

## Nehemiah 3

### Working together to get the job done

- 1) Godly teamwork at its best
- 2) Toil and effort can be in vain – I want something that lasts!
- 3) The impossible and lasting work is done, so do not give up!

### Introduction

Good morning. Well it's probably not a good tactic by the preacher to try and show up those listening to him right from the off, however...be brave, admit it, did any of you drift off during the reading?

However, I've heard this passage before and remember sitting in church thinking, gosh this just seems like a bunch of names, great, so what. Anyone else felt that same? What does a bunch of hard to pronounce names have to do with me today? Couldn't have Nehemiah been a bit more efficient and just written. 'Thanks to all who helped on the rebuilding – much appreciated!

However, I was challenged following our recent 4 part series in the Bible in 2 particular ways as I came to this passage. Do we, (do I) come to each sermon with 2 clear expectations and hopes.

- 1) 2 Timothy 3:16 says. <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that the servant of God<sup>18</sup> may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 4:2 Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

Are we ready to listen to how God may want to speak to us today in these areas?

- 2) Luke 24:27 says <sup>27</sup>And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Are we ready for these scriptures to explain to us something about Jesus?

Not only this, but having spent some time in this passage this week, I pray we will also get to the end of this passage and be thankful for what this rather long list of names shows us about how the family of God can work together for the glory of God.

Let me pray for us for this to be the case, that even in passages that may seem irrelevant and hard to understand, there is something God is teaching us today.

### Recap

So a brief recap to get us into the context of this passage. Nehemiah was originally a joint book with Ezra (Ezra is in our Bibles just before Nehemiah); God's people are in some ways in a better place than they were. Some have returned to Jerusalem from exile and in Ezra we see the temple (the central place of worship and sacrifice and the unique dwelling place of God with his people) is rebuilt. However God's people still feel vulnerable from attack from other nations. Why? The wall around Jerusalem is in ruins and needs to be rebuilt in order to protect God's people.

In chapter 1 we met Nehemiah; a man with a passion for God and His glory and a passion for God's people and from that flowed a passion to get the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt so that God's name and his people would not be in disgrace.

In chapter 2 we discovered Nehemiah's conviction that prayer is powerful and essential if we wish to serve God. Indeed, through the power of prayer, rather amazingly the rebuilding work began.

So here we are at chapter 3....the rather long list of names of people who have rocked up to give their time, energy and effort to rebuild this wall.

## **Section 1 Teamwork at its best: Serving God's people for God's glory**

### **Set up - Illustration**

Last October, Katie and I went to Paris and stayed in an area of Paris called the Latin Quarter and this was the view from our balcony. This building is called the Pantheon; it was one of those buildings that we turned the corner, saw it for the first time and it just made you say WOW! That is stunning. It is impressive, it is beautiful and it most certainly grabs your attention; leaving you somewhat in awe of it.

When we got back, I was keen to find something to help remember the holiday and I stumbled across this painting, loved it and just had to get it.

If you look closely, you see that this is a painting of the Pantheon being built. I love this painting, not just because it reminds me of our holiday, but because it's full of the very normal, very ordinary looking individuals who came together to build something which was and is so impressive.

I'm sure there is a list somewhere of all those who worked hard to make sure the Pantheon was built. A list full of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, friends and families and if you were around at the time; you might have looked at the list; 'Oh yeah I know him, he worked his socks off on this. Oh yeah without these guys; this building would just have not been built.'

Well here in Nehemiah 3 we see a list, full of individuals, working their socks off on a much more important building project – a building project aimed at protecting the people of God. Families and friends coming together to make sure they got the job done!

One commentator puts it like this: 'This list is not a dull recital of forgotten names; it preserves the story of heroic people who played their part in the continuity of the people of God.'

So as we read Nehemiah 3; just that 'long list of names', we should certainly pause and be thankful for those that have gone before us in their service of the Lord, so that the faith was passed down. As I wrote this sermon, I was reminded of a young man, whose name I cannot remember, who was a camp leader on a camp I did when I was ten. I was upset one day and he took me to one side, said that because God loves me, he wants to hear from me in prayer and that I could tell him how I was feeling. I was down and he prayed with me there and then. I am thankful for whoever that was, they taught me as a 10 year old that God is a God who listens.

