

Nehemiah 3:1-32 (NIV)¹
Many Hands, One Task

Introduction

When I was a young Bible college student, I had the privilege of working with an American missionary who once served as the Senior Pastor of a church in Singapore.

About two years after his retirement, he returned with his wife to Singapore to visit old friends. We met up for lunch. At that time, I had already graduated from Bible college and pastoring a church. We had a great time catching up with one another.

I asked him, “What is one thing you miss most as a retired missionary?”

He paused and said, “When I was the Senior Pastor, I might not have remembered everybody’s name. But everybody remembered my name. Now that I have returned to the US after almost 30 years in South East Asia, I realize that very few remember or even know my name back home.”

I could almost detect some choked emotions in his voice.

I had intended to treat him and his wife as my guests. After all, they were indeed visitors in Singapore. I called for the bill, but when I was about to take out my wallet, he stopped me and said, “John, thank you for taking time to be with us. We truly appreciate it. Now, you must let us pay.”

Of course I protested, “How could I allow you to do that? You folks are my guests and visitors in my country.”

But he stopped me from digging into my pocket and said with a firm voice, “John, I insist that you let us pay. Don’t forget—I was your Senior Pastor.”

Suddenly, I recalled his earlier words—“Now that I have returned to the US after almost 30 years in South East Asia, I realize that very few remember or even know my name back home.” And I began to understand a bit the deep loss of identity and significance that he was going through at this stage of his life.

¹ 1984 NIV

Indeed, humanly speaking it is very hard to take when you switch from one whose name everybody remembers or know to one whose name hardly anybody remembers or knows.

We are looking at the Book of Nehemiah today. Which name do you think would be most prominent? It must be the name of Nehemiah, right? But if you go through the whole of Nehemiah 3 (our text today), you find that many names are mentioned. But the name Nehemiah is only mentioned once in v. 16. This Nehemiah was the son of Azbuk. But the Nehemiah from which this book derives its name was the son of Hacaliah (see Neh. 1:1). In other words, the whole of Nehemiah 3 has no mention of the so-called hero of the book.

Nehemiah 3 may seem like a redundant chapter with its long list of strange sounding and difficult to pronounce names. It may also seem like a boring duty roster, telling who is doing what and where.

But I believe Nehemiah 3 is a very important chapter because of three reasons:

- One, God wants it to be known that the success story of the Jews in the Book of Nehemiah is not the work of one man, but that of many. That's why many names are mentioned in chapter 3 except that of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.
- Two, God wants to immortalize those who have served Him faithfully by having their names and efforts recorded down in the pages of Scripture. People may not remember them after some time. But God will not forget their names and labour—He Himself will put down their names in His Book of Life.
- Three, God wants to impress upon our hearts that in building lives and moving forward together, we need and must seek help from each other. We cannot do it alone. Nehemiah 3 is a great chapter about God's people living and working together.

The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem led by Nehemiah as he obeyed the calling of God was not an end in itself. It was only a means to an end. That end was for the lives of the people to be aligned to the will of God. How could the Jerusalem walls and the people's spiritual lives be strong again? These could be done when the physical building up of the walls was matched by a spiritual building deep into the will of God.

Let's trace how Nehemiah matched this physical building up with a spiritual building deep. First ...

I. The primary purpose for rebuilding must be God-centred, not man-centred.

Nehemiah was concerned about only one thing—in 2:17, he said, “Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”

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At first glance, his intention seemed so man-centred. The reason why the walls needed to be rebuilt was to remove disgrace of the Jews, to make them look good and not to lose face anymore. But as we examine deeper, we will find that Nehemiah was more concerned for the glory of God rather than the face of man.

As we look at the Book of Nehemiah, it is quite evident that the enemies of the Jews were taunting and ridiculing them by asking, “If God loves Jerusalem so much, why are the walls in ruins and the gates burned? Why is the holy city in disgrace? Is your God not able to do something to rectify this?”

Today, we hear the sceptics of the church ask different questions but with the same intent—i.e. to discredit the testimony and witness of the church. They may even mock the church by asking, “If you are the people of God, why are there so many scandals in the church? If your God is so powerful, why does the church seem so docile?”

Therein lies the primary purpose of ministry—whether a new building project or rebuilding broken down walls—i.e. the people of God are to shine forth the glory of God before the world and its critics in all that they are doing; not for their own aggrandizement. It must be God-centred, not man-centred.

Even the Lord Jesus had this as His primary purpose when He was on earth—He said in John 17:4, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” The primary purpose of Jesus’ ministry on earth was to glorify His heavenly Father, not Himself. Indeed, our task as God’s people is to glorify His Name in the faithful doing of what He has set for us to do.

