

NEHEMIAH 3

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Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction: What were you thinking this morning when we read the long list of the names of the people who rebuilt the various parts of the ruined walls of Jerusalem? I mean, the sermons are generally too long already, and now also this seemingly endless list! If I say only a few words about each verse, we'll still be sitting here by supper time. Besides, what could possibly be learned from such a listing? I read somewhere: it looks like the list of a graduating class, when all have to come up to receive their diploma. It's a nice part of the evening, but you have to suffer through it, waiting for the moment when your offspring rises up to be recognized. Probably this kind of list will be skipped in some homes when it comes up in the daily devotions. For indeed, what's to be learned here?

We might also wonder if perhaps not too much attention is devoted to human effort. Is it not a bit self-glorifying, this list of busy beavers? We should not take credit, should we, for the work that we do for the LORD? Please, we say in humility, don't mention my name, for all glory be to God alone. Of course. But here it is: a long list, exact and detailed, names never to be forgotten; surely the LORD must have a purpose here for us.

He does. It would be a shame to skip this portion of God's Word, for much is to be learned here, so much that we have to be selective about what to focus on. What I want to do is highlight a few important elements in this passage.

The main line is this: the LORD leads His people to be involved in the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. He does receive also here all the praise. But the effort of His children is not forgotten. Our work is not insignificant or vain in the Lord. And this was quite a project, to say the least. It had not been done before in this way. It was a well-organized, and a deeply-satisfying project.

The people who were addressed by Nehemiah – as we saw last week – responded favourably: let us start rebuilding! They pledged their participation eagerly. Well, you all know, it is one thing to make a pledge, perhaps on the spur of the moment, but it is quite another to fulfil that pledge. But it appears that the people of Jerusalem (and Judah) started right away with this monumental task. There was no time to lose; the opportunity had to be seized. We read therefore, in verse 1, that they went to work and began rebuilding. They started at the *Sheep Gate*, it says, and they also ended at the Sheep Gate (verse 32). So the building process involved the entire wall and all the gates. They got the job done, as we can read in great detail.

Such a massive project needs to be well-organized. If even lesser projects demand organization and leadership, certainly this one requires structure, planning, and method. As long as the “planning stage” does not drag on endlessly . . . for the task must be undertaken immediately. And I have the impression that the work developed in a spontaneous manner. Once the commitment was made and some basic ground rules were laid down, everybody simply went to work and did his part.

I want to emphasize first that it was fully a communal effort. Church-building (I mentioned it also last week) is never the task of one single person or of a few persons, but it is the task of all the people. Perhaps that is the first and main lesson to be learned from this chapter: when it comes to building the church of God and promoting the kingdom of heaven, we are *all* to be involved, voluntarily,

spontaneously, and wholeheartedly. What we read in this chapter is not merely descriptive, it is also normative, it sets a standard.

Sure, it is Christ who builds. He said it Himself later: On this rock I will build my church! But He immediately involved all His disciples in this work, not one exempted. For it pleases God to use *people*. The church is built by Christ, yes, but it is done by Him through the joyous and whole-hearted cooperation of His people; of all His people. I read somewhere that it is almost a “truism” that God works through people, but one that needs to be repeated constantly. God builds, but He never absolves us of our responsibility, for He works through us. God’s work only progresses when we – who are called to it – become enthusiastically involved.

Let us follow the general description of how this rebuilding took place. There are ten gates mentioned, and as I said earlier, they started at the Sheep Gate and also ended there. They went full-circle; no one rested until all the work was done. But though it was a communal effort – they did it together – it is remarkable how many names of individual persons are mentioned. No one hides in the grey mass of people. It is recorded exactly who did what. I think that this is a lesson in itself.

How often do we not think that others will do a certain work? We know it has to be done, but, we tell ourselves, well, others will do it, for there are always enough people willing, and we are too busy, or whatever. Besides, we say, what could I possibly do; others are much more qualified and equipped. Just keep telling yourself that you are unfit and unable and you will become unfit and unable. Most work is always done by the same people; also in the church.

But here everyone is involved and all are mentioned by name and effort, exactly who built what part of the wall. The LORD apparently keeps a record of church-building activities, and one day we will be asked: what did you do to build the church? In the New Testament, our Lord Himself focused on this in the parable of the talents. Have we used what God gave us for the promotion of His kingdom, or have we refused to use our talents for the Lord? The Lord knows exactly what talents He gave you and He will also ask you what you did with them. How many will then fall into the category of the fellow who just buried

his talent in the ground and gave it back, saying: Here, I didn't use it as you told me, but I did save it for you, you may have it back?

