



## WORKING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

### Studies in Nehemiah

### Lesson 3

#### “ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE”

#### Nehemiah 3 - 5

I saw a cartoon recently of two men at a party. Each had a drink in his hand, and they were sitting on the stairway talking while the party was going on. One said to the other, *"My view is this: reality is something that you should always treat with respect, but it should not be allowed to control your life."* Many people seem to feel that way today. They are fleeing from reality, regarding it as unnecessary. But in the book of Nehemiah we are learning how to return to reality after we have experienced the ruin that comes from following illusion.

Jerusalem's walls were not an illusion. Walls were important to ancient cities. They were necessary for protection, security, and stability.

#### I. THE BUILDERS OF THE WALLS AND GATES - THE WORK DISTRIBUTED IN FORTY-TWO SECTIONS NEHEMIAH 3:1-32

In summoning the people of Jerusalem to rebuild their walls and their gates, Nehemiah involved all the people. The whole city gave itself over for a period of 52 days to building the walls and the gates. That portrays for us a very important principle of the New Testament: that the ministry of the church in the world today belongs to everyone in the congregation.

Once, people thought that only the pastor and the hired staff were to do the work of evangelizing, teaching, counseling, healing the hurts of others and serving the needy. Because we have followed that practice far too long, the church is in trouble all over the world. But the ministry belongs to the whole congregation. That is what we see demonstrated in this third chapter.

#### A. The Reconstruction of the City - Repair from Gate to Gate Nehemiah 3:1-32

Nehemiah chapter three is all about work - how individuals pitched in and did the work together, coordinated and led by Nehemiah. The work is described in reference to the gates of the wall; the gates were the critical entry and exit points to the city, and the places most likely to see an enemy attack.

##### 1. Builders at the Sheep Gate 3:1-2

###### a. Name

It was so named because it was the gate where shepherds would bring their flocks and sell them; up until a few years ago, this same gate was being used for this same purpose in Jerusalem.

###### b. Eliashib the high priest

He is the first worker mentioned; he *rose up* to do the work with the other priests, and they worked at rebuilding the *Sheep Gate* and the section of wall near there. The high priest is acting as a godly leader should; he is out in front of the work, leading by example - not acting as if he were too "spiritual" for the hard work of rebuilding the walls.

###### c. They consecrated it

The idea behind consecration is to recognize something as "special," as

uniquely set apart for God's glory and service. City gates made special to God! Nehemiah and Eliashib knew that God wants *everything* set apart special to Him, including these city walls and gates.

Because the first of the work was specially set apart to God, it was a way of saying "*all of it belongs to You, Lord. This is a special work done unto You.*"

**d. The men of Jericho built next to Eliashib**

Every man's work was important, and though these did not work on a gate, they did the important job of building up the walls of protection and security for Jerusalem.

**2. Builders near the Fish Gate 3:3-5**

**a. Name**

The *Fish Gate* got its name because of the fish market that was nearby; the *sons of Hassenaah* did the work of rebuilding the gate while others helped.

**b. Made repairs**

The word for *repairs* is the Hebrew word *chazaq*, used 35 times in this chapter alone. It has the idea of strengthening, encouraging, making something strong - principles that have application far more than material gates and walls!

**c. The Tekoites**

The people of the city of Tekoa were more than willing to work - *but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of the Lord*. For the most part, people joined in - but not every body! These nobles from the city of Tekoa thought themselves above the hard work, so they didn't join in.

Literally, the idea in the Hebrew is that they wouldn't submit - they would not "*bend their necks*" to what the Lord wanted them to do. The real issue was submission. Maybe they thought they had a better plan, maybe they didn't like how Nehemiah was doing it - but they stand in infamy as the only people mentioned in this chapter who did not join in the work! It was gracious of Nehemiah not to record the names of the Nobles.

**3. The Builders near the Old Gate 3:6-12**

**a. The builders**

Among the repairers of the Old Gate and its nearby walls was *Uzziel, the son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths*. Along side him was *Hananiah, one of the perfumers*. These men were not trained for this kind of work! It would have seemed they had an easy excuse to not do anything, but they jumped in and did the work! *They fortified Jerusalem!* They did the work, even though many would not have thought them qualified or able.