Of course, the rebuilding of the walls and the setting of the gates in Nehemiah’s time also meant protection and security for the people. But when Nehemiah arrived on the scene, he challenged them to rebuild the city with a primary purpose that was God-centred, not man-centred—i.e. to rebuild for the glory of God, and only secondarily to safeguard their own properties from invasion and plunder.

Interestingly, the first gate mentioned in Nehemiah 3 reflected this God-centred purpose in the rebuilding process—it is the Sheep Gate. It is at the northeast corner of the city.

Take a look at Neh. 3:1—“Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place ...” The Sheep Gate was the first gate to be restored, and it was rebuilt by the High Priest and his fellow priests. This was the only gate that was consecrated (set apart as holy), as it was used for bringing in sacrifices for the temple. It was called the Sheep Gate because it was the entrance for sheep to enter into the temple compound from the sheep markets, and then to the

sheep pool (later known as Pool of Bethesda) where sheep were washed for sacrificing.

It's no accident that the rebuilding started at the Sheep Gate as a priority. It's a way of saying this—"This is the first and most important place to start. All the sheep entering through this gate will be sacrificed to God—i.e. to be first offered as sacrifice on the altar before as food on the dining table; to put God first." By beginning here, Nehemiah was establishing that the relationship with God would be first and central.

Don't make the mistake of focusing so much on the work or the task that we forget God Himself. God is not impressed with our mere labour. He wants our heart. God wants our heart before anything else. When we give, we do so because we have heard God and sense Him tugging our heart. We give as we obey Him and follow His leading—using our gifting, time and other resources.

We give to the Lord's work by first giving our heart to Him—i.e. we first decide to give and serve in obedience to His leading with a willing and cheerful spirit. That's serving with the God-centred purpose of glorifying Him. That's first building the Sheep Gate in our lives—i.e. beginning with worship in our heart before work with our hands.

Nehemiah matched this physical building up with a spiritual building deep by firstly, determining that the primary purpose for rebuilding must be God-centred, not man-centred.

Secondly, he did so by impressing upon the people that ...

II. God has called each one to play a part.

If you do a quick count in Neh. 3, you will discover that more than 30 individuals are named, and more than 40 groups identified. There were also many workers whom Nehemiah did not name. But each one, both named and anonymous, was assigned a place and a task. Each one assigned to rebuild the walls was important, and each one carried a special function to perform. That portrays for us one very important reality—God uses all kinds of people.

Look at these passages:

- Verses 1-2: "Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them."
- Verses 8-12: "Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section; and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, made repairs next to that. They restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall."

Rephaiah son of Hur, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section. Adjoining this, Jedaiah son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house, and Hattush son of Hashabneiah made repairs next to him. Malkijah son of Harim and Hasshub son of Pahath-Moab repaired another section and the Tower of the Ovens. Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.”

- Verses 15-16: “The Fountain Gate was repaired by Shallun son of Col-Hozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah. He rebuilt it, roofing it over and putting its doors and bolts and bars in place. He also repaired the wall of the Pool of Siloam, by the King's Garden, as far as the steps going down from the City of David. Beyond him, Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of a half-district of Beth Zur, made repairs up to a point opposite the tombs of David, as far as the artificial pool and the House of the Heroes.”

The chapter mentions rulers, priests, men, women, professional craftsmen, and even people from outside the city. There was a place for everyone, and a job for everyone to do.

God has gifted each of us and called each of us to be involved in a lifestyle of servanthood. As we use our gifts in faith and faithfulness, we can be fruitful, we can be fulfilled, and the church can be fortified.

One of the key phrases in this chapter is “next to so-and-so, so-and-so repaired this/that section”. The wall was divided and people were assigned a certain section to work on. Likewise, just as no one person could construct the whole wall by himself, so too, you and I are called to work in a certain part of God's work. No one can and should do everything, but everyone can and should do something.

When I was a young Christian, one ministry that I tried out was to sing in the church choir. One time we were practicing hard for the Christmas cantata.

During one practice session, while we were singing a part of the presentation, the brother beside me whispered, “John, not so loud. Your voice sounds flat.” It was a gentle whisper yet it was so loud and clear like the still small voice of God to Elijah!

After the practice, I asked the others in the choir if I should continue to sing with them. I think God had given me the humility to check with them if I really sounded flat like a “punctured tyre”. I think they answered honestly, yet with much gentleness and affirmation. They said, “Our problem is that many of us can sing well, but few of us can read Scriptures well. We really need a good reader of Scriptures for our cantata. John, you are the best person we have to play this part.”

