

All In
Nehemiah 3:1-32
Surge Sunday – January 12, 2014

Introduction – The Power of a Team

Do you remember when NBA basketball was really a team sport rather than a group of superstars? In the 1980's the Lakers and Celtics had talented teams, but more than that, they knew how to play together. Every man contributing 100% and the result was great competition. Magic Johnson and Larry Bird were the “superstars.” Not because they could score a lot of points – which they could; their greatness was in elevating the play of each of their teammates. Those were the days. It was exhilarating to watch them play together.

Teamwork can happen in work and ministry, too. One of the most enjoyable seasons of my life was when I was the director of the Living Christmas Tree in Sioux City, IA for eight years. We had a great team. Everyone knew what their role was and did it with enthusiasm. Because there was trust and understanding between the leaders, creativity was released and the results always surpassed our expectations. Unlike some productions I've been a part of, the 200+ people who were involved in the Tree each year genuinely enjoyed what they were doing and being with each other. The community loved it, too. In eight years, we sold out every performance, sometimes as many as nine in one year. Frankly, we didn't have a lot of vocal talent. Our actors in the drama were almost always inexperienced. But everyone's performance was more than what they would have imagined because everyone bought in and gave their unique contribution.

The power of a unified team always elevates their production beyond the simple sum of their abilities. The story of the rebuilding of the wall in the Book of Nehemiah is one of history's best examples of the power of unified teamwork. When I was talking with Pastor Dave Klass about the book, he said that Nehemiah is one of the greatest heroes in the Jewish tradition. The wall around the city was built in just fifty two days! (They could do that, you see, because they didn't have to get the bill through Congress to secure their funding and they didn't have to deal with unions.) They did it because it was God's enterprise, he was with them, and they had a heart to do the work. Chapter three is the specific accounting of who did what work in the project.

Prayer

Text - Nehemiah 3:1-32 (ESV)

Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Tower of Hananel. And next to him the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built.

The sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate. They laid its beams and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars. And next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz repaired. And next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, son of Meshezabel repaired. And next to them Zadok the son of Baana repaired. And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.

Joiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired the Gate of Yeshanah. They laid its beams and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars. And next to them repaired Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah, the seat of the governor of the province Beyond the River. Next to them Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, goldsmiths, repaired. Next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, repaired, and they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. Next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired. Next to them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph repaired opposite his house. And next to him Hattush the son of Hashabneiah repaired. Malchijah the son of Harim and Hasshub the son of Pahath-moab repaired another section and the Tower of the Ovens. Next to him Shallum the son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired, he and his daughters.

Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate. They rebuilt it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars, and repaired a thousand cubits of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate.

Malchijah the son of Rechab, ruler of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired the Dung Gate. He rebuilt it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars.

