

Nehemiah 3:1-4:9

"A Mind to Work, Heart to Pray, Eye to Watch"

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 3 as we continue our study through this wonderful book.

It begins in 446 B.C. Nehemiah is a Jew. He is born in captivity. He is in Babylon, serving in a government position of being the king's food tester and taster. And he is burdened in his heart over a city that he has never seen, but it is the place of his fathers, and Jerusalem's plight is bothering him so. His brother had come back with a report of the distress that the people were facing. The city lie in ruins. The children of God were susceptible and vulnerable to the enemy. They were under constant attack. He describes their position in chapter 1:3 as being "in great distress and reproach."

The king, King Cyrus, had allowed the repatriation of Jerusalem in 536 B.C. So it had been ninety-one years since the people had been allowed to go home, but they were still in harm's way. No one had taken the position of saying, "Let's build the city or build its walls. Let's provide safety and honor to a place that the LORD had (one day) put His name." But Nehemiah's heart was stirred, and his story is found in these pages, in this short book. It is one of the premier books in the Bible on leadership and on how God calls an individual to serve Him.

So we looked at chapter 1. We saw how ministry begins, and we told you it is always in the heart of an individual. God doesn't calls groups, usually. He calls an individual. It may result in groups. It starts with you. And you can most often determine what God might be doing in your heart by saying "what breaks my heart doesn't bother others." We certainly see that in Nehemiah's life. For four months, Nehemiah prayerfully sought the LORD, fasting, and yet no occasion was given to him to get out of his job (which would seem to be one he would have permanently). He hadn't been able to say anything to the king. But during those four months of praying and waiting, he planned. And he thought to himself, "If I were given the opportunity, what would I need, what would I do?" And so he waited with purpose.

And we talked a lot, in chapter 2, about how we wait - on waiting upon the LORD. I think it was Abraham Lincoln who said, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." And that wasn't going to be Nehemiah's concern. In chapter 2, we saw how the LORD

had finally opened the door to the king, and God blessed Nehemiah who, for four months, had been planning. And so when the king said, "How long and how much, and what do you need, and what are you going to do?" he had an answer for every question. The king gave him the thumbs-up, gave him everything he needed, and Nehemiah walked away from that meeting saying, "Man, God has favored us!"

At the end of chapter 2, we follow Nehemiah to Jerusalem. Ezra (in the book behind us) says that it took roughly three to four months to travel there. He showed up with authority and with supplies and with everything he might need - far beyond, maybe, what he had hoped and what he had anticipated. But we looked, at the end of chapter 2, as Nehemiah arrived that he had to now get a vision from the LORD as to what to do next. We called the study, "A Vision In The Making." You get a vision from the LORD, you share that vision with others, and then you expect opposition. And that's exactly what happened. In fact, we spent two weeks ago looking at how the opposition began to grow.

By the end of chapter 2, Nehemiah has gotten a direction as to how he's going to attack this big job. He has gotten a vision from the LORD. He has gathered the people of the city together. He has shared with them the LORD's blessing of bringing him to this point. He was able to point out the door to a truck laden with building materials out of the king's storehouse. And then he said, "Look how God has blessed this far. Join Him in the work that He has sent me to do." And God's work and Nehemiah's testimony so encouraged the people that they all got up and began to work with diligence.

Well that brings us to chapter 3 (and we can't do this review every week, I don't think, but, anyway ..... ) where we watch God work, and we get a report as to how the work is going. We've entitled the message this morning, "A Mind to Work, Heart to Pray, Eye to Watch" because, literally, those are the things that we learn from these couple of chapters before us. We'd like to go through chapter 4:9 and chapter 3. We're not going to read chapter 3, but we are going to refer to it a lot. And I think it is a message the church always needs to hear, and maybe a church like ours - we are growing, and yet we are thirty-two years old. And I'll tell you what - you can settle in after a few years. What started off with great joy can become a labor, and what started off in great faith can become a church that just kind of settles in. And there is always the danger for churches to just kind of put it on autopilot. It's the same in your life, spiritually, and it can certainly be the same in the life of a church. So to take these lessons to heart and see the LORD

renew both vision and direction is real important for each of us and for the church as a whole.