I said: everyone is involved. But there must also be leadership, and an example must be set. It is noteworthy that first the high priest and his fellow priests are mentioned as the ones who rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They apparently set the tone. The high-priest, certainly not a man normally involved in construction work, is directly involved. He and the other priests are not afraid to get their hands dirty, it seems. Their work even has a certain urgency. The Sheep Gate was located closest to the temple, and it was named "Sheep Gate" because through this gate the sacrificial animals (mostly sheep and lambs) were brought to be dedicated and offered to the LORD. There is something noteworthy here: the ministry in the temple, the work of reconciliation – which is at the heart of Israel's life – must be first secured. Clean up, open up the way to the house of the LORD! Keep the ministry of the Gospel working as it should!

All who have a function of leadership must be actively involved by way of example. So there went all those priests – picture this! – wearing overalls instead of robes, to clear up rubble and rebuild a gate, men who had probably never done anything like this before. The result was a lot of blisters and sore backs.

The same is said in verse 17 of the Levites. They also actively participated. Now all the so-called clergy could have said: sorry, this is no work for us, this is for the common labourer. We have to stay in the temple or work in our studies; we'd love to help, but this is not really our forte. But no one spoke in that way.

The same was true of many other people in high positions, rulers and nobles. They also participated actively. No one said that he was too "good" for a certain menial or lowly task. Take the example mentioned in verse 14 about the Dung Gate: "The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah, son of Recab, ruler of the district of Beth Hakkerem. He rebuilt it and put its bolts and doors and bars in place." The "Dung Gate" was exactly what its name says: the gate where all the garbage, waste disposal and dung was transported out of the city. Near this gate

were piles of foul smelling material as well as excrement of all sorts, animal and human, and it must have been an awfully smelly place to work, especially when the wind was in the wrong direction, namely in your face. Malkijah could have used his rank and position to put himself and his men somewhere else, in a more pleasant, up-scale area perhaps, but he didn't. It says: *he* rebuilt it – he and of course his men – but he was himself on the spot as well. They cleared the area, transported all the garbage and rebuilt the gate. What an undertaking! No garbage trucks, no front-end loaders, all by hand and the “two-hander,” as they say in Brazil, the wheelbarrow.

You see, when it comes to pitching in, no one can stand on his office, rank, or position, and say: excuse me, but this is not normally the work I do. I am willing to do something in accordance with my status, but do not ask me to do all kinds of lowly tasks! As a matter of fact: leaders must lead by example and so show themselves to be worthy of the place that God has given them, standing beside their men in one common effort, bearing the full weight of the load. Did not the Lord Jesus speak of this later: Whoever will be great among you must be the least? That is the style of the Kingdom of heaven! We have to work where there is need, whether it is a pleasant job or not.

Everybody wanted to help; no one wanted to be left out. Not only the citizens of Jerusalem worked on the wall but delegations came from all over the land. From Jericho in the south to Tekoa in the north they came. No one said: Jerusalem is not our concern, let the citizens there take care of it. No, everyone knew: Jerusalem is God's city and our city; it is the pride of Israel; there the tribes assemble; there we worship together. Jerusalem is the responsibility of all the people. Everyone came in the knowledge and faith: Jerusalem, all my fountains are within you (Psalm 87).

So they came from all parts of the land. From all walks of life. Look at verse 8: “Uzziel, son of Harhaiah, one of the gold-smiths repaired the next section and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, made repairs next to that.” Imagine, gold-smiths and perfume-makers, men of the soft touch and the fine nose clearing debris, lifting heavy rocks, and chiselling and hammering them into place. Do you know

what happens to your hands when you work with solid rock? They get chafed and ruined. And your nose? Filled with dust and mucous. And these men were fine artists, men who had to keep their fingers and noses in proper condition for their work. They could have said, sorry, but this kind of work will make us unfit for our profession. But they didn't.

I also find another passage remarkable and noteworthy. In verse 12 we read about Shallum, son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem – thus again a man of some status and wealth – who repaired a section *with the help, it says, of his daughters*. Did you notice that at first reading? The girls are getting into the act as well. It could very well be that Shallum had no sons – in those days seen as a real deficit – and therefore would have to do less work than some of the others, but his *daughters* came and said: Dad, our family will do its share. We're going to help you repair that section of the wall! That man may be proud of his daughters. And they receive special mention. For in church building work there is a calling and opportunity for both genders, male and female, man or woman, we are all to be involved in the building of God's church.

You may not say: I am only a woman, or a girl, there's really nothing I can do. Do you know how much service the *daughters* of Zion have always rendered in God's kingdom? In Christ's church the offices are not open to women, that is clear from Scripture. But this does not exclude women from service! When it comes to sticking out your hands to pitch in and help out, the LORD requires as much of the women as of the men, and He expressly acknowledges the contributions of the daughters of Zion.