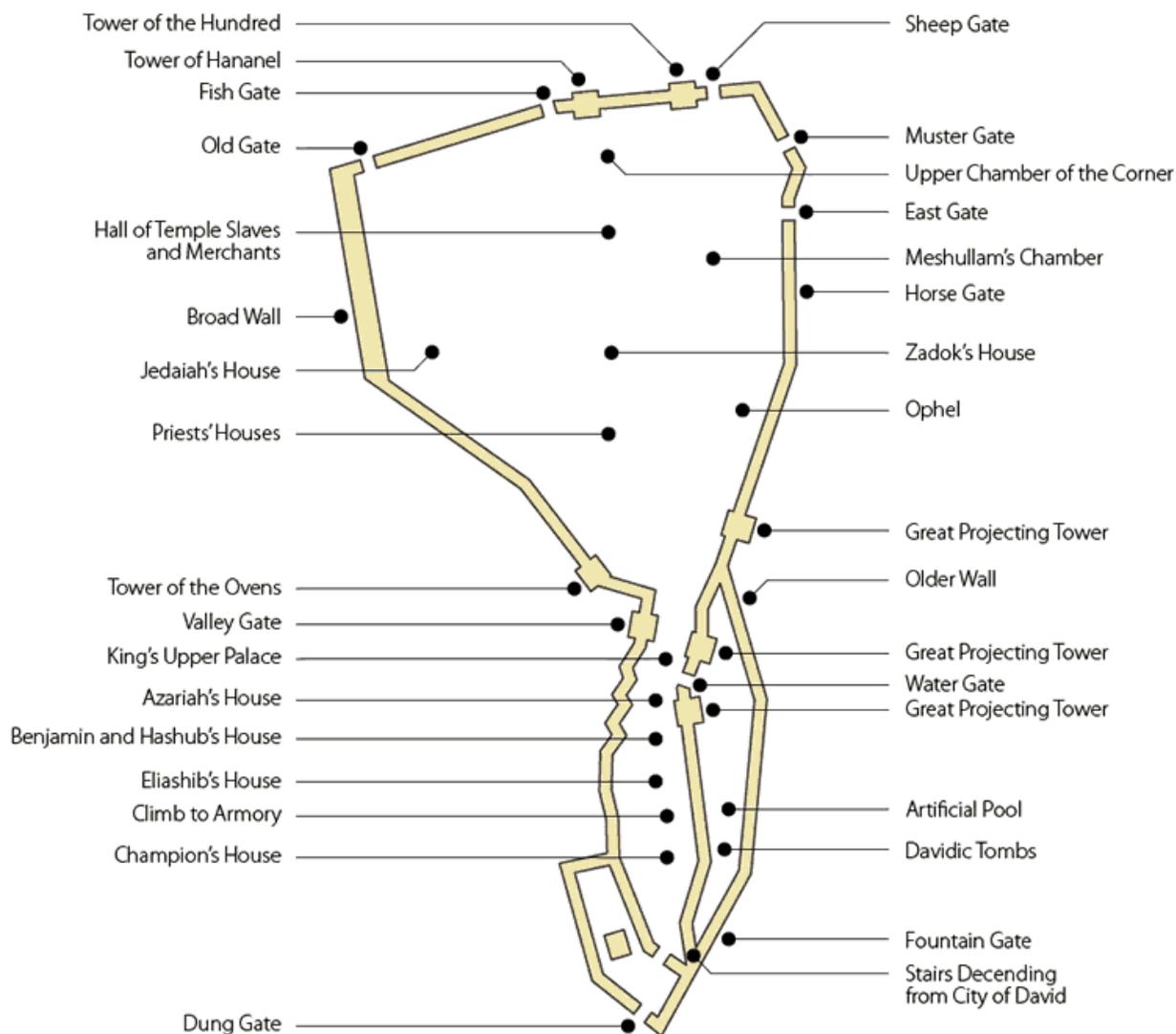
And Shallum the son of Col-hozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate. He rebuilt it and covered it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars. And he built the wall of the Pool of Shelah of the king's garden, as far as the stairs that go down from the city of David. After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, ruler of half the district of Beth-zur, repaired to a point opposite the tombs of David, as far as the artificial pool, and as far as the house of the mighty men. After him the Levites repaired: Rehum the son of Bani. Next to him Hashabiah, ruler of half the district of Keilah, repaired for his district. After him their brothers repaired: Bavvai the son of Henadad, ruler of half the district of Keilah. Next to him Ezer the son of Jeshua, ruler of Mizpah, repaired another section opposite the ascent to the armory at the buttress. After him Baruch the son of Zabbai repaired another section from the buttress to the door of the house of Eliashib the high priest. After him Meremoth the son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz repaired another section from the door of the house of Eliashib to the end of the house of Eliashib. After him the priests, the men of the surrounding area, repaired. After them Benjamin and Hasshub repaired opposite their house. After them Azariah the son of Maaseiah, son of Ananiah repaired beside his own house. After him Binnui the son of Henadad repaired another section, from the house of Azariah to the buttress and to the corner. Palal the son of Uzai repaired opposite the buttress and

the tower projecting from the upper house of the king at the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah the son of Parosh and the temple servants living on Ophel repaired to a point opposite the Water Gate on the east and the projecting tower. After him the Tekoites repaired another section opposite the great projecting tower as far as the wall of Ophel.

Above the Horse Gate the priests repaired, each one opposite his own house. After them Zadok the son of Immer repaired opposite his own house. After him Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, repaired. After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph repaired another section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah repaired opposite his chamber. After him Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired as far as the house of the temple servants and of the merchants, opposite the Muster Gate, and to the upper chamber of the corner. And between the upper chamber of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the merchants repaired.

That's a tough read! Pastor Mark Roberts, one of the commentators I read in preparing for this passage says it's a lot like attending a graduate commencement service where the names of the graduates and their thesis is read for all to hear. Play it out for just thirty to ninety minutes becomes like "nails on a chalkboard." That is, until they come to your friend or relative and you find it hard to contain your applause or a cheer. The truth is, each of these names with the attendant details carries a story. For the Jewish nation, it was important for them to know who was there and who did what. While all the detail may seem just a bit tedious, there are valuable insights that we can gain by taking a panoramic view.

Jerusalem's Wall in Nehemiah's Day



Highlights

As you can see by the diagram on the screen, Jerusalem's wall in Nehemiah's day was a system of walls, towers and gates. The towers were not only strategic for scanning the horizon, but they also provided structural support. The gates, of course, were necessary for entry and exit and they were named either for their location or their function.