The most important abilities in the work of the Lord is *availability and dependability*. One with few gifts and little talent, who has a passion and the perseverance to see God's work done will accomplish far more than a gifted and talented person who doesn't have passion and drive to do the Lord's work.

**b. Broad Wall 3:8c**

You can go to Jerusalem today and see the remains of this *Broad Wall* - and broad it is, more than twenty feet wide! Critics had denied the accuracy of Bible history like this, but the archaeologist's shovel constantly confirms the truth of the Bible.

*Rephaiah the son of Hur, leader of half the district of Jerusalem* worked on this section of the wall; here is another leader who knew real leadership is getting down and doing it - being a servant, instead of expecting others to do it for you.

**c. The names of the men who are said to have *made repairs in front of his house* are interesting:**

Five times in the chapter, it speaks of those who worked on the section right in front of their house. Often, we need to give attention to the work of God right in our own homes. If the work needs to be done anywhere, it needs to be done in our homes! Some of the meaning of the names of those who repaired in front of their own houses are instructive:

(3:10) *Jedaiah* means: "he who calls unto God"; our homes must be places of prayer, where the family calls unto God.

(3:23) *Benjamin* means: "son of my right hand," speaking of a protector; our homes must be places of protection and peace.

(3:23) *Azariah* means "Jehovah has helped." Our homes should be places where we recognize the help of Jehovah.

(3:29) *Zadok* means: "justice"; our homes must be places of justice and integrity, especially with integrity regarding our marital vows and promises.

(3:30) *Meshullam* means: "devoted"; our homes must be places of devotion and separation to God.

**d. Malchijah son of Harim**

He is mentioned in Ezra 10:31 as one of the men who was confronted by Ezra for the sin of taking on a pagan wife; Malchijah got things right with God and now, years later, is serving Him! We should never let a past failure get in the way of serving God. Repent and get on serving the Lord!

**e. Shallum the son of Hallohesh...he and his daughters made repairs: everyone who could, helped in the repairs!**

Not just the leaders worked. Someone has well described some churches in a little jingle that says:

*The pastor is late,  
He's forgotten the date.  
And what will the people do then,  
Poor things!  
They'll sit in the pew,  
With nothing to do,  
And sing a collection of hymns.  
Poor things!*

**4. Builders of the Valley Gate 3:13**

This gate plus the fifteen hundred feet stretching eastward was repaired by Hanun and the people of Zanoah (a town thirty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem).

Hanun, a son of Zalaph, also assisted in the northeast portion (verse 30). Like another man named Meshullam (verse 4 and 30), he is a type of those who have two talents or spiritual gifts, thus being enabled to serve the Lord in more than one capacity.

**5. The Dung Gate (Refuse Gate) 3:14**

The Hinnom valley was located just south of Jerusalem. It was a place used as a kind of garbage dump and for the burning of rubbish. Through the Refuse Gate all sorts of trash and garbage moved out of the city. It was rebuilt

by Malchijah, who might well have preferred to work on one of the more "glamorous" gates, but there has always been a need for some of God's people to engage in the menial, the simple, the less prestigious jobs. There will be rewards for these, too, provided love for the Lord is the motive.

#### **6. The Gate of the Fountain 3:15-25**

Verse 15 mentions *the King's Garden*; Spurgeon has a beautiful sermon where he speaks of six different gardens of the King: Eden, Gethsemane, the Garden Tomb, the human heart, the church as a whole, and the garden of Paradise in heaven.

The southeastern portion of the wall is treated with more detail than any other similar section. A number of recognizable landmarks are recorded, including the pool of Shelah (Siloam), the king's garden, and a particular flight of stairs leading to the palace of David (verse 15).

Other specific points, not all of them clearly understood, are mentioned in verses 16, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24 and 25. Of special interest also is the reference to Baruch, who is said to have labored "carefully (or zealously)" (verse 20). No doubt he was a real example to others, one of those persons who sets the pace, exhibiting a real joy and perseverance to his assigned task.

