

## “They Consecrated It”

### The Thirteen in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

*Texts: Nehemiah 3:1-12; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31*

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**D**etails, details, details. Why would Nehemiah take us on a counter-clockwise, brick by brick, tour of Jerusalem’s walls and gates—beginning at the northeastern corner of the city? Why does he mention so many of the workers, by name, by family, and by town. Why does he mention so many sections of the wall—some of which remain unknown to us today? Why would the Holy Spirit breathe forth God’s inerrant word through Nehemiah, and choose to include so many seemingly mundane details? We will attempt to answer these questions by looking first at Nehemiah’s historical account, and then to that to which the earthly city of Jerusalem points, the spiritual temple of God (the church) and ultimately to the New Jerusalem.

We resume our series on Nehemiah as we come to what one commentator has described as one of the “least lively and stirring of the narratives of the Old Testament.”<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah 3 contains 32 verses of difficult to pronounce Hebrew names, as well as seemingly obscure details about the gates and walls of Jerusalem which archaeologists and biblical scholars love (lots of fodder here for Ph.D. dissertations), but which most Bible readers very likely skip over without bothering to read. There is a reason why I asked that only twelve verses be included for our Old Testament lesson even though we’ll be looking at the entire chapter—imagine making someone read this entire chapter out loud. I’d venture a guess that many of you who have read through the Bible and/or Nehemiah have skipped this chapter—or just skimmed it. I’ll also venture to guess that no one here has memorized any of these verses, or ever claimed one of them as a life verse.

To understand why this chapter is here and why it is important, we will begin by looking at some of the details within the passage, before we consider the role which the passage plays in the big picture of redemptive history. It is easy to bog down in a list of foreign names and long-forgotten places and overlook the fact that it was not long before, that Nehemiah arrived in the city and surveyed the damage to the city’s walls and gates under the cover of darkness. No doubt, the dry as dust content of this chapter encourages many to allegorize this account, attempting to turn Nehemiah’s factual narrative of how the walls of the city were rebuilt into a metaphor about how Jerusalem’s fallen walls symbolize problems in our lives from which we must rebuild. To do this is to turn Nehemiah’s detailed report about former Jewish exiles rebuilding their capital city into a story about us—something Americans crave, but which circumvents the whole point of the passage—God has ordained that his city be rebuilt.

According to Nehemiah 2:16-18, the author eventually informed “*the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work, that “the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me.”* Their response was overwhelming. “*Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for the good work.*” In a short period of time, Nehemiah has performed an extraordinary feat—getting virtually the entire population of the city of Jerusalem organized and mobilized to begin a massive reconstruction project. This pretty remarkable in its own right, and explains the temptation to focus upon Nehemiah’s leadership skills (which are certainly apparent from the account) and not upon the bigger picture—the role the rebuilt Jerusalem and

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part 11).

temple will play in redemptive history, especially in regards to the coming Messiah.

The scale of what Nehemiah accomplishes becomes clear when we learn that he has managed to involve entire family units (families as mentioned here were more like clans and not the husband, wife, with their average of 2.5 children typical of American families), entire towns (from outlying areas) and even various tradesmen not usually associated with manual labor—a goldsmith and perfume-maker are mentioned in verse 8, a group of merchants are mentioned in verse 31, as well as various occupations and callings, such as priests (v.1, 28), Levities (v. 17), temple servants (v. 26), various district officials ( v. 9, 12, 15-17). There are forty-five distinct sections of the wall mentioned, as well as ten gates. This is an immense undertaking, given the number of people and amount of building material involved.

As we will see, there is only one group of slackers—whose mention in verse 5 is the only negative report in the whole account—which is a testament to the unanimity of the Jewish people,<sup>2</sup> at least for now. As we will see in the coming chapters there are still deep divisions among the people which will surface later on. But Nehemiah has pulled this massive project together in short order and everyone pitches in to work. The theme of Nehemiah 3 really could be summed up as “all hands on deck.”

