

Nehemiah: The Work Before Us

THE WALL WAS NOT THE POINT

Nehemiah 7:1–73

NOW WHAT?

Have you ever worked really hard to accomplish something, only to discover that finishing it was really just the beginning?

Maybe you've remodeled a house. For weeks—or months—your life revolves around the project. You're making decisions, buying materials, dealing with contractors, cleaning up dust, and wondering why every project seems to cost more and take longer than anybody originally promised.

And finally, one day, it's finished! The last piece of trim is installed. The tools are put away. The paint is dry. You stand back and admire what you've accomplished. And then somebody says, "Well, now we've got to keep it clean."

And suddenly you realize that finishing the project didn't eliminate responsibility. It just changed the kind of responsibility you have.

Or maybe you've watched one of those home renovation shows. They spend the entire episode tearing things apart, rebuilding everything, and overcoming some unexpected crisis that threatens to derail the project. And then comes the big reveal!

Everybody walks into the room. Somebody cries. Somebody says they can't believe it's the same house. It's wonderful. But have you noticed that the cameras always stop rolling right about then?

They never come back six months later to show you who's cleaning the kitchen, fixing the dripping faucet, or reminding the kids not to put their muddy shoes on the new carpet.

Because the exciting part is the renovation. The ordinary part is living there. And I think that's a pretty good way to understand what happens when we arrive at Nehemiah chapter 7.

For six chapters, we've been following one of the most remarkable construction projects in the Old Testament. Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem. He's inspected the broken walls. He's organized the workers. He's endured ridicule and threats. He's confronted injustice within the community. He's refused to be distracted or intimidated. And finally, at the end of chapter 6, the wall is finished. In fifty-two days!

After everything they've been through, you would expect chapter 7 to begin with some sort of tremendous celebration. A parade, like the Apple Harvest Celebration. Or maybe a special wall dedication ceremony. Nehemiah there with Ezra the priest with really large scissors cutting a ribbon.

Instead, Nehemiah starts appointing gatekeepers and establishing security procedures. And then he gives us a list of names that takes up most of the chapter. It's almost comically anticlimactic.

They finished the wall. And now somebody has to figure out who's going to lock the doors.

But there's something important happening here. Because Nehemiah understands something that we can easily forget. **Finishing the project isn't the same thing as fulfilling the purpose.** And that's what I want us to think about this morning. Because the wall was never the point.

THE WALL IS FINISHED. NOW WHAT? Look at the beginning of chapter 7. Nehemiah tells us that after the wall was rebuilt and the doors were installed, he appointed gatekeepers, singers, and Levites. Then he placed his brother Hanani and a man named Hananiah in charge of Jerusalem.

And I want you to notice how Hananiah is described in verse 2. He was "a faithful man who feared God more than most." That's an interesting qualification, isn't it? Nehemiah doesn't tell us how impressive Hananiah was. He doesn't mention his accomplishments or his popularity. He tells us that he was faithful and that he feared God. And that makes sense.

Because the people needed more than somebody who could organize a construction project. They needed people who could be trusted with the responsibilities that came afterward.

You see, rebuilding the wall was an extraordinary accomplishment. But keeping the city secure, helping the community become established, and ensuring that the people could flourish would require something else.

It would require ordinary, consistent faithfulness. And that's worth remembering.

We tend to celebrate the people who accomplish something extraordinary. We celebrate the person who starts the ministry, launches the business, builds the house, or leads the big project. But so much of what matters in life happens after the excitement fades.

It's the parent who gets up every morning and faithfully cares for a child. It's the husband or wife who keeps loving when marriage requires patience and sacrifice. It's the Sunday School teacher who prepares another lesson, even when nobody notices how much time it required. It's the church member who serves faithfully year after year without needing recognition.

Those things may not seem particularly impressive. But they matter.

We tend to celebrate the people who build the wall. God also values the people who faithfully guard the gates.

And then Nehemiah gives us a detail in verse 4 that I think unlocks the entire chapter. He says, "The city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and no houses had been built yet."

Think about that for a moment. They've rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem. But Jerusalem itself is still sparsely populated. They have the structure. They have the protection. But the city isn't yet what it's supposed to be. And suddenly, the question changes.

For six chapters, the question has been, "How are we going to rebuild this wall?" Now the question becomes, "What did we rebuild this wall for?"

Because a wall can protect a city. But a wall cannot create a community. A wall can establish boundaries. But a wall cannot make people love one another. A wall can provide security. But a wall cannot produce faithfulness to God.