#### **7. Builders near the Water Gate 3:26-27**

In the Eastern wall facing the valley of Kidron and the Mount of Olives, probably the one used by the water carriers entering the city, was the Water Gate. The name Ophel (probably meaning "filling," of a filled in area) was given to a section of Jerusalem just south of the temple area, adjacent to this gate; it was the place where the Nethinim, or temple servants, lived. Presumably they repaired at this point, while another group of Tekoites (see verse 5) worked nearby. Evidently they weren't satisfied with the significant work they had done before - they went on to do even more work! They were not going to let the bad example of their nobles who did no work (3:5) keep them from working above and beyond the call of duty.

#### **8. Builders near the Horse Gate 3:28-30**

*Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah was the keeper of the East Gate*; but apparently that gate was fine - so he pitched in and helped at the *Horse Gate*. His unselfishness is a great example!

*Meshullam the son of Berechiah made repairs in front of his dwelling: dwelling is actually "chamber" - it refers to a singular room.* Meshullam had only one small room, yet he was devoted to God and to the work of rebuilding the walls.

#### **9. The East Gate 3:29-30**

It is not possible to know for certain if this gate was another one in the city's wall or if the reference is to the gate into the temple area, the same gate called "Beautiful" in Acts 3:2. The first seems the more probable.

#### **10. The Inspection Gate or the Miphkad Gate 3:31-32**

Verse 31 mentions *"the house of the temple servants"* (Nethinim). Since these individuals lived farther south in Ophel, this appears to be a reference to another team of them assigned to work here. Merchants no doubt had their places of business here, adjacent to the temple, hence the reference to them (verse 31). The location of this gate has never been found, but it was obviously beyond the Horse Gate. Mention of the Sheep Gate (verse 32) completes the survey of the refurbishing of the walls around the city.

## B. Suggested Meanings of the Names of the Gates

*A thoughtful study of the names associated with these gates will show that they are all related to important aspects of the Christian life. There might even be some significance in the sequence in which they are mentioned. It is inappropriate to over-spiritualize Bible passages, but a few suggestions are here included for the thoughtful student.*

Sheep - Jesus was the Lamb of God, Who died for our sins (John 1:29).

Fish - Jesus called men to come after Him and become fishers of men (Mark 1:17). Moreover, the fish was an early sign of Christianity.

Old - to receive Jesus Christ into one's life is to become new, seeing that all old things pass away (II Corinthians 5:17; see also Mark 2:21-22 and Ephesians 4:22).

Valley - in David's most famous psalm there is the reassurance of the Lord's presence with His own when they are in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4).

Refuse - Paul's new life in Christ was so wonderful that all merely human competence and reputation and goals were of no value to him (Philippians 3:8). Do you and I share this same view? Do we live like it?

Fountain - this word is not only associated with the gift of eternal life (Revelation 21:6), but also of the abundance of that life (Deuteronomy 8:7-10).

Water - water is also used both as a symbol of salvation (Isaiah 55:1 and John 4:7-13 and of an overflow of blessing out of the Christian life to others (John 7:38-39).

