

God's Work Speaks for Itself
Nehemiah 6:15-7:5
February 9, 2014

Introduction – Perceiving the Work of God

If you know someone pretty well, you can always tell their handiwork. Parents and teachers are pretty good at this. When students get a little sophisticated – say around the second or third grade – and they're trying to get away with something, they'll often try their hand at forgery. You can always tell their handiwork. A couple of Christmases ago, Diane and I received a text supposedly from our daughter with the list of things that our oldest granddaughter wanted. The only problem was that the spelling wasn't quite the same that we would expect from our daughter. So we knew it wasn't quite legit. One of the sentimental possessions that I have in my office is this nautical lamp that my dad made in shop class as a teenager. Later in life, he would make these lamps for his own diversion and pleasure and sell them in nautical gift shops. You could always tell his handiwork. Teachers are like this, too. Each teacher cultivates a particular feeling tone and level of expectation in their classroom. It's their handiwork. Diane was a preschool director in two different churches. I think she did a great job. Both of the preschools that she took over had a very businesslike and rigid environment. Some folks like that and some kids thrive in it. But Diane changed the culture in both of the preschools that she took over. Why? Because rigid and businesslike is not her handiwork. While she maintained and achieved solid developmental objectives, under her leadership, the teachers and staff became more loving and nurturing. Probably not a big surprise to you.

I'm certain your handiwork has particular marks that make it your own as well. The way you do your work – the way you relate with people. But what is God's handiwork like? The Scriptures say, "The heavens declare the glory of God!" (Psalm 19:1) But what does God's work among people look like? In today's passage, we observe that God's handiwork was very evident and that it had the effect of demoralizing Nehemiah's enemies.

The Word – Nehemiah 6:15-7:5

So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.

Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. And I

said to them, “Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes.” The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.

Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it:

Summarize the passage

Next week we will be in Chapter 8. Obviously, we haven’t read all of all of Chapter 7, so I think it would be helpful to summarize just what remains in the passage. (I’m not reading all of those difficult names again...struggled through that a couple of weeks ago.) Our passage tells us that God put it into Nehemiah’s heart to take a census. This is an important point because earlier in the history of Israel, King David took a census because he wanted to see how great the nation had become under his leadership. The people suffered a devastating plague as a result of his selfish action. Surely, Nehemiah remembered that episode and he wanted to make it clear that taking an accounting of the people came from the Lord rather than for his own purposes. And for Jewish legacy, it was absolutely essential that they remember who was in the land at such a strategic time in their history. We’re the same way. The popularity of ancestry.com demonstrates the human urge to know the story of those who came before us.

The list that Nehemiah enumerates is essentially the same as the one found in Ezra 2. It is a good point of continuity between the two books. But Nehemiah’s account adds to the list the contributions that the people gave in order to do the work on the wall. It is a full picture of the significant work that was done and completed that phase of Nehemiah’s work in Jerusalem.

In the story that we are considering today, Nehemiah relates the incredible speed and efficiency in which the wall was completed under his leadership. From the time that he approached the Persian king in Chapter 2 to the completion of the wall in Chapter 6, only six months had elapsed. The completion of the project took all the hot air out of the three bad amigos – Sandballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. Nehemiah’s narrative adds, in somewhat of a parenthesis, that he still faced opposition from within his own people and from Tobiah. Evidently, there were a good number of the nobles who were in cahoots with that no-good trouble-maker. And, unfortunately, we haven’t heard the last from Tobiah, either. He pops up again near the end of the book and we’ll deal with him at that time.

“V” is for Vigilance (Skip down in your notes....not in the right order.)

The wall was finished. The gates were hung. They heaved a big sigh of relief and they all went about their business. Not exactly. After the building project was done, Nehemiah’s job *changed*

but it wasn't over. The completion of a major project is very dangerous turning point for individuals and organizations. People are tempted to let their guard down. You see this all the time in church building projects. A beautiful facility is completed and church unity falls apart. Sometimes, the pastor who led the building effort ends up resigning within a year or two. Moral failure often comes after significant success. PTL – the ministry in the 1980's led by Jim and Tammy-Faye Baker slipped into terrible debauchery after they began to have a lot of success. King David had his tryst with Bathsheba after he had won a great victory over the Syrians. Why is that?

Satan is looking for any opportunity to destroy the work of God. A building project – like the building of the wall in Jerusalem – requires a lot of focus in teamwork. When the project is done, people tend to let their guard down. If their vision wasn't any bigger than bricks and mortar, they think they're done. Big mistake. That opens the door for the enemy. Nehemiah kept the vision in mind – that Jerusalem would once again be the place where God's name would dwell – and remained vigilant in order to keep the enemy at bay. He did two significant things to ensure the safety of the city.

First he delegated to able leaders. It is important that leaders understand their gifting and their role. Nehemiah was wired to understand the big picture. He was a vision guy who gave direction and inspired hope and enthusiasm in his people. Now that the project was completed, he needed faithful managers to ensure its smooth operation – those who were able to deal in detail and minutia. He chose his brother Hannani and Hannaniah. We know that his brother was faithful and loyal because it was Hannani who brought news of Jerusalem to Nehemiah when he was serving the king in Susa. He could be trusted. He was “all in.” Notice what the Scripture says about Hannaniah, “for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many.” Nehemiah chose him on the basis of his character. Do you recall Nehemiah's rebuke to the Jews who were abusing their brethren in Chapter 5? “Ought you not walk in the fear of our God...” (5:9) To Nehemiah, the fact that Hannaniah was a godly man was of paramount importance. His desire to have leaders of godly character is not surprising at all since God was first in *his* life.

