

Ordinary Heroes

Nehemiah 3:1-32

This week I read about a guy named Stefan Sigmund from Romania, who has been trying for many years to get his name in the Guinness Book of World Records. His recent attempt went up in smoke. Using a contraption that looked like an air filter for a car, Sigmund managed to smoke 800 cigarettes at one time. Only later did he discover that Guinness no longer accepts these kinds of "accomplishments."

Another time he ate 29 hard-boiled eggs in four minutes. Unfortunately, Guinness quit printing gluttony records many years ago. He also jumped into a lake from a 135-foot cliff only to find out that the record for diving from a fixed point had already been set at 176 feet.

People like to hear their name mentioned in a positive way. Our text for today is basically a list of people who achieved some pretty major accomplishments. Alongside the team members, there are a few who are listed because they never joined the team. And, it's interesting that Nehemiah is not mentioned at all. I think he wanted to keep the attention on others.

At first glance, Nehemiah chapter 3 looks a bit dry. One commentator refers to it as a "colorless memorandum of assignments." It reads much like the book of 1 Chronicles with its long lists of names that are difficult to pronounce, information that seems redundant, and a chronology that seems meaningless. It's hard to muddle through. While it may be tempting to skip this chapter, it contains some great insights and principles that have direct application to our lives today.

Let me briefly set the historical context in case you've missed first part of Nehemiah's story. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army captured the Jews, Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls of the city were knocked down, and the temple was burned. The people were deported and were forced into slavery and Jerusalem was left in ruins.

All of this was the plan of God to discipline His people for their idolatry. But God did not forsake His people. God first moved the Medo-Persian King Cyrus to make a decree to let some of the Jews return. And in three stages, over about a hundred years, they were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem, only to discover the city was still demolished and desolate.

Nehemiah gets word of Jerusalem's problems in chapter one and prays to make a difference. He has a God-given passion for the Lord's project. In chapter two Nehemiah gets permission from King Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of the city. After Nehemiah gets God's vision of the project, he communicates the vision to the people and they commit to doing the work.

Now we come to chapter 3 and a list of 38 individuals and groups who worked on over 40 sections of the wall. This list, however, is immediately interesting to me, much more so than many of the genealogies which consist mainly of name after tongue-tying name. I think that in between the Meshezabels and Henadads there are some pertinent spiritual truths for us to consider! Let's take a look at lessons we can learn from these ordinary heroes!

The work on the walls was accomplished because the people:

1. Committed themselves to the same goal.

Nehemiah had communicated the vision, a simple one: “come, let us rebuild the walls.” There is nothing particularly ground-breaking about recognizing the simple fact that we must work together on the same team after the same goal if we are going to have success as a church! And yet I daresay that you could go to a whole lot of churches in the U. S. of A. and find that there would be no clear direction among the people, no clear purposes which people could articulate. To the degree that we focus on our own agendas, we will be distracted from God’s agenda and the goals toward which He would have us move.

One word that you find repeated in almost every verse is the word “next.” Most every verse says, “next to him,” or “next to them.” The Hebrew here comes from the word “*hand*” so the words literally read “*to the hand of him (or them)*”. It’s almost like a picture of them joining hands next to each other in the work. It’s a great picture of unity. They joined hands in the effort.

For us, unity is absolutely indispensable in the church. Our unity must be centered around a shared focus: the Kingdom of God where Jesus Christ is Lord. We join our hands in working for God’s glory.

We’ve avoided the worst of the terrible winter storms that have dumped on much of our country this year. Snow is an amazing thing. A single snowflake is among the most delicate, frail things we can see. But if enough of them stick together they can paralyze a city! There is tremendous power in cooperation. Someone once said that “snow is a beautiful demonstration of what God can do with a bunch of flakes!”

We might say, “Church is a beautiful demonstration of what God can do with a bunch of saved sinners!” We may not be able to accomplish a whole lot individually. When we work together for the Kingdom of God, we can impact our city and even the whole world for the glory of God.

Just as God called the people of Nehemiah’s day to build the walls of Jerusalem, God has called us to be involved with Him in the building of His Kingdom. Our mission is to make disciples, people who follow of Jesus, loving Him, obeying Him, and serving Him. This is our goal, and we will succeed by the grace of God to the degree that we keep ourselves focused on Jesus and pursuing His Kingdom. That is what unites us.