Chapter 3 gives us a detailed account of the start of this wall building project: what people worked, what they did, where they did it. And I'll tell you what - it is quicker than the hoops we're having to jump through these years to build. Except for a dishonorable mention of a few elitists (in verse 5 which says, "Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord"), everyone else helped. The whole city showed up, the small as well as the great. If you read through this section, you come away thinking here's a warm and excited group of people who are bounded together by faith; and the progress was quick, and it was significant.

I remember when we started this church in 1985, and we started actually with two couples in a house and ended up at the school down the street here with maybe 100 people. And we met in a school that really didn't clean up after itself. We had to come two hours early every service to clean up and clean bathrooms and clean classrooms and clean the floor. Didn't have any air conditioning. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. And yet God blessed. And I remember seeing everyone showing up for everything. That isn't like that anymore. The church gets larger. But it was quite a sweet time to look back upon.

Everyone here joined in. Everyone had a job to do. No one, it seems, was jealous of what someone else was doing. In fact, some folks were so excited about what the LORD was doing, they volunteered to do two sections of the wall (which seemed like a lot), but they were just willing to be responsible for it. As you read this chapter - the names and the accomplishments - you can't help but look away and think that's really the way the LORD builds the church. Everyone has a part to play. Everyone is happy in the place that God puts them. Everyone is dedicated to do what the LORD calls upon them. There is respect for the calling of others. There's little to no discontentment here - the kind that the flesh would engender. But remember. This work (in chapter 3), which has so many names, started off eight months ago with one guy who sat 700 miles away in tears, asking God to use Him. And now look what God is doing through him.

Why were so many people involved? It does appear (after the end of chapter 2) that the first, and maybe the foremost, thing is that there was a personal conviction of God in every person's heart. Like Nehemiah, who just burned within

to get to this work, as the people heard from Nehemiah, their leader, the people also began to hear from God. It's almost like chapter 2 has to precede chapter 3. I don't just mean in numbers but in terms of work. A vision and a stirring heart must precede any true work that God would want to do. It has to be the heart first, then the labor.

You remember the Ephesian church at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century (in chapter 2 of the book of Revelation). But we read Jesus' letter to the Ephesians, and the Lord said, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary." And then the Lord says, "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love." With all of the compliment comes the motivation. That was what was in question. The heart had disassociated itself from the work. The work was still going on. Outwardly, it looked like it had always looked, but now, all of a sudden, chapter 3 was ahead of chapter 2, and the heart had disengaged. And the LORD called them to, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works" (or to check their motives) or, "I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place." "I'll take you away from the work that you have been given to do." The Lord called them about their mechanical kind of serving of the LORD which took place.

Well that's not the case here. Everyone was engaged because they were, in the first person, drawn to the work by God's Spirit, convinced by Nehemiah and the proofs that he brought that God was in it. They came to serve the LORD. And when you come to serve the LORD, you're never discouraged. You come to serve people, they're going to let you down. But God doesn't do that. And if your heart is one of serving Him, then you're good. Peter wrote, in his first letter - chapter 4:11, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." In other words, give it your best. Bring all that God has given to you, and bring it out to serve Him. And that's what these folks were doing. They were serving the LORD. They were bringing what they had. God was moving, and people were listening. And if you look at the list, here in chapter 3, there were some pretty unusual laborers for building a wall. There were priests who probably hadn't worked in this work for years. There were goldsmiths and rulers. I can't imagine them mixing concrete and forming walls. I don't think that

the wall was straight or that it looked all that good. I can't imagine. I'm not good at this. I could imagine me helping out. "Get out of the way!" would be the only thing the work overseer would tell me, probably. And I suspect that it was like that here. But that never entered into the equation because the people were willing to serve the LORD with all that they had.

Never let ministry gifts (and you have them) be confused with a calling to serve. We all are given gifts by the LORD with which we should serve regularly, but there are times when the LORD just calls you to serve Him outside your skillset because you love Him. And that's the case here. I've heard people sometimes, when there are needs in the church, say this, "Oh, I'm not called to that." "Well that might be so, but can you help out?" "No. I'm a verse 5 guy." And that's what we'll call you - a verse 5 guy. You certainly don't have to be called to the Sunday school ministry to help out one day to come and watch the kids. Or you don't have to be a painter to show up on a work day to paint. "Well I'm not called for that." No. You probably aren't. Who's called to paint anyway, unless you're a painter! But you are called to serve. And you can serve.

And notice that God keeps (verse 5) good records of those who do what and who do not do what. God wanted a wall, and they were convinced that He did, and they were going to serve to the best of their ability though, if the truth be known, none of them had as a skillset wall building. That wasn't in their repertoire.