There is a map of the city of Jerusalem in Nehemiah’s time included in your bulletin, and if you have an ESV Study Bible, there is a helpful drawing of the City of Jerusalem in Nehemiah’s time found on pages 828-829. Given the difficult nature of the passage, rather than go through it verse by verse, I’ll be skipping around throughout entire chapter. The first 12 verses which we read give an indication of sense of the whole—lots of Hebrew names and sections of the wall are recounted.

The account opens in chapter 3:1, with an important declaration. “*Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Tower of Hananel.*” This particular section of the wall is near the temple—the Sheep Gate was the gate through which the sacrificial animals were led into the temple. The city has been destroyed and rebuilt so many times since that although the Sheep Gate is a recognized landmark, the location of the two towers mentioned is completely unknown to us—although the direction and location of the wall has been confirmed by archaeological research.

It is not accidental that Nehemiah begins his account with the high priest, Eliashib, who was grandson of Jeshau (“Joshua,” the first high priest mentioned by Ezra, and the figure of Zechariah 3 whom Satan accuses before the Lord). As Nehemiah’s account unfolds, Nehemiah will have a dust-up with Eliashib’s son, who married one of Sanballat’s daughters (Nehemiah 13:28). The unity of the people on this occasion is real and important to the account. But there are all kinds of tensions which surface later.

As reported by Nehemiah, Eliashib the high priest takes the initiative, and together with the priests begins the work of “building” the gate and towers, not just rebuilding. This suggests that this especially vulnerable part of the city’s defensive wall next to the temple had been completely destroyed, not merely damaged.<sup>3</sup> Likely stone from this area was hauled off and used for construction elsewhere. This particular section of wall must be built from scratch to protect the temple area and Eliashib and the priests jump right in and get to work. If the high priest and the others were willing to do kind of difficult

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<sup>2</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 85-86.

<sup>3</sup> Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 204.

manual labor that which normally fell to others (i.e., paid laborers), the implication is that those with high office got to work first, setting an example for everyone else.

In verses 2-3 we read, “*And next to [Eliashib] the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built. The sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate. They laid its beams and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars.*” As we see throughout the account, some of these family names (like those here) were associated with the returning exiles in the list in Ezra 2. These people are among the descendants of the original exiles who returned to Jerusalem in 538 (80 years earlier). In verse 4, we read that “*next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz repaired. And next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, son of Meshezabel repaired. And next to them Zadok the son of Baana repaired.*”

The verb “to repair” (the *hiphil* of *chazaq*, literally to “make strong”), will dominate the rest of chapter, conveying the sense of the city’s inhabitants repairing what already existed, not building something new from scratch.<sup>4</sup> With the exception of section built by the high priest, the city’s existing walls which had been knocked down were rebuilt, precisely where they had stood previously, by using the same materials with which they were originally constructed. The point—for the most part, this is repair work (massive as it is) not new construction, hence the ESV, “repaired.”

In verse 5, we read of an interesting set of circumstances, which will reappear through the coming chapters. “*And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.*” As I mentioned, there is but one negative comment in the entire chapter, and here it is. The nobles of the city of Tekoa (which may have been in an area controlled by Geshem—our old friend “chunky”) may have resented Nehemiah’s appointment as governor and would not do any work which might benefit him. Or perhaps, as implied, these “nobles” thought it beneath them to do manual labor. Yet, according to verse 27, the rest of the people from this region did manage to complete two entire sections of the city’s wall. Meremoth (mentioned in verse 4), too was able to repair two sections (cf. v. 21). We also know from Nehemiah’s account throughout the balance of the chapter that many other people of high social standing joined in with the laborers to complete their work (see, for example, Nehemiah 3:9,12,15,19).

There are several other items of interest to be found in Nehemiah’s account. According to verse 12, “*Shallum the son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired, he and his daughters.*” Perhaps Shallum had no sons and so his daughters went to work, or the entire family contributed (but the sons are not mentioned). In verses 23, and then in 28-30 we read another interesting comment. “*After them Benjamin and Hasshub repaired opposite their house. After them Azariah the son of Maaseiah, son of Ananiah repaired beside his own house.*” And then “*above the Horse Gate the priests repaired, each one opposite his own house. After them Zadok the son of Immer repaired opposite his own house. After him Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, repaired. After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph repaired another section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah repaired opposite his chamber.*”