Again, as I was writing this, reading my Bible in English, I was thankful for Christians, over the years, who have toiled to translate Bibles, so that many can read God's word in their own language. People I will not meet here on Earth, but whose effort has served so many.

On another personal note, I am deeply encouraged and thankful for the endless amount of teamwork and serving that happens here at CCH; both 'officially' and ad hocly, as we endeavor to love Christ, love each other and love Huntingdon.

I wonder for you, who might be on your list, who do you praise God for, those known and unknown to you, who toiled and do toil to pass the gospel message on.

### Principles

But what else is there to learn? As we look a bit more closely at Nehemiah 3, there are a whole range of principles we discover about working together, as the family of God for the glory of God. I will not mention everything we could draw out of this passage, but 3 principles from this passage particularly stuck me.

In Nehemiah 3 we find those that serve know their **priorities**, willingly take on the work at **personal cost (or it's a personal sacrifice)** and they know it is a **privilege** to serve.

#### 1) **Priorities:**

The list tells us where the work began, verse 1 'the sheep gate' – let me remind us of it. This would symbolically have cried out to Nehemiah's readers '**Put God first**'. This gate provided easy access to the temple, possibly taking its name from the fact it was the gate where animal sacrifices were brought to the temple. What is the first priority of those that serve – to be right with God, to be with God, in his presence, forgiven and made clean; for God's people in Nehemiah's day, that meant putting temple access front and center, to show the need to repent, sacrifice and be forgiven.

#### **So for us at CCH**

When we serve, are we doing so with this priority in mind; our greatest need and that of those around us, is to have come to the Father, our righteous judge and ask that we be forgiven, knowing Christ has made it possible. Do we, as it were, give 'easy access' to Jesus. Make him front and center in what we do?

#### 2) **Personal cost: Are we serving unselfishly where there is a need, even if it's at a personal cost**

This was a building project; but as we look at the list, there are a host of people mentioned who would have been as useless and terrified of building work as I am! Those that by trade were certainly not builders! Look along with me – we have priests (v 1), goldsmiths (v8), perfume-makers (8), merchants (v32), district rulers (v12) and there'll be others that I haven't mentioned. Many of these people could well have left, or at least temporally put on hold lucrative professions for an undefined period of time to help with physically tiring work and work they may not be trained in. Why? They saw the value of committing to working for the glory of God.

Not only this, but many of those who served, would not have even directly experienced the main benefit of their laboring – the protection the walls gave Jews living in Jerusalem. There are 7 locations mentioned (including Jericho v 2 and Gibeon v 7) where volunteers came from, that are places outside of Jerusalem. What service! To labor and toil and to not even primarily benefit from your efforts.

### **So for us at CCH**

Are we willing to serve, even at personal cost (to our finances, to our time, to our energy levels) Are we willing to serve even if the ministry doesn't directly benefit us? (If we serving on a camp we might not see the fruit of our labor; those helping doing refreshments might not see the conversations their kind serving has facilitated, the list could go on.

### **3) Serving is a privilege if we understand that God turns our life around**

Read Verse 11 with me. This might just seem like a random verse that we might pass by without thinking about it, but we've actually met Malkijah son of Harim before in the Bible. He is mentioned in the book of Ezra, for 13 years before he was convicted of wrong doing for he had married a non-Jew -which God had wisely prohibited, as it makes falling away from the faith much more likely. However a sinner is always welcomed back by God if they repent and put their trust in Him. Malkijah had done just this and now his life was one of serving, in light of God turning his life around. He had gone from disobedience to a willing servant of the God who had saved him.

### **So for us at CCH (it's good to ask ourselves)**

Do we see serving as a begrudging chore or a life commitment to the God who has taken us from death to life; willing service of the God that has rescued us, redeemed us, made us his family, given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms, given us an eternal home and the again the list could go on!

### **Part 1 conclusion**

So what is there to conclude from first reading of Nehemiah 3?

It is certainly a strong reminder to be thankful for the service of others, which was for God's people for God's glory. I wonder who you are personally thankful to God for in this area?

Not only this, but will we allow our serving to be challenged by the principles that we see at work in this passage? Do we consider our priorities? Personal cost? Our privilege? When serving.

### **Section 2: Toil and effort can be in vain – I want something that lasts!**

However, may I suggest this is not the end of the story for that long list of names...