Thirdly, Nehemiah had them work together. And I think that's an important lesson to learn. Jesus, when He was training the disciples, first sent them out two by two (the twelve); later sent seventy out in like manner (in two's) for support, for encouragement, for accountability, for strength. You remember when Moses had to have his arms held up over the battle (in Exodus 17) that Aaron and Hur came and help up his arms. That was their job. "Just hold up his arms" as he held out that staff that God had given him to bless. Jonathan wants to go fight in faith, he takes his armor bearer with him (1 Samuel 14). There's something about being in a group. It is one of the reasons, certainly, where Hebrews 10:25 tells us we shouldn't forsake the assembling of ourselves together. It is needful, it is necessary. If you're going to do well, you need the body to be a part of. We, unfortunately, live in the weirdest part of the country where there's a church every two blocks. If you don't like something here, you can go up the street, and you can be the pastor next week. And if that doesn't work out, you can go six more blocks. You can do that again. Is there a way you can just kind of run wherever

you're going. In fact, you can shop for entertainment. "What are you having at your church this week?" "What about you?" "I'm going over there this week." There's really no allegiance. There's just a using of the church. It's not like that in the Midwest. We have a church in Wisconsin that might be only one of two churches in the entire city that teaches the Bible. So, when the fellow that (we started in his home, listening to CDs and then planted a church there) left his church to help in this church, it made the front page of the newspaper. Not quite the same as here. But there's something to be said for being involved with a group, that we can work together. There's protection from sin. There's encouragement. There's growing up to deal with conflicts rather than just running away from the first sign of something you don't like. "I'm leavin'!" Well that's easy. It's not growth-bearing, but it's easy.

Chapter 3 is a catalog or a worksheet of names and places around Jerusalem. It speaks of this tremendous organizational ability that Nehemiah had, but it also shows how everyone joined together to work. Which explains why they had such success with a relatively small work force with limited talents and an ever-growing camp of enemies surrounding them.

We read in verse 1 of chapter 3 that, "Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate." It's interesting to me that the priests set the example. I am sure that, in the job that they are given, none of them had ever had a callus. They didn't do that kind of work. I'm sure, because of this, the invention of the massage took place. "I hurt everywhere!" And yet the Tekoite nobles did nothing, and God writes it down. In verse 10, we read about folks working in front of their homes. In verse 23, we read it again. In verse 29, we read it again. In verse 30, we read it again. It does seem that one of the lessons is that everyone wanted to work in a place that they would find the most benefit, that was dearer to their heart, if you will. The best place you can ever start for ministry is your home. It's your first mission field. If you don't take care of your home, nothing else is going to work. Paul wrote to Timothy (in 1 Timothy 3:4) about elders, and he said, "Make sure he's someone who can rule his own home, have his children in subjection with all reverence (if you can't run your own house, how are you going to take care of the church of God?)" And so Nehemiah gives them some motivation. "This is close to your home. You're going to benefit by this, maybe more than anyone else. This is to your benefit." And it motivated them to work even harder.

We usually find ministry by what hits closest to home. We often find in Sunday school that when moms have kids and when families begin to grow, you'll find those moms working in the nursery because they want to be around their kids; and the minute they graduate to the next class, all of a sudden they move as well. And you can find moms and dads kind of running through the Sunday school, all the way to junior high or high school sometimes, not always to the joy of the children, but there they are because that makes more difference to them than anything else. We have plenty of folks in our prison ministry who got saved in prison or spent years in prison, and they can't wait to go back to prison and preach. And those who've lived on the streets are usually the ones working in our food ministry, those who have gone without, know the difficulty. It's like going back home. It's what impacts you the most.

And so Nehemiah sets folks (in their families) by their homes, and he mentions it four times in these thirty-two verses, that folks find themselves right where it meant most to them as well. So chapter 3 is just a list of workers and where they worked and what they worked on and who they worked with and what their motivation was.

Chapter 4, we read in verse 1, "But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish - stones that are burned?' Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall.' "

One of the lessons that we learn from Nehemiah, overall, is that God expects us to make progress in the face of opposition. In other words, that the road isn't so easy, it's not always downhill. You grow under pressure. You'd like things to just go flowing, but they don't, and especially when you step out to begin to serve the LORD. And notice that Nehemiah as he begins to see his ministry that has been going on for months now come to fruition, it is immediately attached to the focus of the opposition. They're not fair. The anger is not warranted. The words are mockery, plain and simple. They aren't kind. You would have thought that anyone watching this movement of people seeking to build this wall would have brought praise to their lips or applause from them like, "Man, they've really worked hard!

