man the city gates. It's also why he appointed Hanani and Hananiah to help him in the work of organizing the city's ongoing defenses. He understood that everyone needed to take part in defending the city.

And the same thing is true for us. We may all have copies of the Word of God. We may have the finest, most complete theological statements that have ever been written. But as long as they stay on the shelf they won't do anyone any good. That's why we have regular Presbytery meetings to make sure that pastors coming to teach our congregations know and believe what the Scriptures say. That's why our sessions train and examine our elders in their knowledge of the Bible and the confessional standards, so our elders can in turn help all of us know what to believe about God and how to live out our Christian faith in everyday life. And just as in Nehemiah's time, the pastor can't do all the work of defending and applying the Christian faith by himself– that's why it's so important to have ruling elders and deacons, faithful, god-fearing men and women like Hananiah to share the burden of leadership.

But that doesn't mean that the rest of the church members are off the hook. After all, verse 3 says that guards for the city were drawn not just from the leaders and the Levites, but from all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. In the same way, we all need to learn the Scriptures, we all need to be trained in righteousness, so we can all take a stand for Christ in our increasingly lost and confused world. We all need to be able to speak the truth in love, sharing Christ's claims to be not only the King of Kings, ruling and reigning over every one and everything in the world, but also the Savior of sinners, the One Who laid down His life so that all who trust in Him might be saved. In short, we must not only be busy about building the Church, but about defending it by showing and sharing the love and truth of Christ.

And this is all the more important when we realize the third reason that our task is not yet finished: many of our most vehement opponents can actually be found within the Church. That was certainly true of Tobiah, who opposed Nehemiah so forcefully in today's passage. Now, when we first met Tobiah

back in chapter 2, we learned that he was the governor of the Ammonites, a pagan people who lived across the Jordan River to the northeast of Jerusalem. But even though he ruled over such foreigners, both his name and the family connections explained in this passage indicate that he was in fact a Jew. But that didn't stop him from trying to sabotage the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, or from trying to frighten Nehemiah and undermine his authority. In short, even though Tobiah claimed to be one of God's people, his loyalties actually lay elsewhere.

And we can't deny that there are still a lot of people like Tobiah today, people who claim to be followers of Jesus but who are actually much more interested in the things of this world. And this problem isn't just limited to Pennsylvania priests who abuse boys, or to health-and-wealth preachers who drive Cadillacs. For when we ourselves are faced with difficult circumstances, instead of relying on God's Word, haven't we all caught ourselves looking to our traditions or our position or our family connections to determine what we should do? And some folks even look to their family or their church membership – to their connections – to give them assurance of their salvation. That's really all Tobiah and his relatives were doing, and it's all too easy for us to follow their example.

That's all the more reason why we need to build and defend the Kingdom of God today. For we all need the truth of the Scriptures and the clarity of the Westminster Standards to help us stand firm against the lies of Satan. And we all need ruling elders to help us apply the Scriptures to our daily lives and to hold us accountable for our profession of faith. And we all need deacons to challenge us to be better stewards of the time, talent, and treasure God has entrusted to us. While we go on living in this world, the task of building and defending the Church from enemies within as well as in the wider world will never be finished.

But there's one more thing we can learn from today's passage, something that should encourage us as we keep working at our unfinished business. For no matter how sturdy our houses of worship, no matter how sincere our devotion to the Scriptures, no matter how clear our standards of faith, and no matter how qualified and diligent our church officers may be, God is the one who is ultimately responsible for building and defending His church. Even though we are all called to be involved in the work, it is God Who makes everything possible.

We can certainly see God's hand at work in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city walls, can't we? For when we compare the date in verse 15 with the one we find at the beginning of chapter 2, we draw an amazing conclusion: from the time Nehemiah first asked the Persian king for permission to return to Jerusalem to the time the last gate was put back in place, only six months had gone by. All the travelling, the planning, the recruitment and encouraging of volunteers, the overcoming of obstacles, and the actual construction had been completed in six months. For cryin' out loud, it takes us six months to call a committee meeting! Surely, only God could get the credit for the completion of the project with such speed – verse 16 tells us that even the unbelievers in the area could see that.

And the good news is that same thing is still true today. The good news is that Jesus has already accomplished the greatest work – the work of saving His people and bringing all who trust in Him back into a right relationship with the Father. And the good news is that He is the One Who is even now drawing all His people unto Himself, giving new life to dead hearts, convicting us of sin, and allowing us by His grace to trust in Him. He's done all that for us, and we can be sure that He will do the same thing for so many more.

And so even as we have lots of unfinished business to do, even as we spread the good news of Jesus Christ, even as we do our best to build up and defend God's Church, let's trust the Lord for the results. And let's give Him all the glory for whatever it is that He allows us to accomplish.