

# Nehemiah 3

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[ 0 : 00 ] And open your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 3. And as you can imagine it's not an easy chapter to preach on, but actually it's one of the most important chapters in the book.

And it's a detailed account of how Nehemiah achieved the impossible. It tells us how Nehemiah in the space of 52 days rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

And he did it without mechanical shovels, did it without diggers, heavy earth moving vehicles. He did it while constantly harassed by opposition, how he was beset by setbacks.

How did he do it? Well actually this chapter tells us. And it's quite easy to analyse. If you look at a commentary you can see a kind of diagram of the seven gates in the city that go in a kind of counterclockwise direction.

And it begins with the sheep gate on the north side of the city. It goes to the temple enclosure and then eventually if you go to verse 32 it comes back to the sheep gate.

[ 1 : 06 ] And so what can we learn from a chapter like this? Three things. First thing I want us to see is I want you to see Nehemiah's brilliant strategy. It's Nehemiah's brilliant strategy.

It's really important in any work isn't it? Especially God's work to know where to begin. And so notice how Nehemiah begins the work and notice carefully how the words change from verses 1, 2 and 3 to verse 4 onwards.

So in verses 1 and 2 and 3 you'll notice it uses the word built. They built the wall. And they built, they built, they built.

But from verse 4 onwards there's a change from the word built to repair. And I think that's significant.

In the opening three verses he talks about building the wall. But then from the end of the chapter he talks about making repairs. And it means of course this doesn't it?

[ 2 : 09 ] It means that Nehemiah began where the damage was most extensive. It means that he began where the wall was totally broken down. Where it needed not just repairs but it needed totally rebuilding.

And the northern city had been devastated by the Babylonians. You might remember, if you know your Bible, Jeremiah, he gave a vivid prophecy. He gave a prophecy where he talked about this picture of a boiling cauldron tilted from the north.

And it poured its contents over the people. Well that prophecy came true. And when the Babylonians attacked the city it was from the north, from the sheep gate.

And the fish gate and the damage was most extensive. And so that's where he begins his work. What is the point of greatest need? Well that's where we must begin in God's work.

You may be familiar with Martin Luther's quotation from his day. And the fight he was involved in. There's doubt whether Luther actually said it. But it's a good quote so we'll use it. And yesterday was Reformation Day.

[ 3 : 18 ] And he talked about that mighty work of God. And he said this. To be fighting manfully on every front. Except where the battle is raging. Is cowardice. To be fighting manfully on every front.

Apart from where the battle is raging. Is cowardice. And we need to be where the fighting is. I used to be a little bit like that on the rugby pitch. I would run around the rugby pitch manfully.

But I would be running around vigorously. Apart from where the action was. So if you looked on you'd think. Oh he's busy isn't he? And we can be like that in the Christian church. We can be very active.

Rushing around. Looking very impressive. And yet not be. Where the work needs to be done. Where the fight is. Where the action is. Where it's costly. In Luther's day.

The issue was. Wasn't it? Getting right with God. Justification by faith. Where is the battle today? It seemed to me that the battle today.

[ 4 : 16 ] Is at the moment. Where what are the roles of church and state? What can the state legitimately ask? The other area is that of ethics isn't it?

Of sexual ethics. Where the state and our culture. Says here is an acceptable way of believing. And if you step outside of that kind of system. You're a pariah.

And so we need to fight. Where the fighting is. Where the action is. Where great aren't we? Are fighting yesterday's battles.

And so it's true in the wider scene. But it's also true in congregations like ours. It's a matter of finding out. Where are our priorities? Learning to put first things first. Church life.

There's always a lot of things to be done. And we need to learn to put first things first. Somebody has written. Haven't they? About the tyranny of the urgent. That we never get to do what actually needs to be done.

[ 5 : 18 ] Because our time is taken up with all sorts of things. Crying out for our immediate attention. And so what is necessary doesn't actually get done. Because the urgent is always crying out for attention.

And so one of the jobs of church leaders is to work out what is urgent and what is necessary. There's all the need to repair.

And there are three. Lots needs to be done. And he needs to make a decision on where to begin.

What needs doing and where does he start. And we can apply it to our own lives, can't we?

I think in our culture we are reluctant to take hard looks at ourselves. To examine ourselves.

We've got that fear of being morbid and introspective. And there's no doubt that is a danger. But it is a good thing. We'll come to the Lord's table. Chris will read.

[ 6 : 19 ] Let a man or a woman examine himself before he comes to the Lord's table. To give yourself a good hard look. To know where you're most vulnerable in your Christian life.

To know what is your besetting sin because of your personality. What temperamentally are you most vulnerable to? What's your greatest risk? Remember the story of Mary and Martha in the New Testament.