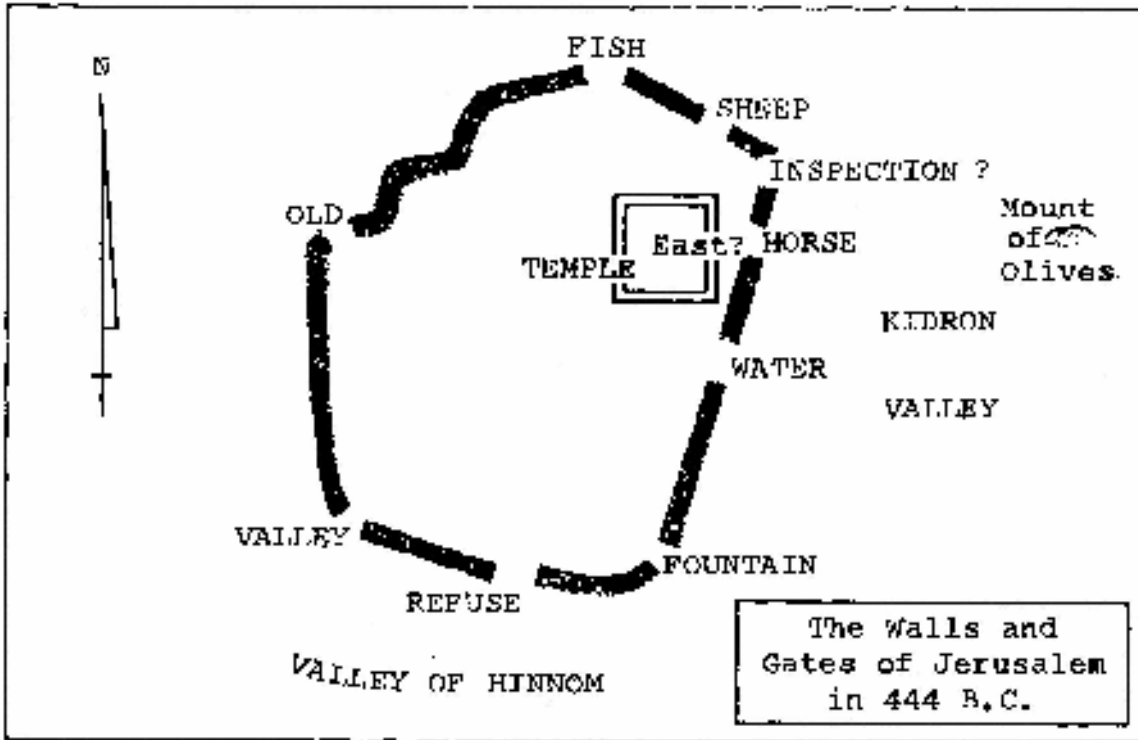
Horse - this animal is usually associated with war and, hence, with wrath and judgment (Revelation 19:11-12).

East - in that same future associated with the book of Revelation, the glory of the Lord will return to His temple from the east, as prophesied in Ezekiel 43:2, 4.

Inspection - this word relates to "judgment" and is a reminder of the several future inspections which are to come (II Corinthians 5:10, Revelation 14:7, II Peter 2:4).

- Dr. Robert Stevens, "Nehemiah", Church Bible Studies

Two additional gates, perhaps not in need of repair, are mentioned in Nehemiah 12:39, thus making a total of twelve gates in the city of Jerusalem. This is striking when one remembers that the New Jerusalem associated with the return of Jesus is to have twelve gates (Revelation 21:12)!



## II. THE REPUDIATION OF ATTACKS FROM WITHOUT NEHEMIAH 4:1-23

### A. Attack by Ridicule Nehemiah 4:1-6

#### 1. The attack 4:1-3

##### a. The leader of the opposition: Sanballat

Sanballat, already described as one who laughed at the plan of Nehemiah, scorning and despising his efforts (Nehemiah 2:10, 19), was at one time governor of the country called Samaria, lying adjacent to Judah on the north. A great rivalry between the two developed which reached intensity in the time of Zerubbabel. When the Samaritans asked if they might help rebuild the temple, they had been refused, and they then began a policy of weakening the builders (Ezra 4:1-6). Seventy years later, the Samaritan governor undertook a similar effort to prevent work on the walls.

Sanballat was probably a Jew, rather than a follower of the confusing amalgamation of religions found in Samaria. Sanballat proved he was not truly a Jew inwardly (see Romans 2:28-29) by his opposition to the building program. He was angry, indignant, and he mocked the Jews (verse 1). Moreover, he held them up to ridicule before his own people. *"What are these weaklings trying to do? Are they going to strengthen themselves? What good does it do to engage in sacrifices? Do they think that God will help them? The project is so big they cannot possibly finish it!"* And Sanballat's crony, Tobiah the Ammonite, chimed in with his sarcasm, *"Even what they do accomplish will be so flimsy that a fox, climbing the wall, will knock it down!"*

##### b. The criticism

In Chuck Swindoll's book on Nehemiah he says:

*I became discouraged because of criticism in my ministry.*

*My optimism eroded as a lengthy chain of events led me into the pits. Knowing of my need for encouragement, my wife searched for a way to lift my spirits, and she found a hand-lettered statement written by a statesman I've always admired. She used it to make a wooden plaque, and gave it to me as a gift. What an encouragement that was! I often read it when opposition abounds and my shoulders start to droop, when I'm knocked down and feel like I'm about to be knocked out. It reads like this, now you mark this, and I'll give you a copy of this if you want it - I quote: 'It is not the critic that counts, not the man who points out how the strongman stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done even better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly'. Now this is what really impressed me: 'Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though chequered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy or suffer much because they live in the grey twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat'.  
–Charles Swindoll, Hand Me Another Brick*

## **2. The defense 4:4-6**

Nehemiah took the problem to God (vs. 4-5). The Samaritans had ridiculed God and His people and he asked that their reproach be turned on themselves. Such a prayer, based as it was on the Old Testament law of retaliation (Exodus 21:23-36), is reminiscent of certain of David's prayers when he asked God to deal with his enemies. (Psalms 52, 58, 59, 69, 109 and 140 – these are called the “imprecatory Psalms”).

Some believe that even today we can ask God to so deal with His enemies. However, with the dawning of a new age and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian era, believers are enabled to love their enemies, to pray for them, and to return blessing for cursing (Matthew 5:38-45).

## **B. Attack by War Nehemiah 4:7-9**

When the sarcasm and ridicule made no impression on the Jerusalem builders, the leaders of the opposition turned to another device: an active conspiracy, actually planning with certain allies - Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites - to end the work by force (verses 7-8).

Nehemiah responded to this, first, by prayer, and, second, by a series of very practical measures beginning with the setting of a twenty-four-hour watch (verse 9).

God was allowing the attack to go on, when He could have instantly swept it away - but He allowed it to continue because He was delighted that His people were drawing closer to Him, with a deeper trust than ever before. God was doing His perfect work both in building the walls and His people.

## **C. Attack by Discouragement Nehemiah 4:10-23**

## 1. The attack 4:10-12

Discouragement is such a powerful weapon because it is somewhat the opposite of faith. Where faith believes God and His love and promises, discouragement looks for and believes the worst - and tends to pretty much forget about who God is and what He has promised to do.

### a. The size of the task 4:10

Judah, the "lion" begins to whine first. The strength of the laborers is failing: the half-way point (mentioned in 4:6) is a dangerous place; much remains to be done, but fatigue sets in because much has been done.

The work of rebuilding the walls was not only construction, but cleaning and hauling away the rubbish. The ruins of the walls, laying in waste for one hundred years, had become a collecting point for all kinds of rubbish.

Clearing away the rubbish was not an option - it had to be done so the walls could be rebuilt upon their foundations. If they didn't do this, the walls wouldn't stand at all!

### b. The threats 4:11

Verse ten may have reflected the lowest point in the spirits of those doing the work; things are already in a bad state, and the discouraged workers feel like giving up. Now, the enemy plans its raid on the workers, to crush those rebuilding the walls.

It is doubtful these enemies knew exactly how discouraged the people of God were; but certainly, the counsels of spiritual darkness in high places knew, and the attack was planned.

### c. The compromise 4:12

## 2. The defense 4:13-23

After setting the watch as a warning against any Samaritan attack; Nehemiah also took other precautions. When the Jews in outlying towns feared attacks upon their homes (verse 12, Berkeley and Revised Standard Version), Nehemiah apparently brought them to Jerusalem and placed them in strategic places in the line of defense.

Further strategy is clear from the remainder of the chapter.

- a. **He divided his personal servants into two groups, one laboring on the wall and the other stationed as an armed guard (verse 16a).**
- b. **The rulers stood behind the people, probably ready to lead in case of attack (verse 16b).**
- c. **Some who worked on the walls or carried supplies kept a weapon in one hand (verse 17).**
- d. **Others labored with both hands, but had their swords buckled on and handy (verse 18a).**
- e. **Nehemiah stationed the trumpeter near him at all times, prepared to sound the alarm to indicate the place of attack (verses 18b-20).**
- f. **There was an orderly work schedule (verses 21-22).**

Nehemiah and those closest to him in the program of rebuilding and defense were so intent on their work that they slept "with their boots on," removing their clothing only to bathe (verse 23).