If you have any brothers or sisters, I wonder if they were as annoying a sibling as I was when I was younger. (You would have to ask Sarah, my sister, if anything has changed). My sister would spend hours building a precise and well-constructed building out of lego. The proud and joyful cry would ring out 'It's finished!' Then along charged in younger brother and smash, hours of work undone in seconds.

In the days where you had to record your favorite show on VHS, making sure the VHS was clearly labelled starting and stopping the recording at the right moment; well my sister over 6 or 8 weeks or so, had managed to record a whole series of her favorite TV show- Ballykissangel. Job done, tasked finished, she now had a WHOLE seasons recorded, ready to keep, in order to watch again and again and again; until little brother 'borrowed the VHS and recorded over it with 'match of the day'.

Sarah used to diligently collect thimbles, she placed them carefully on a stand in our living room, perhaps 30 or so on display. Looking beautiful, until one day little brother come along, practicing football tricks inside and smash, the majority of a thimble collection, years in the making, destroyed.

I can only speculate, but I imagine that my sister often thought – why do I bother! All this hard work and toil, but with him around, none of it will last! She must have been longing for the day where her hard work would not be destroyed! She was probably saying to herself: Toil and effort can be in vain – I want something that lasts!

The title of this talk, ‘working together to get the job done’ is taken from the much loved Bob the builder song ‘Can we fix it?’ to which the answer in the song is ‘Yes we can!’ But seemingly, whatever Bob and his gang mend, well, soon it is broken and damaged once more!

I wonder if you have ever felt like that. Can you recall being frustrated or disheartened by your hard work going to waste or not lasting? I imagine we all can.

As we look at Nehemiah 3 in the context of the whole of Ezra and Nehemiah and in context of the whole of the Old Testament, we will see a similar feeling.

So rightly and joyfully this list of names of hard workers; those that toiled on the wall in order to protect the people of God is here in Nehemiah 3. It can cause us to praise God for their hard work and remind us to give thanks for people who have worked hard for the glory of God.

However, in context, this is also a passage within a book and story both of hope and of disappointment. This building project, as impressive as it was, as important as it was and even in recognition of all the hard work of these individuals; did not achieve lasting and permanent security for God’s people and more vitally it did not achieve the lasting and permanent obedience and worship of God by His people.

By the end of Nehemiah, the toil seems to be in vain – all the efforts have not changed the hearts of God’s people – many still did not keep God’s law; markets were set up around the walls, not to honor God, but to make a quick profit; temple duties, precious and essential for the people of God, were not taken seriously. Those hard workers in Nehemiah 3 who would have exclaimed with glee ‘It is finished!’ The wall is complete! But by the end of the book are all too aware that their work has not achieved lasting success.

Why? Man-made projects offer no eternal protection and man-made projects do not change the hearts of disobedient sinners.

Many of Nehemiah’s contemporaries echoed that frustration and desire for lasting security and lasting change – the desire to work on something with eternal significance.

Zechariah cried out for a city without walls; Jeremiah was longing for a time where God’s law would be forever written on the hearts of God’s people; causing them to be sincerely worshipful and obedient.

Looking at the list of workers, leaves us both thankful and dissatisfied. Whenever the Pantheon falls and crumbles or is destroyed, there will be that sense of; what was the point, it didn’t last forever; all that hard work and that toil and effort for something that didn’t last.

Nehemiah 3 should leave us with the question – is the toil worth it? Should I bother giving my all?

Reading Nehemiah 3 should leave us longing for a ‘building project’ as it were, that will never damage, perish and be forgotten over time. It should make us cry out for something of eternal significance.

### Section 3 The impossible and lasting work is done, so do not give up!

Nehemiah and all the Old Testament prophets were longing for a work to come that would last forever; a way for people's hearts to be radically changed and utterly transformed; they longed for there to be eternal security for God's people and eternal obedience and worship of the God of the universe, who deserves our all.

WHAT could be more eternal and secure than this....

1 Corinthians 15:55-58

<sup>5</sup> "Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

<sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>58</sup> Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is NOT IN VAIN!