How good is it to see that kind of diligence!" But that's not at all what you see. Satan desires and uses criticism and derision to discourage you from serving the LORD. Know that! You step out to serve Him, you're going to have an enemy who's going to look to whisper that you're no good and unable and unusable. And notice the enemy here - he's described in verse 1. He's "furious," and he's "indignant," and it leads him to "mockery." "You are feeble, you bunch of wimps. The priest has no muscle because the priest doesn't really have ..... he can't even pick up the sledgehammer! Go back and sacrifice something." You go out, and you share your faith with folks, and you invite them to know Jesus, and they'll tell you how weak and dependent you are. "You might need Him. I don't. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for goodness' sake. I'm independent and self-sufficient." And so you stop sharing. But, in reality, if you'll stick with God's Word and the leading of His Spirit, and you live your life in a way that would honor the LORD, in time people will notice, and they'll come to want to know the LORD that you know, and the walls in their lives will get built. And the church will grow one person at a time. But notice the work and what a great chapter, chapter 3 is. But standing outside, there is the enemy - mocking their ideas and questioning their motives and pointing out their inabilities and belittling their accomplishments and seeking to sidetrack and challenge their commitment and their zeal, even bringing up their past failures. Criticism, by the way, is what you get from a human viewpoint. Faith comes from those who see God. I am more than willing to admit that the church should fail. But it doesn't because God doesn't fail. And if I try to put myself in Nehemiah's shoes over these eight months plus of weeping and praying and planning and finally the work beginning, the last thing I want is some guy over there badmouthing our laborers. And if the truth be known, probably some of the criticism is accurate. The wall did lean in some places. Some of the laborers did have more cement on them than on the wall. I'm sure it looked like a joke sometimes. But God was working. "If a fox jumps on it, it'll break down the wall." Well, maybe so, but this is what God is doing. And so though the enemy grows as the work continues (as we mentioned a couple of weeks ago), and the show of force is pronounced - now there's an army of Samaritans - the work has to continue. How we need to have a vision from the LORD so when the criticism from the world comes, we don't get moved by it. And, unfortunately, sometimes it comes from the church itself.

Nehemiah prayed, in verse 4, "Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders." I love Nehemiah's



prayer. He doesn't fight back with insults, "Your mother wears combat boots" (Laughing) or anything along those lines. He fights back in prayer. How do you handle when people criticize you? Do you talk behind their backs? Do you gather a bunch of people that will agree with you? How do you deal with people who criticize what you're doing? And I love Nehemiah's example because, like Peter says (1 Peter 3), if you suffer for conscience towards God and you endure grief, suffering wrongfully, God says that's commendable. In other words, that comes with the territory. But Peter went on to say what credit is it to you if you're beaten for your faults? In other words, if you deserve to be criticized. But they hadn't been. They were only serving. And I find it an interesting prayer that Nehemiah prays, and it doesn't sound like the kind of prayer that you would probably want to pray openly, but it's one that you might think about. It's an honest prayer. "LORD, kill them! Don't forgive them. Let them become captives in this land." I mean, the Old Testament whole line was an eye for an eye. It was to limit injustice. But Nehemiah just asks God to judge them. And the important lesson is he doesn't take this into his own hands; he leaves it with the LORD. And he says to the LORD, "Really, they're making fun of You because this is Your work, not ours." You see, if you know that the work is God's, then you don't take the criticism personally. You're criticizing the LORD. You're criticizing His people, but in so doing, you're criticizing the LORD. Be careful when you begin to speak evil of your brethren behind their backs because you're criticizing the LORD.

So Nehemiah prays. He doesn't argue. That Scripture in Proverbs 15:1 that says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," you can escalate something. "The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness." You can get your boss to yell at you so when you go home, you yell at your wife, who yells at your son, who kicks his baby brother, who beats the dog, who bites the cat, who scratches the baby, who pulls the head off her Barbie doll. You see, this can just go on and on. (Laughing) Nehemiah just left it with the LORD. Probably better.