I am struck by the first sentence of the narrative, "Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built..." The High Priest would have been the most highly esteemed person in the city. The priests with him were also held in highest regard. They were the religious leaders. They shouldn't have had to get their hands dirty with manual labor. I've

worked for a lot of pastors in my career. Some felt that it was beneath their position to move chairs and tables or to do any kind of manual work. But I've also worked with those who readily pitched in. Guess who were the most trusted and loved? That's why they were the best pastors, in my mind. I loved to work alongside of them and to work for them. You can be sure that the pastoral staff of this church will always work alongside of you. If we don't, in my mind, we don't have the authority to lead.

Throughout the passage you'll also notice that community leaders pitched in and did the work, as well:

- Shallum, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem (12)
- Malchijah, ruler of the district of Beth-haccerhem repaired the Dung Gate. How'd you like that job? Think septic-tank; only, on top of the ground. That's the gate they carried the dung out of the city. Malchijah, ruler of a district, led the work on such a lowly project. That was humility and servant leadership.
- Shallum, ruler of the district of Mizpah (15)
- Nehemiah, ruler of half the district of Beth-zur (16)
- Bavvai, ruler of half the district of Keliah (18)

The Levites, who in our day we would consider as support staff in the church, also pitched in. Goldsmiths and perfumers, men with soft hands who were artisan craftsmen, cleared rubble, cut and lifted heavy stones into place. They didn't complain saying, "that's not my calling or my gift." They caught the vision; they saw the need and did their share of the work. They were all in.

But there were a few who would not work. These were the nobles of Tekoa – a city located in open country twelve miles south of Jerusalem. The Scripture says that they "would not stoop to serve their Lord." (6) Their people worked, but they refused. What a terrible epitaph! How would you like to have that written on your grave stone? ("They would not stoop to serve the Lord.") There will always be those who will not pitch in and join the work. The Tekoite nobles may have been arrogant or they may have been afraid of reprisals from Jerusalem's enemies. It will be the same here, as it is in every place where people are together. But what a shame it would be if it was written years from now, that, for whatever reason, you refused to join in. I would not want that as my legacy.

There were others, too, whose work was essential to the wall project but are not mentioned in Scripture. There is no mention of bakers or herdsmen or other providers of essential services needed in the community. They were the "behind the scenes" people without whom the project could not have succeeded. We have those folks in our church, as well: the office volunteers, the nursery workers, those who prepare and serve meals. Your work is every bit as essential to ministry at First Baptist Church as a teacher, musician, or pastor.

Why Were They So Energized?

How is it that Nehemiah could inspire such a powerful and unified response from the Jewish people? As I've studied this book and this passage, that question has spun over and over in my mind. Certainly, the practical issues of security and overcoming centuries of shame were in the forefront of their minds as they worked together. But I believe there was something much deeper that burned in their hearts that inspired them to rise up and build with such a heroic effort. It's the same kind of dynamic that enabled our country to rise up out of an economic and social depression to defeat two powerful empires bent on conquering the world during World War II. It's similar to the impulse that inspired three hundred Spartans to fight the Persian Army – outnumbered nearly 100 to 1 - in the Battle of Thermopylae. The Jews in the Book of Nehemiah had a compelling vision of the glory of Jerusalem that burned in their hearts for generations.

In his passionate prayer for the city at the beginning of the book, Nehemiah recalled God's promise: that he would “gather them bring them to the place that I have chosen, *to make my name dwell there*. That was the passion in the vision that burned in the heart of every Jew. Jerusalem was to be “the place where God's name dwells.”

Two hundred fifty years earlier, the wicked Assyrian army laid a siege around Jerusalem in order to destroy the city. Instead, God destroyed them in a miraculous battle in which they turned on themselves without God's people even having to lift a sword. In grateful response, King Hezekiah penned Psalms 46, 47, and 48. Psalm 48 captures the Jewish understanding that Jerusalem would be “the place where God dwells.”

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.
Within her citadels God
has made himself known as a fortress.
For behold, the kings assembled;
they came on together.
As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;
they were in panic; they took to flight.
Trembling took hold of them there,
anguish as of a woman in labor.
By the east wind you shattered
the ships of Tarshish.
As we have heard, so have we seen
in the city of the Lord of hosts,
in the city of our God,

which God will establish forever. Selah
 We have thought on your steadfast love, O God,
 in the midst of your temple.
 As your name, O God,
 so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.
 Your right hand is filled with righteousness.
 Let Mount Zion be glad!
 Let the daughters of Judah rejoice
 because of your judgments!
 Walk about Zion, go around her,
 number her towers,
 consider well her ramparts,
 go through her citadels,
 that you may tell the next generation
 that this is God,
 our God forever and ever.
 He will guide us forever.