Notice that these particular people are said to make repairs in front of their own homes. For one thing, there is every reason to believe that people would do quality work if their own lives depended upon the rebuilt walls to protect them from marauding enemies attacking their exposed houses. Some have suggested that Nehemiah figured this would be a good way to motivate certain people—fear of an attack

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<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 87; Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part 11).

upon their own houses. As one commentator puts it, “personal interest can be quite a motivator.”<sup>5</sup>

In light of the repetitive details of this passage, what then ought we to conclude about the historical events as laid out in such detail by Nehemiah? First, those who did the work of rebuilding the city, were not foreign mercenaries nor paid laborers. These were the actual inhabitants of Jerusalem and the surrounding environs, and they come from every rank and social standing. They join together as one to rebuild the city of their fathers and the city of their God. At this point (the noble shirkers from Tekoa excepted), the people show remarkable unity in joining together to build forty-five sections of wall so quickly that as chapter 4 opens, Sanballat, a loud critic of the project, admits to being amazed at how rapidly the work is completed. “Will they finish in a day?” he complains (4:2).

It is also clear—although never explicitly stated—that Nehemiah did a remarkable job of organizing the people and then motivating them to join together to rebuild the walls for the common defense of the city. Not only was this necessary for their safety, the restoration of the city’s gates and function would go a long way to remove the sense of shame that had fallen on the city and its people because of Jerusalem’s poor state of repair. God’s city had become an object of ridicule by Gentile pagans—but no more. There is much to learn from Nehemiah’s efforts, but his leadership skills are not the point of the story. The more important and obvious point as Nehemiah himself tells us is that God’s hand was upon him to accomplish YHWH’s greater purposes.

It is YHWH, the great and awesome God, who turned the Persian king Artaxerxes’ heart to reverse his policy and then send Nehemiah to Jerusalem to rebuild. It was YHWH who gave his people this wonderful sense of unity, so that all pitched in to do the work of rebuilding. There are many internal differences which will surface in the following chapters, but in Nehemiah 3, the people of God work together for a common cause. Many of them are named, what they did is recorded in God’s word—the best commemoration for which anyone could hope. Their hard work led to that era in redemptive history known as “second temple” Judaism through which God prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah.

If it is wrong to turn this passage about the rebuilding of the city’s walls into an allegory about individual Christians rebuilding our fallen lives (just as these people rebuilt the fallen walls of Jerusalem), it is certainly not wrong to see in this account a vivid illustration of the importance of each individual member of Christ’s church serving the Lord as part of the body of Christ. The builders of the walls of Jerusalem were important enough to redemptive history to be named and identified. They helped rebuild that city which will play a large role in the future course of redemptive history. History, being the operative word—real people whose names are mentioned, who, for many days did the back-breaking work of rebuilding the city’s walls because God’s purposes required that it be done.

This is the city to which the Messiah will come on Palm Sunday to take his place on David’s throne, to be rejected by his people, and then suffer and die for our sins on Good Friday, only to rise again from the dead on Easter Sunday. At that very moment when Jesus dies, the veil in the temple which separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was torn from top to bottom, a powerful reminder that once Jesus has come and fulfilled all of the messianic promises of the Old Testament, the city of Jerusalem and its temple have fulfilled their respective roles in redemptive history. When Jesus dies upon the cross as the final sacrifice for sin, the Jerusalem temple is rendered “ichabod” by the death of Jesus—the glory of God, symbolic of God’s presence with his people, departs never to return. Both the city and the temple will be

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<sup>5</sup> Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part 11).

destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, the temple never to be rebuilt.

Yet, the role the earthly city of Jerusalem plays in redemptive history does not end with the coming of Jesus. This is because the earthly Jerusalem points us forward to a heavenly Jerusalem. This is why YHWH directed Nehemiah and the Jews to rebuild both the city and the temple. The New Testament writers never do appeal directly to Nehemiah's account when discussing the unity of the nature of the church as the "spiritual temple of God," but Nehemiah 3 certainly prefigures what can happen when the people of God serve their Lord together as one in the Holy Spirit.

