

Sermon – 25/01/2009 pm

A United Effort

Study Text: Nehemiah 3

The people of America have a new president. He has sworn on the Bible to uphold the constitution of the nation – ‘so help me God’. He has promised to rebuild the nation that lies in ruins because of the greed and irresponsibility of some. The people for now stand united behind their new leader. All are waiting to see if their nation can be rebuilt.

But if greed and selfishness brought about their downfall, how will he stop this problem returning. Millions look to this one man but can he do anything without the support of the people? Can he do anything without the blessing of God? It was encouraging to see an evangelical church leader being called to pray for him.

The nation needs rebuilding. The church needs rebuilding, at least in our nation. How will it be rebuilt? Much prayer is needed just as we have seen in Nehemiah’s life. But this chapter is one of action – prayer and action. The walls of Jerusalem were broken down. How were they rebuilt? The people began to pick up the stones and build the wall. They put their hand to the plough and did not look back.

At first sight this chapter seems unduly long and insignificant, but it is one of the most amazing chapters in the Old Testament. In it we see the wall of the holy city rising up out of the rubble. How did this happen? The people of God, the remnant that had returned from exile worked together, they were united in the work of the Lord.

Rose Up

Nehemiah had surveyed the city walls and knew what work had to be done. Thousands of stones had to be carried and placed in the wall. Slowly the wall would rise up as this work was done. The gateways were a major job and some skill was required to build these and hang the doors. Ten gates are listed in this chapter.

The work began on the northern wall next to the temple. It is thought this wall would have been the broken down the most as invasions usually came from the north. This chapter in fact is the most detailed description of Jerusalem that we have in the Old Testament – or anywhere for that matter. Without this chapter our knowledge of ancient Jerusalem would be much less. Being a living city archaeological excavation of Jerusalem is difficult. Nehemiah gives details of the gates and towers as well as the general topography of the city.

Eliashib the high priest rose up and started the work after he, the nobles, the officials and all the Jews told Nehemiah *let us rise up and build* (2:18). The Sheep Gate as mentioned was near the temple. Animals for sacrifice were probably brought in through this gate. The temple had been rebuilt by Zerubbabel but with the city walls broken down the life and worship of the people was under constant threat.

So the high priest along *with his brothers the priests* (3:1) led by example to build this gate and hang its door. He consecrated it when finished. They went on to build a section of the wall which they also consecrated. When work is done unto the Lord it is right that the Lord is thanked upon completion of the work.

Nehemiah had inspired them for the task and probably suggested a plan but he is not mentioned by name in this chapter. He is in the background. These men were working to please the Lord not men (Colossians 3:17). Too often the work of the church and mission is labelled as being the project of so and so, and not seen as the work of the Lord. A friend of mine always refused any thanks for the work he did in mission saying that if he received praise here he would not get praise in heaven. This is what the Bible says (Matthew 6).

After the high priest others rose up to work. There were all sorts of people from all sorts of places – all Jews of course. There were craftsmen, trades people, priests, Levites and temple servants as well as district officers. One man even got his daughters working (3:12). No one came along saying I am not qualified to help or I not able to help. Anyone able to carry stones helped.

There was one notable exception – the nobles from Tekoa (3:5). They refused to get their hands dirty. They refused to cooperate with their new leader in the man Nehemiah. They would not get in and help in the work of their Lord. This exception serves to highlight the tremendous way in which the people came together to undertake this seemingly impossible task.

The men of Tekoa repaired another section of the wall (3:27). They had to work extra hard because the nobles were not pulling their weight. This is what happens when some refuse to do their share of the work. Someone else has to do it. God's work will be done. He will find men and women willing to join in the task of building his church. Those who sit back and watch others do the work will not of course rejoice like those who laboured in the heat of the day.

Rebuild

They came together to rebuild the walls. In almost every verse of this chapter we read the word 'repair'. The people had a unity of purpose – a common aim. 'Without a common commitment to a specific task in hand, the result would have been a self defeating chaos' writes one commentator. This may appear to be obvious but this comment reminds us of the danger of not having a common commitment.

Imagine what the walls of Jerusalem would have been like if everyone decided to do their own thing. Imagine what they would have been like if some had decided to build the wall in a different direction or to a different height. Imagine what would happen to a church if everyone decided to do their own thing.

In fact it is not uncommon to find one group in church having one aim and another group having a different aim. There will be one group that supports the pastor and another which seeks to undermine him. There is a group that wants the church to grow and another that wants no change. Thankfully in Jerusalem there was a common aim with everyone building the same wall.

Right Next Door

In addition to 'repair' the other word we read again and again in this chapter is 'next to'. It literally means 'at his hand'. Some translate as 'adjoining him'. Eliashib finished at the Tower of Hananel. From there the men of Jericho picked up the work. Next to them Zaccur the son of Imri – presumably with his family (3:2).

And so it went on all the way around the city. Each section joined the next to make a single wall. It was not that one section was finished before the next started but rather that all built simultaneously. The work went on at a pace, so fast that their enemies were taken by surprise (4:2).

Some of the work was done by families next to their own house (3:23), especially up the eastern side. This section is thought to be on a new alignment higher up the slope than the previous wall. Houses may well have been built into the wall as with Rahab's house in Jericho. In some ancient forts in India you can still see houses that are part of the wall. Building next to their own house would have given added incentive for the people to do the work. It would also have been convenient and efficient.

It is important in a joint project, even in the work of the Lord, for each person to feel part of the team. Nehemiah did not keep interfering but let each one be responsible for their allocated section of the wall. Nehemiah was good not only at organization but also at communication and delegation. These are important characteristics of good leadership.

Paul made it clear that in the church each person has been given a spiritual gift (Ephesians 4). This gift is to be used in the assembly. Ministry in the church is not a one man show. Special gifts of preaching and teaching are there but these are for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, not so that the saints will have nothing to do (Ephesians 4:12).

All who believe and belong to a church have a spiritual gift that is to be used in the church. Only as we use these gifts within the unity of the body will the walls 'rise up' as it were. Let us be of a single mind, let us have the mind of Christ as we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

We pray together your kingdom come, your will be done. It is the kingdom of Christ we seek to build. Christ is the head. Christ is the chief cornerstone. Look to him and join hands with those of like mind as we labour together in building the church of Christ to the glory of God the Father.

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