And you've got this story of Mary and Martha this activist. That kind of personality. And she's in danger at that point, isn't it?

She's busy around. And you remember what Jesus says to her. Jesus says, Martha you're worried and you're troubled about many things. But one thing is needful. One thing.

Start there. And so I think the first thing to learn from Nehemiah is where he begins. Notice something else. Nehemiah gave a lot of thought how he would divide up the work.

[ 7 : 22 ] The wall that's described here is about 2.5 miles long. They built and repaired the wall 2.5 miles long in about two months.

And you can't do that on your own. You can only do that by dividing the work up. Nehemiah, he subdivides it into about 40 manageable units.

And of course, if you don't do that, the work just won't happen. You'll be defeated. You'll be frightened by it. I think that's partly what Jesus meant, isn't it, in the Sermon on the Mount?

Where he says, sufficient is the day for the trouble thereof. Take it a day at a time. That's what he's saying. Break it up into manageable units.

Otherwise, it will overwhelm you. It will frighten you and it won't get done. A story I'm told of Carl Henry. Carl Henry was an American theologian.

[ 8 : 24 ] And he was invited to speak in a northwestern university in America to give lectures on Christianity. And when the day came, he traveled to the university. The man who invited him to come turned up to find that they were the only ones there.

They were the only ones there. The man who'd invited Carl Henry to speak at the university, he'd done everything else apart from tell people that there was a meeting going on.

He'd done everything else apart from advertising the meeting. The guy who'd chosen a theme, he'd contacted the speaker, he'd picked a date, he'd booked a room. But he'd forgotten to advertise the meeting. Typical student.

That kind of thing happens, doesn't it, when you try to do everything yourself. That's not the way God's work gets done. That's not the way Nehemiah approaches the work on the wall. He doesn't do it himself.

He could never have done it. He sits down, he subdivides it, he subcontracts it. So if you look at the chapter, no part of the wall is uncovered. There are no gaps.

[ 9 : 31 ] So there's a recurring theme, isn't there? Did you pick it up? Next to him. Next to them. Next to them. Next to them. That phrase keeps coming up. The whole work is covered.

Because Nehemiah has the foresight to break the work down into manageable units. Look at the way he does that. There's some interesting details here. How does he allocate the different jobs to be done?

And he obviously knows his workforce. He knows each person or group of people. What's best? Let me just illustrate that. Notice four times that we're told he repaired the wall against his house.

Let me show you that. Look at verse 10. So, Jediah, the son of Harumath, repaired opposite his house. And look at verse 23.

And after them, Benjamin and Hashem repaired opposite their house. And then verse 29. Then Zedot, the son of Imer, repaired opposite his own house.

[ 10 : 33 ] And then verse 30. Meshulam, the son of Barakai, repaired opposite his chamber, opposite his house.

That's common sense, isn't it? No one likes commuting to work. One of the perks of lockdown. Think of the time saved and the energy saved. Nehemiah doesn't want these people to commute from one end of Jerusalem to the other.

To go home for lunch. So he sets them to work outside their front doors. It's good management. But it's also good psychology. Remember, they're doing this work under great pressure.

There's great opposition to what they're doing. And you imagine, don't you, in the event of an attack, what is the guy's concern going to be? It would naturally be for his family.

And his mind wouldn't be on his job. And so Nehemiah arranges for every man to work outside his front door. If that's possible. And of course, a person would be certainly willing, wouldn't they, to build strong walls where their own house needed protecting.

[ 11 : 40 ] But there is, I think, a spiritual principle here. Nehemiah was a brilliant leader, a strategist, a brilliant planner. But I do think there's a spiritual principle that comes out here. And that is where every real work of God begins.

And that is at home. We see that principle, don't we, particularly in the pastoral epistles when it talks about leaders in God's church. It says in 1 Timothy 3, Then Paul goes on and he says, If a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?

That's where you begin. So before the doors open to a wider service, that's where you have to begin, behind your front door. That's called strategy.

For his work in the world, that's called strategy for his church. A church is never stronger than its homes, than its families. And if God is going to revive the work and rebuild and restore the work here, or anywhere for that matter, it will always begin in the home.

A church like ours will only be as strong as the homes. You can have men or women, they can be really prominent in Christian service and active, but their home is a mess.

[ 13 : 06 ] There's a spiritual principle here. God first calls us tonight to begin with our own homes. So much could be said. I'm trying to bring out the strategy of this man.

He was a brilliant strategist who knew what he was doing. So the second thing we see is we see this spectacular success. Of Nehemiah. His brilliant strategy.

And secondly, his spectacular success. He manages to marshal, doesn't he, the entire population of Jerusalem. He manages to motivate just about everybody.

And he mobilizes just about everyone except verse 5. And there's always an exception. Look at verse 5. You've got quite a bit of rhythm.