Everyone is involved, people of every rank and file, rulers and nobles, rich and poor, young and old, male and female: the project of rebuilding is done by the entire people. This is what Nehemiah 3 shows us in no uncertain terms. The LORD honours this work; He sees it and notes it, and in His grace He blesses and rewards it. All in their place and with their abilities. This principle underlies the communion of saints and determines the health and growth of the church.

I said: everyone is involved. However, some of you may want to say: that's not completely true. You are right. It is also carefully recorded who refused to help. Look at verse 5: "The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors." Underline that. God did. We are not told why these nobles refused; but their lack of help is carefully noted. May I suggest that they probably felt too noble for this kind of work? No one is going to tell them what to do! They will not work side by side with the commoners from their region. So they decline: no, thanks.

It says literally: they would not put "their neck (shoulders) to the service of their lords." Who are their "lords"? This must mean first of all Nehemiah and Ezra, who had been commissioned by the LORD God. The call to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem did not go out without divine authority. Israel was summoned by the LORD to this work. Yet these "nobles" did not feel "called," and no matter what excuses they offered, the result is that they did nothing! As a result, the region of Tekoa was represented only by the common folk. Which of the two groups really had a heart for the Lord's service?

The Lord Jesus carefully notes who responds to *His* summons and also who does not respond. And at bottom of all this lies the crucial issue whether we have love for the Lord and His service, for His church and His people, and are one with these people in sharing the workload. Paul wrote about it later in the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians: in Christ, the Head of the Church, we are all united as one body, and if we are individually connected to Christ, the Head of the body, will we also as members of the same body work together. Personal faith always translates into communal activity in the church.

Throughout the years of my ministry I have heard many reasons or excuses why certain people could not participate in the work of the church, whatever the work might be, but preferred to remain at the fringes, content to be loners, sometimes nurturing old grudges against other members. But I have rarely to date heard a valid reason, that is one that can stand in the light of Scripture. Elders may ask many times why someone is not a living (= participating) member of the church,

and receive no answer. But one day Christ, who is the only Head of the church, will ask the same question: why did you not give yourself to the upbuilding of *My Church*? Not even at the repeated prompting of my office bearers? For that's what the church is: Christ's church, and not the church of Nehemiah or Ezra or whoever else.

One of the hardest aspects of ministry in the church – and all ministers, elders, and deacons, can tell you about it – is how to *motivate* and *involve* everyone in all the work that needs to be done. To ensure that we together bend out necks, put our shoulders under the task, knowing that in this way the body of Christ builds up itself in love. But remember that everyone will one day have to answer for himself or herself before Him who discerns the hearts.

In the world a successful outfit, let's say a sports team, is successful because it has many *all-stars*. A good player can fetch millions of dollars because he is valuable. But in the church of Christ there are no all-stars. Don Cherry, a pompous but colourful sports commentator likes to remark that successful hockey teams are not made up of pampered pansies but are "the lunch bucket brigade." The lunch bucket brigade, perhaps in a sense that term also pertains to the church of Christ. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth. The wonder of the church is always that God does so much through ill-equipped, incapable people. The least for the most. The church cannot be carried by the sublime effort of a few exceptional members; it is to be built by the combined effort of all, office bearers and other members alike.

Nehemiah does not paint an idealistic picture of full cooperation and all-inclusive support. Also here it is stated: some, even nobles (people of whom you'd expect so much more because of their position, talents, and wealth) will not obey the call of the LORD. The common folk of Tekoa will one day testify against their own nobles who refused to help. But also we may gratefully say: the LORD here does lead His *entire* people to involve themselves. The non-participants are an exception; the rule is: everyone does what he can to rebuild the walls of

Jerusalem. What really comes across is how the LORD motivates His children to service in His kingdom.

Before we begin to wrap up, I want to point to one more aspect of this chapter. It is remarkable that we constantly read *exactly* which part of the wall was built by whom. They each built specific sections, and time and again we read the word “next”; next to him so-and-so built, sometimes even specified to the meter or the yard. Special assignments, such as roofing, towers, difficult corners (angles) are specifically mentioned. In verse 10 we read that “Jedaiah, son of Harumaph made repairs *opposite his house*.” In other words, the tasks were carefully divided, special assignments were noted, and some people began the work right where they lived.

No one had to build the whole wall by himself. Everyone did only a small part, a section. Some did more than others, yes, but all did something. Someone like Jedaiah just started right outside his own house. Sometimes you do not have to go far to look for work, because it stares you in the face, all around you, maybe even inside your *own* house.