"So," verse 6, "we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work." Opposition does little to the work of God when people have a mind to work and a heart to pray. There's little that you can do to stop God's work when you can't be distracted by criticism. There's a work to be done, so you put your blinders on. It doesn't matter what people think. I've noticed that when I watch people and listen to them, I'm always discouraged. But if I keep my eyes on Jesus, I'm never discouraged. He's never failed me, He's

never disappointed me, He's never said anything to me that would cause me to want to back off. He brings hopefulness. If I listen to others, it's easy to get discouraged because we're just a bunch of goofs anyway. But to serve the LORD. And notice "the people had a mind to work," and he goes out of his way to tell us that. They "had a mind to work." They were focused upon the things that God was doing. They were committed to it despite what other people said. Look, if you have a mind to work and a heart to pray, Satan has no trick that can hinder you. And notice quickly the work gets half done.

"Now it happened," verse 7, "when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites" (well let's just say there's a bunch of them now) "heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion. Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night." A more sinister cloud now appears on the horizon because as the work grew, the opposition grew as well. And I want you to notice that (here in verse 7) a lot of these folks are warring factions. These aren't people that normally get along. These are folks that, everything being equal, would be fighting each other, but they bury the hatchet and their differences to come together for evil against God's people. Mortal enemies become mutual partners against God's work. It's kind of like what you read about Herod and Pilate, there in Luke 23. They didn't like each other until they were brought together to get rid of Jesus. Here, the enemy turns from ridicule (first opposition) to attack mode (threats). And notice they come from all sides. Just take a look at that which we've been given there. Samaria is in the north, Arabia is in the south, Ammon is to their east, Philistia is to their west (the capital of that is Ashdod). Just in a couple of verses we are given, they were surrounded. There's conspiracy being spoken of, "We're going to come and get you." So far, there's been no attacks. And probably because the king would have forbidden it. This was a world kingdom. That wouldn't have gone well. But they are threatening terrorist activities. "The next attack will come from somewhere at some time, and we want to frighten you," and so they came (verse 8) to attack, and they wanted to create confusion and fear. At the height of the Roman Empire, the church, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, was estimated to have lost 10,000 people a day - being killed. But they couldn't eliminate the church because when you killed one, five just stepped up to take their place. Those with Nehemiah, serving the LORD, would now have to count the cost and be extremely dedicated because this was dangerous.

So, what happens? Verse 9, as we'll stop this morning, "We made our prayer to our God." What does Nehemiah do when there're problems? He prays. And I want you to notice this is the first time that you find the people following Nehemiah's example. Now they are all praying. It might have been Nehemiah at first. Now everyone is praying. And then they set a watch. We mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago, I think, when we were looking at this portion, that prayer is never to be a substitute for taking responsible action. Remember when Moses stood before the Red Sea with the people with him and the armies of Egypt barreling down, and he began to pray, and the LORD said (in Exodus 14:15), "Why are you prayin', man? It's time to move." Sometimes it's time to pray. Sometimes it's time to move. "You'd better get goin'. They're catching up with you." And they did.

So, be wise, don't be foolish. I'll give you an old line that I heard years ago, and I'd love to tell you who told me. I know someone did, but until I find out, I'll just tell you I've made this up on my own. (Laughing) But the line says this, "You should plan as if everything depended upon you, and you should pray knowing everything depends upon God." And if you'll take both of those lines, you'll be right in balance. You'll have done everything you could, and yet you'll have come to that place of dependence upon God. God always desires you to be an active participant in what He is doing. And so though he can't fight back (Nehemiah), he can certainly seek God. It's like the old Marine Sergeant who said, "Hey, we're surrounded by the enemy, so let's not let any of them escape." They were persistent with biblical common sense. If you're out of a job, go find work. Don't sit home! David, when he was being chased by Saul everywhere, prayed that the LORD would deliver him and then ran real fast. Prayed and ran.

So the people prayed, they set a watch, and they continued to work. They had a mind to work, they had a heart to pray, and now they had an eye to watch. And, as they do, they continued on. Their feet were planted on the ground, their ears were turned up to heaven. They can't lose. It's a good lesson, isn't it? And it's one that we certainly want to hear because we need to have God give us a fresh vision for our own lives.

Next week, we'll try to take the rest of chapter 4, and we've entitled the rest of chapter 4, "Don't Leave the Building For the Battles," or, if you like, the battle's going to come, but there's something more important - the work that you're doing.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson

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