Repaired, repaired, repaired, repaired, repaired. And next to them, the Tekoites. Repaired. But their nobles would not stoop to serve their lord. They stick out like a sore thumb, don't they, in the chapter.

[ 14 : 04 ] And they are the only ones. These Tekoan noblemen. They probably thought it was beneath them to be involved in such work. Some commentators suggest that they had sympathy with Sambalat and Tobiah and company.

And whatever the reason, these men wouldn't and didn't get involved in the work that was going on. They refused to put their shoulders to the work of the Lord. They refused to put their shoulders to the work of the Lord. As you read the chapter, there's remarkable unity.

Unity. There's remarkable unanimity amongst the people apart from these men. And that is sobering, isn't it? Just think about that for a moment. At a time when such a work of God was being done.

It was a real work of God. We can see it, can't we? We read about it in our Bibles. And we can see that something very significant is happening. And at a time when such a work is being done.

To refuse to be involved. It's often been like that in the history of the church. We're reading as a family at the moment this magnificent book by Trial and Triumph. And I don't know how we got it.

[15:16] I think the Rays recommended it to us. It's a really great book. It costs a fortune to get on Amazon. Otherwise we'd get some. But there's a chapter on Jonathan Edwards. Jonathan Edwards is a great kind of theologian.

But he saw, revivably saw a remarkable work of God. But listen to this. Nightly in the town, neighbours gathered for prayer and Bible reading. Edwards said it was never so full of love nor joy. It was a time of joy in families because of the Lord's salvation. Parents rejoiced over their children as newborn. And husbands over wives and wives over husbands. In the space of six months, over 300 people found forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

The revival spread to several other towns in Massachusetts and Connecticut. It was the dawning of the great awakening. But many people in New England stood firmly against the revival.

Some ministers condemned it from their pulpits. Critics complained that Jonathan Edwards was stirring up emotions. This is not a true work of God. They said. A refusal to get involved in what God is doing.

[16:26] In a day of opportunity where God is so obviously at work. When God's people in Nehemiah chapter 3 are coming together in an unprecedented way.

From such a variety of different backgrounds. And as you read through the chapter, it is magnificent. There's all sorts of people here. It's one of the glories always of the Christian church.

That you find all sorts of people that you would never find together under the same roof anywhere else. Believe it or not, if I wasn't a Christian, I wouldn't want to be with you lot. Alright?

And you wouldn't want to be with me. And we work together with one aim and with one purpose.

And so who do you find in Nehemiah 3?

You find the priests. You find the farmers. You find the goldsmiths. You find the coppers. You find businessmen. You find town councillors. You find the chemists. They're all here in this chapter.

Tradesmen.

[17:21] Even trades unionists. People who belong to various guilds. The housewives are here. The women of the city. The daughters of Jerusalem. And it's no mean feat is it to get a group of people like that, a variety of people like that together.

Pulling together like that. And so what a terrible thing it is when all of God's people seem to be of one mind and one purpose. And for you to distance yourself from what God is doing.

To have no part in the rebuilding of the walls. Next to them the tochoites repaired but their nobles would not stoop. To serve the Lord.

What's the point of living if you can't do something useful with your life? Perhaps they thought it seems from the language used they thought the work was beneath them. But whatever the reason they're not involved.

So when I talk about Nehemiah's spectacular success there is an exception. They are the exception. But just notice verse 27.

[18:30] Verse 27. The tochoites. They reappear don't they? The tochoites nobles. The leaders. They refuse but in verse 27 you've got to love them.

The tochoites themselves repaired another section. In addition to the work they'd already been consigned there's something extra. It's almost as if they want to make up for their nobles. For their leaders. They feel honour bound to make up for the lack of service of their leaders.

And that attitude is widespread in the work. They're not the only ones putting in extra time. Look at verse 11. It's there isn't it? In verse 19 and 21 and 24 and 27.

You find again in those verses in 11, 19, 21, 24 and 27. They repaired another part. Another part. And there were many others who did additional pieces of work on top of their primary commitment. There was no attitude. Well we've done our bit. Let others do theirs. You see the noblemen and these takawai noblemen they stick out like a sore thumb.

[19:44] They're the exception. And so it's hard work isn't it? Hard, hard work.

And the work of God's service is hard work. The work of God's church is hard work. John White. He's got some very, very good books. He's got a funny little book on Nehemiah called Excellence in Leadership. Some of it I don't really agree with. But some of it is brilliant. But it's worth reading for this little phrase.

This helped me so much. He says this. Now while you can work too much. It is not true that you can emphasize work too much. And here's the passage that struck me.

Work does not produce nervous breakdowns. Despite what anyone may have told you. To the contrary. He's a psychologist. Work as hard as you like. And as long as you like.