Let me ask you: Have you joined hands with us in the work? What part of the wall are you building here at New Covenant Baptist Church?

2. Followed the same leaders.

Nehemiah was the man God had called to lead, and the people followed the lead that Nehemiah set! Now don’t think by that statement I as your pastor am setting myself up as an unaccountable parish potentate! That doesn’t happen here, and it certainly is not my point. But at the same time, it is Scriptural that we as believers follow the leaders that God has appointed (Hebrews 13:17). There was not mass confusion, but rather a humble submission to Nehemiah and a willingness to work at the assigned task for the completion of the work.

Further, notice the first people who joined the work listed in verse 1: Eliashib and his fellow priests set the example. These guys roll up their sleeves and get with

the task at hand. Their priority was the Sheep Gate which was near the temple, the gate through which animals would be brought for sacrifice at the temple. The people saw these leaders and others mentioned in this chapter getting down and dirty in the work, and they followed their example and leadership.

Let me ask you. Are you setting the example of service for others to follow?

3. Thought little of themselves.

There was a lot of unselfishness in this project. We read of people coming from Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Zanoah, Beth Hakkerem, Beth Zur, and Keilah, among others. What we need to understand is that these folks were people who did not live in the city. They had nothing personally to gain from being there to work on the wall. They were from outside the city. They could have easily stayed home and said, "that wall is not my problem!" Yet, they got in there and worked hand in hand with the people of the city.

There were all kinds of folks on the wall working! Viggo Olsen, who helped rebuild 10,000 houses in war-torn Bangladesh in the early 1970's, was greatly inspired, he said, by this chapter. He writes, "I was struck that no expert builders were listed in the "Holy Land Brigade". There were priests, priests' helpers, goldsmiths, perfume makers, and women, but no expert builders or carpenters were named." Only the nobles of Tekoa, in verse 5, are listed as having said, "That's not in my job description!" Now, if the world were doing the job, they probably would have looked for the guys with muscles bulging out of sleeveless shirts, wearing hard hats, and steel-toed sandals. But Nehemiah didn't have that; he just had a bunch of folks who said, "whatever it takes, I am available!" And that's all he needed!

Some of you are doing exactly what you need to be doing both in your career and in kingdom work. Others of you are struggling to find your niche. I read someone who said, "I like work -- it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours." When it comes to the work of the Lord, there are no couch potatoes. There is no place for sitting around watching others do the work.

God is much more interested in your availability than in your abilities. Jesus didn't call people to be professional religious clerics. He called them to be servants. Servants are not people who concern themselves with their own self-promotion; they are people who are most concerned with the agenda of the master that they serve. I'm pretty sure that these people who Nehemiah lists here had no idea that 2500 years later half way around the globe, we would be reading their names. I'm pretty sure that none of them walked over to Nehemiah and said, "Hey, Nehemiah, that book you're writing there? Would you put a plug in it for me?" It's amazing how much God can do through people who just work regardless of who gets the credit! God gets the glory when we serve like that.

One of the key words in this chapter is the word "section" or "piece." It is used seven times. Like in verse 11, "**Malchijah the son of Harim and Hashub the son of Pahath-Moab repaired another section, as well as the Tower of the Ovens.**" And again in verse 19, "**And next to him Ezer the son of Jeshua, the leader of Mizpah, repaired another section in front of the Ascent to the Armory at the buttress.**" The wall was divided into sections and people were assigned a certain piece to work on.

Just as no one person could construct the whole wall of Jerusalem by himself, you and I are called to work in a certain section of the kingdom. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. Paul tells the Romans church:

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.” (Romans 12:4-8).

You have a place of service in this church. God has assigned it to you. Again Paul writes about how God has assigned the work of the church 1 Corinthians 12:

- 4 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.**
- 5 There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord.**
- 6 And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.**
- 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all:**
- 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.**
- 12 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.**
- 18 But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.**
- 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.**

Who places us in the Church, the Body of Christ? God does. Who distributes the gifts, these divine abilities for the work? God does through His Spirit. Who assigns the work that we do with these gifts? God does. Which members of the body of Christ are most important? None, they are all important. Everyone one of us is here because God put us here to work together.