I still remember it was a great cantata. I was there serving with the others. They opened their mouths to sing; I opened mine to read the words of Scripture. There was a part for everyone. And I was there to play my part.

There is a part for everyone to play in God's work for He uses all kinds of people. Do you know your part? If so, how are you playing your part?

Two other key words in the chapter are “also” and “another”. Look at these passages:

- Verse 13: “The Valley Gate was repaired by Hanun and the residents of Zanoah ... They also repaired five hundred yards of the wall as far as the Dung Gate.”
- Verse 21: “Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired another section, from the entrance of Eliashib's house to the end of it.”
- Verse 27: “Next to them, the men of Tekoa repaired another section, from the great projecting tower to the wall of Ophel.”

Most workers are glad to lay down their tools when their job is finished. But these people asked for additional assignments or walked the extra mile. These people served “zealously” like how it is described of this man named Baruch in v. 20. And the word “zealous” means “to burn or to glow”. Some like Baruch were burning lots of energy and glowing for the Lord as they served.

The attitude here is not so much to do as much as or more than others ... until you get burnt out. It is to do as much as we can as the Lord so leads and enables.

There is a part for everyone to play in God's work—this is the first reality. And a second reality is this—some people do more than others (see Neh. 3:11, 19, 21, 24, 27, 30). This is so not because they have been “arowed” by others to do more (i.e. volunteered by others without your consent). But they have been led and enabled by God to do more. And we must and should appreciate, support, and affirm these who so obey and serve God and His church.

God Himself understands human nature so completely. He knows that some people will not work. Look at v. 5 about the nobles of Tekoa (a town about 11 miles from Jersualem)—“The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.” Perhaps, they were too proud to submit themselves to their respective supervisors. They were too important and self-respecting to get their hands dirty.

But the Lord could see through all this. That's why he moved and enabled the common folks of Tekoa to double up. They built up two sections of the wall (vv. 5 and 27).

In John 21:19-22, you remember that Jesus called Peter to follow Him. Peter then turned to look at the disciple whom the Lord loved (believed to be John) and said, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.”

Often, we are like Peter here—we are afraid of not getting the same deal as others (we are “kiasu”). We are quick to protest, “Not fair!” The Lord said to Peter in John 21:18, “When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” In John 21:19, we realize that the Lord was hinting to Peter that he would have to suffer much while serving Him, especially with regard to his later martyrdom. And Peter was suspecting that the Lord was giving him an unfair deal. So he turned to the other disciple and asked the Lord, “What about him? Am I getting a worse deal than him?” Peter wanted to know if he was the only one who was going to have a hard time—particularly in comparison to John, who was supposed to be the disciple whom Jesus loved. Essentially, Peter was asking, “Lord, are you giving me a fair deal? Or are you playing favourite?”

The answer Jesus gave was straight to the point—“If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?” (see John 21:22). Put in another way, Jesus was telling Peter that what He decided to do with this other disciple was none of Peter’s business. It was strictly between Jesus and this other disciple. In the same way, Peter’s work and future would lay strictly in Jesus’ hands—that was the only thing of concern to Peter and nothing else.

In light of the future that Peter was being called to live, he should not allow anything to stray him from following and serving Jesus. Indeed, trying to understand God’s ways of dealing with other people can be both distracting and confusing. We may even become disgruntled. But one thing will help—we let Jesus do His job, which is to lead us; and we do ours, which is to follow Him. That will keep us on track!

We all are at different life phases, facing different challenges, and with different commitment levels. The Lord has different schedules for each one of us. May we sense His leading and obey, even if it means doing a little more in His name and from our heart as He leads and enables. When some are not in a position to put their hands together with us for whatever reasons, the Lord will enable some others to be strong so that they can help bring up the weak in His time.

Conclusion

We learn today that there are two things we cannot say when we become God’s people.

One: “You do not need me.” Everyone in the Body of Christ needs everyone else.

Two: “I do not need you.” You do need others in the Body of Christ.

If God's work is going to get done, we're to co-labour with one another, not to compare or criticize. We must keep the main thing the main thing by never forgetting that God's glory is at stake. And we often cannot all give equally. But some may be led and enabled by the Lord to give more so that the weak may be helped.

You may find some areas that need repairing/rebuilding/restoring as you look at your own life, or that of another, or that of the church today. As you arise to repair/rebuild/restore these areas, seek to become all that God has intended you to be—individually and as a church together.

Amen!