Second, Nehemiah took sensible precautions to prevent any attack. Typically, the gates of an ancient city were opened at daybreak and closed at nightfall. Though the walls were completed, there weren't a lot of people living inside of them. Nehemiah was concerned that their enemies might lay in wait through the night and attack at dawn when the gates were first open. He changed the policy. Instead of opening at dawn, he waited until later in the morning when the light was full and no surprise attack could be made. Nehemiah was wise. He remained vigilant. In that regard, Tobiah's ongoing threatening letters were probably a blessing. Though the building project was done, danger was still imminent. Nehemiah counteracted his enemies with wise actions and watchful eyes.

The Marks of God's Handiwork

What are the marks of God's handiwork in the lives of his people? Certainly, the fact that the wall was built in fifty-two days is significant. But that alone doesn't tell us that it was God's work. In 1994, a 6.7 earthquake in Northridge, CA severely damaged four bridges on the busy Santa Monica freeway. The economic outlook from such significant damage to a critical transportation artery was bleak. Economists estimated that one million dollars a day would be lost until the interstate was reopened. The State of California hired a contractor to complete the work within 140 days. They gave the company an incentive of \$200,000 a day for each day completed before scheduled. Contractors, of course, are notorious for going over time and over budget. Incredibly, they finished the job in 66 days!

It wasn't just the construction project. Why were Nehemiah's enemies demoralized? Why did they perceive that this was God's enterprise? Most translations render verse 17, that the work was completed "with the help of our God." That's an unfortunate rendering. Literally, it should be "this work had been accomplished *from* our God." When we say that "God was our helper" we may have a sense that God pitched in on our project. He "lent a hand." The better translation, "from our God" tells us that this was God's enterprise in which he used us. That is a very important distinction.

God's handiwork is not easily quantified. Five loaves and two fishes don't feed 5,000 people. It often doesn't add up. There is a sense, a discernment, that something or Someone supernatural is at work. Certainly, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had to be frustrated. They held the Jews in low regard and now they had completed the project that seemed impossible. They observed that Nehemiah had successfully parried every attack that they had attempted against him. And when morale began to flag because of internal injustice, Nehemiah dealt forcefully with it and got the people unified again. The meeting of all these elements: a unified people, a completed project, an untouchable leader bore the handiwork of Israel's God. The people in that region had seen Yahweh act for his people for centuries. They knew it when they saw it and they knew they were outmatched.

How Do We Ensure We Are Doing God's Work? - Prayer

What is the mark of God's work among his people today? It is observable, but difficult to measure. What are the statistics on a changed life? Can you measure unity with a yard stick? What is the price of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?

Those are the marks of God's work among his people. It is the aroma *of a people and place where God's name dwells.*

I'm going to ask you a question and I want your response. I want you to listen carefully, so that you actually do respond. (Finney's story) How many of you want First Baptist to be a place

where God is truly at work? If you don't want to be a part of God's handiwork in this church – if you just want to be left alone and be comfortable, just sit in your seat. But if you are willing to be changed – and remember, that is a mark of God's work – and you want God to work in our lives as his people, stand where you are.

It's begs the question: how does that happen? How do you ensure that you are joining God in his work? How do you invite God into your life so that He will work in and through you? I think Nehemiah shows us the way.

Throughout the story, Nehemiah is always praying, always having a running conversation with God:

O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of [the king].

Nehemiah 1:11

Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.

Nehemiah 4:4-5

And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

Nehemiah 4:8-9

Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Nehemiah 5:19

But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

Nehemiah 6:9

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

Nehemiah 6:14

Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service.

Nehemiah 13:14

Remember this also in my favor, O God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

Nehemiah 13:22

Remember me, O my God, for good.

Nehemiah 13:31

Nehemiah was always praying. He was a man of prayer. If you want the same results in your life – of God working in you – you must become a person of prayer. If we want the same results as a church – and many of you stood to express that desire – we must become a church that prays.

Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I in you...apart from me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:4,5) That’s what it means to pray without ceasing. That’s what it means to be a praying people. Let the first thought that comes to your mind when that alarm goes off be, “Good morning, Lord,” and begin your conversation from there. I know life is busy and you may not be able to give as much time to focused Scripture reading and prayer. But cultivate an awareness of God’s presence throughout the moments your day. Turn off the radio or the CD player. Look for God’s handiwork. Listen for his voice. Live in his presence all the time.

We’re working on this as a church. When our deacons met for a retreat this weekend, we spent a lot of time in prayer. Every month, when they convene, they dedicate a good amount of time to prayer. We are beginning to launch small groups here. We don’t need another class or study. Small group leaders and hosts, get your people to share the handiwork of God in their lives and where they need each other’s support. Then, learn to pray together.

If this is to be God’s enterprise...if First Baptist is to become the people and place where God’s name dwells, we need to be like Nehemiah. Learn to pray. Keep a running conversation with God. And then you will be amazed what He will do in your life. And like the people of old Jerusalem, God will demoralize our enemies and the people of this community will grab hold of us and say, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.” (Zech. 8:23)