Are you serving in your area of giftedness right now? If not, it's time to grab a brick and jump in. Let me ask, are you willing to serve in God's church even if no one notices what you've done?

4. Paid the price to accomplish the task.

Notice this as well: this wasn't easy work! It cost them something! For nearly two months these folks completely dropped what they were doing in order to daily climb on a wall and work. This wasn't glorious work from an earthly standpoint; it was sweaty, back-breaking hard labor. Let's not spiritualize this: these were real people who lay down each night with really sore muscles and aching backs after lifting stones and hauling dirt all day! This work tested their physical resources to the breaking point! And they didn't have all of the sophisticated tools and machinery at their disposal that we do! This was tough work done in a hot sun

with much opposition, which we will learn about in the following chapters. They paid the price to get it done!

Some even went on to work on a second section of the wall after finishing their assigned work. You'll see the name of Meremoth in verse 4 and again in verse 21; of Meshullam in verse 4 and again in verse 30; you'll see the men of Tekoa in verse 5 and again in verse 27. These guys didn't just do what they were assigned to do; their hearts were such that they found more work to do until the work was done, paying the price to accomplish the task.

And this is what the church does! I know that it is a popular thing in America to paint this picture of Christianity as a group of people who live at ease on our way to our heavenly reward. The heresy of our day says, if you have enough faith, you can have all of the goodies of this world and heaven too! Baloney! A better picture of what the church is all about is serving God in a world that is hostile to the gospel. Jesus put it this way, **"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me"** (Luke 9:23). It is denying yourself. It is picking up your cross daily. It is following Jesus wherever He goes. It is feeding the hungry; and clothing the naked; and visiting those in prison; and bearing one another's burdens. It is doing the difficult and inglorious work that must be done which will likely not benefit us, nor be rewarded with earthly acclaim or financial benefit.

It is people who minister to AIDS patients and pregnant teenagers and convicts and people with broken lives and broken homes. That's what the church is and does; the normal picture of God's people is of a people who are willing to pay whatever the price in order to be obedient to God. These people on the wall paid a significant price!

Hey, let me ask you a question: what are you willing to sacrifice to see God's kingdom built here at New Covenant Baptist Church?

During WWII, Winston Churchill seized many opportunities to rally not only the troops and the Parliament, but the common English folk as well. On one occasion, he was speaking to a group of miners to urge them to work hard to provide the coal to fuel Great Britain's desperate fight against the tyranny of Adolph Hitler. He used the imagery of a parade, painting the picture of a great victory march at the end of a successful war against the Nazis. He described how the foot soldiers would march down the main streets receiving hero's welcomes. Behind them would come the flyboys of the RAF who had beaten back the attacks of the Luftwaffe. Then there would come the legions from the Royal Navy who had fought on the high seas. And then, at the end of the line would march hundreds and thousands of sweat-streaked coal miners, common laborers falling into ranks behind the fighting men. And as Churchill told the story, someone would call out from the crowd, asking where these men were while their brothers and sons were out on the frontlines fighting the Nazis. Churchill said to these miners that, when that day comes and that question is asked, make this your response: "we were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal!"

The story of New Covenant Baptist Church is still in the process of being written. If the Lord tarries before coming again, what will future generations say about those of us who served the Lord here? They may or may not have a list of our names, but I hope that when the story is told, it will be one not of superstars and

celebrities, but of ordinary heroes. People will be in awe of God as they say, "Look what God did with a bunch of ordinary people who committed themselves to the mission God had given them, who followed the leaders God had brought them, who thought little of themselves but much of the glory of God, who were willing to sacrifice and bleed and sweat and pray."

Some day when the Lord returns we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the praise of the Master. And the Lord will reward not just the Abrahams, and Davids and Nehemiahs but also some just Uzziels and Baruchs and Jehoiadas and Eliashibs. The Lord will reward not only the Peters and Pauls and Billy Grahams but also a whole lot of Rexs, Petes, Daves, Mikes, Toms, Howards, Gordons, Marks, Dareks, Bobs and Bretts. He will reward all the Nancys, Pams, Leolas, Pennys, Kathys, Mays, Debbies, Taras and Elaines! And you! Just ordinary heroes!

Let's stand and pray together: