

“Eating the Whole Elephant”

Nehemiah 2:17-3:5, 3: • Acts 8:26-38

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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I'm willing to bet that everybody here attended a commencement ceremony for someone you know graduating, either from high school or college. They are usually large, impersonal ceremonies with lots of people in the audience watching. And generally, each person watching the ceremony is really only there to see one person graduate. So you sit through a long, boring reading of each name. But when your child or grandchild or friend's name is called you applaud and cheer. The rest of the time you're probably fairly disinterested. Those of you whose last name comes toward the end of the alphabet have probably had the experience of watching people leave before your child's name is even called.

Maybe the only thing more boring than listening to the reading of all the names of the graduates is at a college graduation listening to the titles of the dissertations of doctoral candidates. Here are some examples of actual recent dissertation titles: *An Investigation of the Metacognitive Knowledge and Metacognitive Strategies of University EFL Writers in China. A Comparative Study of Artificial Neural Networks Using Reinforcement Learning and Multidimensional Bayesian Classification Using Parzen Density Estimation for Identification of Spectra of Partially Methylated Alditol Acetates on the World Wide Web. The Association Between Age-Related Increases in Minimum Toe Clearance Variability and Joint Movement Variability During Level Over-Ground Walking.* I'm not suggesting that these aren't important things to research but I am saying that the titles make me kind of go numb as they read them at graduation.

When we come to Nehemiah 3, it can seem a bit like these long lists at a commencement ceremony. It's a long list of names that we struggle to pronounce, one after another. Nehemiah lists one and then says, "next to him...next to him...next to him." But if we look closely, if we read between the lines, we

discover some amazing theological truths. We discover that God uses people to accomplish His work. God wants to use *you* to help build His kingdom.

The first thing we want to look at is how God used Nehemiah. As we have seen over the past few weeks, the secret to Nehemiah's leadership is his dependence on God. His first response is always to turn to God in prayer. But God has also given Nehemiah the ability to plan and to lead, and as chapter 3 shows us, God gave him the ability to organize and delegate. Lets look at how he did it.

There's an old management saying: "How do you eat an entire elephant? One bite at a time." The idea is that any complex project can be broken down into small, individual tasks. When I was in college, one of the courses I took was called Production Management. In that class we learned about something called the Critical Path Method of project management, or CPM for short. CPM allows you to map out all the parts of a project and find the most efficient way to complete it.

That's basically what Nehemiah does. Faced with the nearly impossible task of rebuilding the roughly two and a half mile long wall around Jerusalem, along with all of the gates, Nehemiah devises a plan to get the whole thing done in the least amount of time. He divided the wall into about 40 sections, making each section more manageable. He then assigned the right people to each section, motivated them to work by helping them understand the bigger picture of what they were trying to accomplish, and then let them do their job. At the end of chapter 2, Nehemiah says to the people, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." He then tells them all the things God has done up to this point to make the project possible. It's important for *us* to remind each other of how God has been faithful

to get us where we are. In a minute we'll see how we can do that.

The last thing I want you to see about Nehemiah's leadership is that he is humble. Chapter 3 lists all the people or groups of people who worked on the wall. Nowhere does Nehemiah take any of the credit. He is working every bit as hard as the rest, maybe even harder, but he thinks it's important to name all the people helping him, and ultimately he gives all the credit to God. Biblical leadership is humble and recognizes that, as Psalm 127 says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

In addition to helping us understand biblical leadership, chapter 3 of Nehemiah also has a bigger theological truth that is important for our lives today. As I mentioned earlier, God uses ordinary people like you and me to accomplish His work. The people who rebuilt the wall in Jerusalem came from all walks of life and from all the surrounding communities. There were religious leaders like the priests and Levites. The first person mentioned is the high priest and his fellow priests. There were government officials. Verse 12 mentions Shallum, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem. And not only did Shallum work, but his daughters helped repair that section of the wall.

Verse 14 tells of the ruler of a nearby district coming and repairing the Dung Gate. You can probably imagine why it was called that. Needless to say, it wasn't a prime assignment, but this high-ranking official repaired the gate willingly. There were skilled craftsmen like goldsmiths and perfumers, merchants, and people whose occupation is not mentioned. The truth is that Nehemiah got everyone involved.

Mark Roberts, a Presbyterian pastor and theologian, writes, "Nehemiah 3 is a reminder to us that the work of God happens when the people of God labor." As followers of Jesus, each of us is called to help carry out the work of God.

I think the only question left for us to answer from this passage is this: What is the

work of God? What is it that we are supposed to be building? I think the wall becomes a metaphor for building God's Kingdom. Every week we pray, "thy Kingdom come on earth." God is calling all of us, as followers of Christ, to build the wall of His Kingdom. So what's *our* wall today? It's making disciples. Our task, our calling, is to make disciples of Jesus. God wants to work through YOU to help other people learn about Jesus. It's that simple. It's not easy but it's simple.

Let me share with you a few practical ways from Nehemiah 3 that we can begin to make disciples. First, and maybe most importantly, be willing and available. Of all the names mentioned in Nehemiah 3, only the nobles from Tekoa refused to help. That's their legacy forever. All the rest, whatever their skill or ability, were used by God because they were willing and available.

Second, connect with other believers. This diverse group of people all worked side-by-side to build the wall and a number of the verses indicate that people from different areas worked together on one section. Third, look around you. Who is in your life that doesn't have a relationship with Jesus? Verse 28 says, "Above the Horse Gate the priests repaired, each one opposite his own house." Many of the people who helped rebuild the wall were working on sections that connected to their own home. God used them to build His city right where they lived. He does the same thing for us. He is calling us to serve and to make disciples where we are. I'm not suggesting that missions aren't important. They are very important. Our community continues to benefit from Christians from other places coming here to help rebuild. But the work of building the kind of relationships with people that help them want to know Jesus happens as part of your daily life, right where you live. Ask God today who He wants you to get to know better.

Finally, I think it's important to hear from one another how we've seen God at work in our lives. Some churches call these testimonies. It's

an opportunity to celebrate with others and to be encouraged. Nehemiah inspired the people to work by sharing what God had done so far and it motivated the people to work. The same is true today. Hearing how God is working in others lives can help motivate us to carry out His work.

God wants to use you to help build His kingdom. And if everyone works on the section of the wall He has assigned to us, we will be amazed as we see His kingdom built right here around us as more and more people come to know Jesus. It's a big job but we can do it one bite at a time.

Amen.