The wall matters. It was necessary. God graciously enabled His people to rebuild it. But **the wall was never the point**. The wall existed to serve something greater than itself. It existed to help restore Jerusalem as the place where God's covenant people would live, worship, and fulfill their calling.

And I wonder how often we forget that distinction in our own lives.

WHEN THE THINGS WE BUILD BECOME THE POINT

Think about a person who spends years working to provide a beautiful home for his family. He works long hours. He sacrifices. He saves money. He builds or buys the house he's always dreamed of giving them. And there's nothing wrong with that.

Providing for your family is a good thing. But imagine that somewhere along the way, the house becomes more important than the people living inside it. Every conversation revolves around maintaining the property. Every decision is about protecting the investment. The family rarely spends time together because everybody is so busy working to pay for and maintain the house.

And eventually, they have a beautiful house. But they don't have much of a home. Isn't that tragic?

Because the purpose of the house was to provide a place where the family could live and flourish. The house was supposed to serve the family. The family was never supposed to exist to serve the house.

And the same thing can happen in almost every area of life. We can become so consumed with building a career that we neglect the people we hoped that career would provide for.

We can become so committed to organizing activities for our children that we have very little time left to simply enjoy being with them.

We can become so concerned about achieving financial security that we forget to enjoy the blessings God has already provided.

And churches can fall into the very same trap. We can become so consumed with maintaining buildings, organizing programs, protecting traditions, and keeping schedules running that we lose sight of why those things exist in the first place.

Now, hear me carefully. Buildings matter. Programs can be wonderful. Organization is important. Traditions can be meaningful. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. In fact, much like the wall around Jerusalem, they can be valuable tools for accomplishing the work God has given us.

But they are tools. They are not the purpose.

A church building is a place where the church gathers. But the building is not the church. A Sunday School class provides an opportunity for discipleship. But having a class on the schedule is not the same thing as making disciples.

An outreach event can provide an opportunity to share the gospel. But the event itself is not the mission. **The structures exist to serve the people and the purposes of God and not the other way around.** And I think this is something every generation of Christians has to remember.

Because over time, it's possible to become more attached to the things we've built than to the reasons we built them. And when that happens, we can begin protecting the structure even when it no longer serves its original purpose.

We can confuse keeping something going with actually accomplishing something worthwhile. And perhaps the most dangerous part is that we can do all of this while sincerely believing we're being faithful. Because we're busy! We're working hard! We're maintaining things!

But being busy maintaining something isn't necessarily the same thing as fulfilling the purpose for which it exists. That's why Nehemiah 7 is such an important chapter. The wall is finished. But the work God is doing among His people is not.

THE NAMES ARE NOT AN AFTERTHOUGHT

And that brings us to the part of the chapter most of us would probably be tempted to skip. Beginning in verse 5, Nehemiah explains that God put it into his heart to assemble the nobles, officials, and people to be enrolled by genealogy. And then he finds a record of those who had returned from exile.

What follows is a long list of families, priests, Levites, servants, and others connected to the restoration of Jerusalem. Now, I know what happens when we encounter passages like this. We start reading. And then we see the names. And the numbers. And more names. And more numbers.

And pretty soon we're wondering how many verses are left in this chapter and how many chapters are left in the book? But there's something important about this list. These aren't simply names in an ancient census.

They represent people who belong to a story much larger than themselves. And I want you to think about something as we look at this long list of names. These names represent something much bigger than an ancient census. They represent the faithfulness of God.

You see, generations earlier, God's people had been carried into exile. Jerusalem had been devastated. The temple had been destroyed. Families had been uprooted from the land God had given their ancestors. And in the middle of that exile, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah.

In Jeremiah 29, He told His people that their exile would not last forever. He told them to build houses, plant gardens, raise families, and seek the welfare of the place where they were living. But He also promised that when the appointed time was complete, He would bring them back.

And that's the context of one of the most familiar verses in the Bible. Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you"—this is the LORD's declaration—"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."

Now, we love that verse. And understandably so! We read it to our high school and college graduates. We memorize it and recall it when we are considering a major life change. But we sometimes forget who heard it first.

It was spoken to people living in exile. People who had lost their homes.

People whose circumstances looked nothing like what they had hoped their lives would be. And God was telling them, "I have not forgotten you. I have not abandoned My promises. This is not the end of your story."