The role Jerusalem and temple play in the New Testament can be seen in a couple of ways—not as ideal forms as in platonic philosophy, in which the spiritual and heavenly versions are more real than the historical buildings—but as historical pictures and events which point us to a heavenly and spiritual reality which we cannot yet see. This very point made in Hebrews 12:22 ff. (a passage with which I concluded last time), when the author writes, "*we have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest . . . [we] have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.*" The earthly city of Jerusalem points us to the heavenly Jerusalem, that city which Abraham described as "*the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God*" (Heb. 11:10). The historic and physical reality of the city of David and Solomon, which was the apple of God's eye, and which was rebuilt in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah, is a powerful reminder that there is a heavenly city of God which is every bit as real as the earthly city, but which we cannot yet see—although one day we will (heaven).

Nehemiah's account of the unity of God's people rebuilding the city of God provides Old Testament background for two prominent themes within the New Testament. The first of these is the great importance of unity within the body of Christ. Jesus' high priestly prayer certainly comes to mind in this regard, when, in John 17:20-21, our Lord prays, "*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*" When Christians are unified through our profession of faith and mutual forgiveness of one another the world certainly notices. In doing so we also remove one of the most common and difficult objections non-Christian raise against Christianity, "a divided church, full of hypocrites, who speak about love, but shoot their wounded."

The apostle Paul addresses unity within the body of Christ in two places. One is Ephesians 4:1-6, where Paul speaks of Christ's church as a place of unity created by the Holy Spirit. "*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*"

The remarkable but short-lived time of unity in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day reminds us that as sinful human beings, we will always struggle with self-centered behavior and division, until we die or Jesus returns, whichever comes first. But the fact that YHWH's hand accomplished it for a time in Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah points us ahead to the messianic age and beyond, when God will give his Holy Spirit to form the mystical body of Christ (the spiritual temple made of living stones) in which the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus and restrains our inherent sinfulness and works in us the humility,

patience, gentleness, and bond of peace described by Paul. Indeed, there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father who is Lord of all.

In another passage, 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 (our New Testament lesson), the theme of unity appears again and its also tied to the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul uses the body metaphor to make the point that *“just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.”* We get a foretaste of this when we see all the citizens of Jerusalem, regardless of their social status, or their job descriptions, each joining together to rebuild the city for their common good. This is so rare, that when we read such accounts we are struck by the fact that only the hand of God can bring such unity about, and even then, because of human sin, such unity is temporary.

When Paul addresses the church as the spiritual temple (and body of Christ) he ties unity directly to our union with Christ (each one is a member of his body) and to the work of the Holy Spirit to unite us together. He goes on to say in verse 25 of 1 Corinthians 12, *“but God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”* Division among the people of God is destructive in so many ways. We will not realize perfect unity until we enter the church in heaven, or until Jesus returns, but it is an ideal and something for which we must strive.

The other way Nehemiah’s account serves as important background to images used by the New Testament writers occurs in Revelation 21 with John’s vision of the New Jerusalem. The contrast between John’s vision and Nehemiah’s account is really quite striking. Beginning in verse 9, John writes,

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed—on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel’s measurement. The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by

day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

Quite a contrast between Nehemiah’s account of a rebuilt city with a Dung Gate, a Sheep’s Gate (for sacrificial animals) and stonewalls designed to keep out earthly invaders. Of those folks named by Nehemiah, we can say they “consecrated it” [their work] to the Lord for his glory. Nehemiah can recount a remarkable, albeit temporary unity. In light of a new and better covenant, the Apostle Paul can speak of the work of the Holy Spirit in creating that kind of unity in our midst, where everyone pitches in to do the work necessary to support ministry of the word—from making coffee, the taping sermons, to stapling bulletins, to the work of the church officers, missionaries, etc.

But if Nehemiah’s account points to unity, it also reminds us that the Jerusalem with which we have to do has no temple because the Lamb himself is there, and nothing unclean can ever enter it. The glory of God provides light. Even as the rebuilt earthly city of Jerusalem is necessary to God’s redemptive purposes, it points us ahead to a unity and glory which cannot be brought about by any human effort, but must be purchased by the saving work of Jesus, the one to whom the earthly Jerusalem and its temple always point us.