What joy, for the Christian today, for you and I, this very day and in the years to come, our labour is not in vain! Why? Because the true work of defeating the true enemy has been done! What can human effort not achieve? Overcoming death. What can human toil not overcome? The power of sin. But verse 57 'But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

What is the conclusion here – Devote yourself fully to the service of God's people for the glory of God. Do not be moved, but stand firm and give yourself FULLY to the work of the Lord, for that service is not in vain.

At the Pantheon, when building was complete, the cry went up in excitement 'It's finished! My sister with her lego, 'It's finished!', only for a younger brother to destroy it,' Bob and his gang, 'It's finished!' only for the building to fall into disrepair, Nehemiah and co at the walls 'It's finished!' The sheep gate – it's finished, the fish gate, it's finished!' Only for the hearts of God's people to remain hardened. The building project did not last!

What are we pointed to? Jesus on the cross cried 'It is finished'. The impossible work, that man could not toil to achieve, was finished at the cross! And this work cannot be undone, spoilt and brought down. Jesus' work on the cross is eternally lasting and unbreakable; for the wrath of God is and always will be satisfied for those that turn and trust in Jesus. It is done and it cannot be undone. Jesus is building a forever Kingdom, for a forever people – his toil and effort have made it possible. Surely this is a 'building project' I want to give my all to!

This is not a call to stop serving! Nehemiah 3 shows us how wonderful it is to work together for God's people, for God's glory! But **do so** in the right knowledge of Jesus and his finished work.

Know the truth – if you trust in Jesus, each one of us is part of the family and people of God; saved sinners, those taken from death to life, those lost and now found and lovingly invited into the greatest

building project of all time – the building of an eternal people part of an eternal kingdom, worshiping an eternal God!

Now, as a member of God's family/ God's people, which you were graciously brought into by the work of Jesus, use the gifts you have been given, alongside all the rest of your heavenly family, to be involved in serving the greatest building project of eternity.

### Application

If you are investigating the Christian faith, whatever you are thinking or feeling about it at the moment; don't these passages fill you with intrigue as to whether this can be true! Because if it is true, what good news it is! Every one of us has felt that sense of dissatisfaction in what we do; but the Christian faith gives an answer of hope to all those who have felt wearied, broken and dissatisfied in human toil and effort. Isn't it worth investigating to see if the claims of Jesus are real; if they are, it is life changing!

For those who would call themselves Christians, let's take a pause; how might God be speaking to me, to you today by His Spirit, through His Word? How might this apply to us, to me, to you from those expectations we had at the beginning from 2 Timothy and Luke's gospel.

Do you need to hear a word of encouragement? Keep going! Jesus has done the impossible and lasting work of making people right with God; your labor is not in vain, it's part of His eternal work! He will strengthen you. Keep going! Keep serving God's people for God's glory!

Are you being reminded to be encouraged and thankful for Christian brothers and sisters (personal and 'large scale') who have toiled to make Jesus known nationally, worldwide or helped make Jesus known personally to you.

Do you need to hear a word of challenge? If it is really true, that in my own strength, that my own toil and effort does not bring lasting change, then do I pray deeply and sincerely that what I labor in for the Lord would be fueled and powered by Him, so that it has eternal impact?

Is the Lord calling you to pause, pray and consider how you serve him? In light of knowing you are part of an eternal project, do you need to consider ways to serve more sacrificially? Perhaps that's on Sundays, getting along to life groups or prayer meetings, considering serving a Kids club, which might require using some of your holidays time, or simply sending a message to a friend in need. Whatever ever it might be, is God prompting you in this area?

Is the Lord calling you to pause, pray and consider how you serve him? Do you serve him as though it depends upon your hard work and not His finished work on the cross? Do you need to serve sacrificially, but ensure you Sabbath and rest better, in recognition that He is God and you are not!

As we pause; what might Jesus have said about this passage, if he spoke about it on the road to Emmaus, about how this passage related to him? 'Cleopas, these people in Nehemiah 3 worked so hard for God's people for God's glory, but don't you see, true, lasting, eternal work, the building of a forever city (without walls) a forever Kingdom, with God's laws written on the people's hearts, where there is no death and pain; that isn't achieved by human toil, but when I cried on the cross 'It is finished' and I meant it. For those that put their trust in me, the wrath of God is and always will be satisfied. That will not change, cannot be undone. I have once and for all achieved a permanent and lasting work for a forever kingdom – trust in that toil and effort and not your own!

Let me pray.