[ 20 : 44 ] If you're in normal health. You come to little harm. Especially if your labor is in the Lord. Why? And here's the genius. Because it's tension that kills not work. It's getting caught in the Christian rat race that does the damage.

It is the desperate fight to keep up a front with Christian friends or with the Christian public. To appear smilingly spiritual. And produce spiritually when you know all the while that your true inner life does not measure up to your exterior image.

Sometimes we work too much because the work is essential. Not because the work is essential. But because we're driven by fear rather than sustained by faith. But it struck me, doesn't it? I'm in an age where lots of my minister's friends are kind of struggling in lots of ways.

And it's not overwork. It's not having to preach a certain amount of servants. That isn't the issue. It's tension. It's getting caught in the Christian rat race.

It's being driven rather than drawn. But if your labor is in the Lord, you can work as hard as you like.

[ 21 : 54 ] I love that. And not come to any harm. Psalm 127 is so helpful, isn't it? It's also puzzling. Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.

That says, isn't it, you and I can work as hard as we like until we're blue in the face. But unless the Lord builds the house, we labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

It's vain for you to rise up early. Vain for you to stay up late. You can burn the midnight oil. But unless God is in it. And then he says this wonderful, wonderful verse. Psalm 127 verse 2.

He says, for so he gives his beloved sleep. It's a lovely demonstration of that, isn't it? On the boat in the lake, the wind is howling.

The rain is lashing down. The wind and the waves crash down on the lake. And Jesus is fast asleep like a little baby. Because he gives his beloved sleep.

[ 22 : 55 ] And you only sleep like that when your dog tired. And when you've worked so hard, you're exhausted. And they couldn't wake him up. The storm couldn't wake him. They had to shake him to wake him fast asleep.

For Nehemiah, it's no mean measure of Nehemiah's success that he can get so many people from so many different backgrounds with just one exception. He's got all the people.

Look at verse 14, for example. Some of them have now done this kind of work. Verse 14. Malkijah, the son of Rahab, the ruler of the district of Beth-harachem, repairs the dung gate.

He rebuilt it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars. He's consigned to the toilet gate, the refuse gate. He did it. It wasn't beneath him. And so they work together.

There are people on this wall who didn't even live in Jerusalem. Man of Jericho, we're told in one verse. There's a list of other villages quite a distance from Jerusalem. And they work on the wall. There's no parochialism.

[ 24 : 00 ] And so they all work together. Impressive variety of people, shoulder to shoulder, next to each other. Each one doing his own bit without interfering in his neighbor's work. Just getting on with what they've been asked to do.

Using their gifts and their abilities to the full. Without hankering after someone else's. Without wishing they were doing someone else's work. And that's how the work of God gets done. Just notice, before we move on to the last point.

Just notice how the work was done. There's a little detail. Every verb is perfect tense. I don't know whether you saw that. They built. They repaired.

That just means they completed the task. There was a sign to them that there were no gaps. And the work was finished in just over two months. It was a superhuman effort. And they did it without power tools.

And without diggers. It's a brilliant strategy. Lastly, and very quickly. Brilliant strategy. Spectacular success. And Nehemiah is conspicuous by his absence.

[ 25 : 08 ] Do you notice that? What do you mean? What am I talking about? I've been talking about Nehemiah all night. But he's not mentioned in the chapter. You say, but what about verse 16?

There's a Nehemiah there. But he's another Nehemiah, isn't he? In verse 16, that Nehemiah is the son of Asbuk, whoever that is. That's another Nehemiah.

Our Nehemiah was the son of Amhakaliah. Dozens and dozens of names, but no Nehemiah. Of course he was there.

Who else do you think compiled the report? He recognized what was going on. No doubt he went and looked at the walls regularly and expressed his appreciation for the work they were doing. That motivates them, doesn't it? And helps them to keep on with the work. And he records the whole list of the names and the work that have been done. He mentions all these people, but he doesn't mention himself.

[ 26 : 13 ] What a contrast. What a contrast to 144 years earlier. To a man named Nebuchadnezzar.

Who 144 years ago, from Nehemiah's day, said, Is this not Babylon? Is this not Babylon?

That I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty. And God judged Nebuchadnezzar for his arrogance.

And Nebuchadnezzar grasped for glory for himself and he was judged in the most frightening way. But Nehemiah gives credit to others. And he gives glory to God.

Just look, lastly, as we finish at chapter 6 and verse 16. For Nehemiah says, The work that they had done, when all their enemies heard about it, all the nations around us were afraid and felt greatly in their own esteem.

[ 27 : 26 ] For they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. It was God's doing.

And it was marvellous in our eyes. Not unto us, O Lord. Not unto us. But unto your name give glory. Let's pray.

Amen.