In verses 16-18 - The sword and the trowel. Some of the servants did the work of defending; some did the work of building. The workers had a sword at their side and a trowel in their hands to get the work done! The kingdom of God is built with both a sword and a trowel, a sword to come against every spiritual force of wickedness in high places, and a trowel to do

the precious work of building up the people of God.

### III. REPUDIATION OF ATTACKS FROM WITHIN NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

#### A. The Attack- Selfishness Nehemiah 5:1-8

Since the people were constantly engaged during this period in working on the walls and gates, they of necessity had to borrow money and food from certain Jews, the "loan-sharks" of their day. This involved mortgaging lands, vineyards, and houses. The problem was complicated by a recent drought (verse 3). Besides providing food for themselves and their families, there were also taxes to pay! And to meet all these obligations, some were forced to sell their own children into debt servitude or outright slavery (verses 4-5).

The nobles and the rulers" were exacting usury of excessive interest charges on loans (verse 7). Moreover, many Jews, apparently slaves to surrounding peoples in earlier days, had recently been bought back; now, the practice of usury was reversing the process once again (verse 8)!

#### B. The Defense Nehemiah 5:6-19

##### 1. The accusation 5:6-9

Nehemiah confronts them and accuses them.

##### 2. The restoration 5:10-13

The usurers were agreeable to the governor's demands expressed in verse 11: they restore the mortgaged property, end the interest rate, which appears to have been 1% per month on the unpaid balance. To make sure that the reforms continued, Nehemiah called on the priests to take note of the promise of the money lenders (verse 12b). Also, in a dramatic gesture, he "*shook out the fold of my garment,*" thus pronouncing a curse on anyone who broke the agreement (verse 13). "*And all the assembly said, 'Amen.' And they praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise.*"

##### 3. The example 5:14-19

When it came to putting the work of God ahead of his own personal interest, Nehemiah was first in line. He certainly had the right to tax the people for his support (others had done it before him), but he doesn't take that right because it wouldn't help the work of God.

Nehemiah not only did not take when he could have; he gave when he did not have to. He received a lot of food from the king's provisions, which he could have sold if he did not want - but he gave them away, feeding as many as 150 people regularly! He could have taken more (the governor's provisions), but he didn't. So, Nehemiah is an example for what he did not take, and for what he did not keep. Nehemiah, in his own life, is living the way he told the nobles and rulers to live - to not take personal advantage of another's need. He did what every godly leader must do: never expect more of his followers than he expects of himself.

Nehemiah prays, asking God to remember his good deeds. Is Nehemiah wrong for saying all the good things he did? Jesus clearly taught us that our good works must not be done to show others how spiritual we are. But in his prayer, Nehemiah is not looking for praise from man - but from God. In fact, Nehemiah probably originally intended that no one else see all or part of this book, because it is written as a diary.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Read the notes on Lesson 3. What did you find interesting or helpful about
  - (a) the process of rebuilding the walls and gates.
  
  - (b) the leadership of Nehemiah?
  
2. Study Nehemiah 6, Genesis 3:1-5, Matthew 4:1-11, II Corinthians 11:13-15, and I Peter 5:8-9. In what ways do Nehemiah's enemies remind you of the opposition of Satan to the work of God?
  
3. (a) What did the adversaries threaten to do if Nehemiah did not stop building and meet with them?
  - (b) Why would Nehemiah not go into the temple with Shemaiah? (6:10-13)
  
4. What relationship do you see between Nehemiah 4:6, 9, 20, and 6:15?
  
5. What does the Bible say about fear in 2 Timothy 1:7 and 1 John 4:18?
  
6. (a) Skim the census list in Nehemiah 7:8-73 and jot down any names which are familiar, together with what you may recall about each person or place.
  - (b) Compare the census list with Ezra 2. How similar do they appear to be?
  
7. How does Nehemiah minimize the threat to the city in 7:1-3?
  
8. Memorize 2 Timothy 1:7.