Psalm 48

Seventy five years before Nehemiah came on the scene some of the Jewish exiles had returned from Babylon and had begun work on the Temple. But they were intimidated by their adversaries and stopped the work. God raised up the prophet Zechariah to prod and inspire them to continue their building that, indeed, Jerusalem might be “the place where God’s name dwells.” It is a great and compelling vision:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord and to seek the Lord of hosts; I myself am going.’ Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’”

Zechariah 8:20-23

It wasn’t just for security. It wasn’t just overcoming shame. Deep in the heart of every Jewish person was the understanding that Jerusalem was to be “the place where God’s name dwelt.” It was that compelling vision, burning deep in their heart that brought them all together and enabled them to complete the walls, the towers and the gates of the ancient city.

A Place Where God’s Name Dwells

And what about us? We’ve come to this day – Surge Sunday – and enthusiasm is high. We have 250 people here; we probably have 400 different ideas. So many of our thoughts naturally gravitate to the use of this building. I’m no different. I’ve got all kinds of ideas of how we

should update and use this place. Ever since our building was built, we've shared the space with the Christian school. Now the rooms are open, as is our schedule. It's only natural that ideas should be exploding in our minds like popcorn in a microwave.

But there has to be something more than just modifying and updating our building.

I believe our vision should be the same as the people in ancient Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, Jerusalem was where the Temple was. It was where people went to meet God. It was the place of intersection between heaven and earth. When Jesus came, he made it clear that he was replacing the Temple – that he would be the way to God rather than the ritual sacrifices that were required at the Temple. He did away with all of that so that everyone in every place could have access to God. A few years after Christ ascended, the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians of the massive change that had taken place. Speaking of the gathered church, he challenged them: “Do you not know that you (plural) are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?”

First Baptist Church should be *the place where God's name dwells*. That is the vision that should inflame our imagination today as we consider what God would have us become and have us do. Friends, I don't in any way want to squash your ideas and enthusiasm, but the building is secondary. *God's glory in us* is our primary calling.

What does that mean- “the place where God's name dwells?” At the very least, I believe it entails these things:

1. First, we are to be a holy people. The very idea should shock us. Underneath the veneer of smiling faces and church talk is a whole lot of brokenness and sin in our church. Not only is the church the temple of the Holy Spirit, but our bodies as well. “...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” (I Corinthians 6:19) Friends, if we are to be a people where God's name dwells, we need to repent and put our sins away.
2. Second, we need to understand our calling as disciples rather than just believers. A transforming life is the fruit and objective of the Gospel. We need to do better than just getting people to say the sinner's prayer so that they'll go to heaven when they die. There's not a lot of preaching about Hell these days. It's kind of passé for some evangelicals. But it's an uncomfortable and stubborn doctrine. The awfulness of eternal judgment in darkness and isolation remains for those who do not respond to the Gospel. The reality of Hell should inspire an urgency in us to live out the Gospel as transformed people in order that we might share the Gospel without hypocrisy. That's what Jesus did. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God of and demonstrated it through his compassion and the miraculous things that he did. Hell was part of his story. But his emphasis was on a changed life by following him. If we focus only on our eternal destiny after we die, we

are tempted to ignore the demands of discipleship for today. Sadly, that's been one of the shortcomings of modern evangelicalism. Jesus didn't command us to go and make believers. He said, "Make disciples." We are to be disciples ourselves and make disciples of those who respond to the Gospel.

3. We need to bring the Gospel to the culture just as Jesus did. Most of us live in an evangelical bubble. I certainly do. Most of our friends are Christians. Our activities revolve around the church. I don't believe God ever intended us to live that way. We can say we're committed to evangelism by sending money to missionaries. That's good to do, as we are partners with them in the Gospel. But we are to be like Jesus, interacting and intersecting with the world. How can we say we love them if we don't care enough to meet them in their world and at their point of need? I received a call from Aaron Kjenstad at the YMCA just this week. He has twelve kids – good kids – from single parent homes that need mentors. Those of you who have grandchildren: how many of you wouldn't want that kind of help for your child and grandchild? That's only one example of the kinds of needs that are out there in the community. Many of you are aware of so many more. If this is to be a *place where God's name dwells* then we need to live the example of Jesus and serve those who are in need in our community.

What would it look like, church, if we were the *place where God's name dwelt*? May that question bother us and inspire us as we join our hearts together in the building of this ministry to the glory of God.