You can worry so much about the “big picture” – the church in general – that you forget to tend to your own little part. There are people like that: always speculating on what others should be doing or not doing, but meanwhile ineffective themselves. Stay focused on that piece of wall in front of you. Trust that others are building elsewhere, for we all have one Motivator and Supervisor, Christ Jesus. Don’t worry too much about who else is or is not working, for you cannot oversee the whole project. Just work faithfully, right there where you are. That small piece of wall in front of you is formidable enough in itself. Keep chipping away at it, keep clearing rubble, putting in new stones, and one day your piece of the wall will be finished.

And you’ll discover that meanwhile others, too, were working hard. You did not see them, but they were there on their own little stretch of the great wall around the corner. The work will be done, the whole wall finished, because Christ is the author and perfecter of our faith.

Sometimes people say: I'd love to help, but I don't know what to do. As sad as that is, it is indeed sometimes true: some people have no clue where to begin. Well, let that not hold you back. You really want to help? There is, first, the requirement of *prayer*. Pray for the church and its ministry and members. Then look around. As I read somewhere, your section of the wall may be right in front of you, but you just don't see it, or ignore it. For years Jedaiah came out of his house and just stepped over or around the rubble, until the day he started to clean up the mess. If you do not know what you could possibly do, pray for wisdom, ask other members, follow the advice of office bearers, because there is enough to do.

And I close with this thought. Today we are not called anymore to build a wall of stone around the church. We don't need to restore physical ruins. The "Jerusalem" which we are building is fully spiritual, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the temple made up of living stones, the Jerusalem that has its source above where Christ is.

Actually, the returned exiles knew this also. The church cannot hide behind walls of stone, isolated from its surroundings, neatly behind a safe barricade. If you have some time today, I'd like you to read Zechariah, a post-exilic prophet who served before Nehemiah. Read Zechariah 2, about the young man who went out to measure the wall of Jerusalem. The chap was told to cease that activity. And we read in Zechariah 2 : 4 and 5 that the "new" Jerusalem will be different from the old one in this way: it will have *no* wall. Actually, it cannot have a wall, because it is constantly growing. You can understand that. Walls are needed only when all growth is stopped or undesired. But the Jerusalem to which we belong has no physical walls, for it is a growing and dynamic body.

What, no walls? That was unthinkable to a returned exile. These people spent hours of sweat to build a wall of stone. Can a city be a refuge without a wall? Well, yes. The prophet Zechariah gives us the answer from the LORD: "And I myself will be a wall of fire around it, declares the LORD, and I will be its glory within." There are no walls now, except that wall of fire, which is the preserving and guiding power of the Holy Spirit. The glory of the church is not some awesome temple

of stone, behind a six-foot wall, impressive but immobile and impotent, but is God Himself, who in Christ through the Holy Spirit dwells within us and moves us to service.

Today Christ is seated on the throne. His Spirit now motivates us and protects us in the life and work of the church. There are no physical walls today. The wall is spiritual, powerful, renewing, cleansing. What must shine forth from us is the power and work of the Spirit of Christ. And then we have enough to do. No one should be bored here. Let's all start by cleaning up the mess right in front of us, perhaps in our own houses. Do some real *home*-mission, and from there on spread the light of the Gospel wherever you can and may. By doing this we work for the preservation of the church!

Someone once told me that he was against organized "home mission" because, he said, we should clean up our own back yard first. What an excuse. Should the mess in our back yard keep us from doing the work of the Lord around us? I said: Well, start to clean up that mess behind the house – starting at your place where there is also some rubble. For the sooner you get on with it, the sooner you can step out the front door and face the pile of debris on the street. Clean up our backyard first – is that an excuse? Our yard should be proper and spotless, or we have been very lax and lazy.

Don't worry about the wall. The wall is intact, built by Christ. Find your refuge in His work, in His promises and in the guidance of His Spirit. The wall is intact. It is not a fixed wall of stone, but a dynamic wall of fire, moving forward, expanding to accommodate all who come to Christ in truth. And the gates are open. Gates were once meant to keep people out. Now they are meant to let people in! Renewed people, snatched from the dunghill of a doomed world, cleansed and washed by the blood and Spirit of the Lord. Others will not want to enter, and one day these people will be unable to enter. That is the day when the parameters of the great city can be measured (Revelation 21), for all will have been brought in by Christ. We do not measure and count until all is done.

But that is after the day the gates will jump for joy to receive the King of glory. The prophecy of Psalm 24 will be fulfilled: Let Him come in, the King of glory! All work is done in anticipation of His coming. No one can be bored when he is preparing for that glorious entry when Christ shall come to live among us forever.

Until that day there is so much to do that not one moment may be wasted.

AMEN.