But here's what makes that promise even more remarkable. Many of the people who first heard it would never personally see Jerusalem restored. They would live and die in Babylon. Their children and grandchildren would be the ones who experienced what God had promised.

And then, generations later, we arrive at Nehemiah 7. And what does Nehemiah find? A record of the families who returned from exile. Names. Families. Generations. People whose ancestors had been carried away, but whose descendants had come home. And suddenly, that long list of names looks a little different, doesn't it? Because these aren't merely names in an old record. **They're reminders that God keeps His promises.**

The restoration began long before Nehemiah arrived. But now the walls have been rebuilt, the gates are in place, and the people are being organized for life in the city. God is continuing the work He promised to do.

And I think there's something here we desperately need to remember. **God's faithfulness is not limited to what we can see in our own lifetime.**

Sometimes we want God to accomplish everything right now. We want to see the results. We want to see the answers. We want to know how the story ends. But God is working on a much larger timetable than ours. And sometimes the seeds of faithfulness planted by one generation bear fruit in another.

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And sometimes the seeds of faithfulness planted by one generation bear fruit in another. So, let me ask you something this morning.

Grandparents, are you praying only for the needs of your children and grandchildren today? Or are you willing to begin praying for generations of your family that you may never live to meet?

Have you ever prayed for your great-grandchildren? Your great-great-grandchildren? Have you ever asked God to raise up faithful men and women from your family long after you're gone?

Have you ever gone into your prayer closet asking God to call pastors, missionaries, teachers, and servants of His kingdom from generations of your family that haven't even been born yet? Or from your church or community?

You may never know their names. You may never hold them in your arms. But you can begin praying for them today.

And parents, let me ask you something. We're willing to sacrifice an awful lot for our children, aren't we? We'll rearrange our schedules, drive all over the countryside, spend enormous amounts of money, and give up our evenings and weekends so our children can have opportunities.

And listen, there's nothing wrong with wanting your children to have good opportunities. Sports can be wonderful. Music lessons can be wonderful. Academic achievements and extracurricular activities can be wonderful. But let me ask you a harder question.

Are we as parents willing to sacrifice as much for our children's spiritual inheritance as we are for their athletic, academic, and social opportunities?

We'll spend hours helping them develop a skill that they may never use again after high school. But are we equally intentional about helping them develop a faith that can shape their lives—and the lives of their children and grandchildren?

We're concerned about what colleges they'll attend or what careers they'll pursue or what opportunities they'll have. And those are important questions. But are we equally concerned about whether they'll know God's Word? Whether they'll love His church? Whether they'll learn to pray? Whether they'll recognize the difference between what the world celebrates and what God calls good?

Because here's something worth thinking about. **The most important thing you leave your children is not be something they inherit when you die. It is something they learn from watching you live.**

Your commitment to Christ. Your faithfulness to His church. Your willingness to obey God's Word when it's inconvenient. Your example of prayer, generosity, forgiveness, and love. Those things can shape a family for generations.

And church family, this challenge isn't limited to parents and grandparents. Some of you may not have children or grandchildren. But every one of us has an opportunity to invest in a generation that will come after us.

Through the children we teach. The young people we encourage. The families we welcome. The people we disciple. The example we set.

And perhaps that's one of the greatest challenges of Nehemiah 7.

Are we only building something that will benefit us today, or are we willing to invest in something that may bear its greatest fruit long after we're gone?

Because we're part of a story that began long before us. And, if the Lord tarries, it will continue long after us. We may never see everything God accomplishes through our faithfulness. But that doesn't make our faithfulness any less important. And it certainly doesn't make His promises any less trustworthy.

And the God who was faithful to His people in exile is the same God who remains faithful to His promises today.

The names aren't merely evidence that people returned. They're evidence that God kept His word.

WHAT ARE WE ACTUALLY BUILDING?

And I think this is where the passage becomes especially challenging. Because all of us are building something. We're investing our time, our energy, our resources, and our attention into things that we believe matter.

We're building families. We're building careers. We're building relationships. We're building ministries. We're building lives. And the question isn't simply whether we're making progress.

The question is whether we're making progress toward something that actually matters. Because it's possible to accomplish exactly what we set out to accomplish and still discover that we've missed the point.

It's possible to build the house and neglect the home. It's possible to advance the career and lose the relationships. It's possible to organize the ministry and forget the people. It's possible to maintain the church building while neglecting the work of making disciples.

And it's possible to spend our lives accomplishing things that look impressive without giving much attention to the things that will matter for eternity.

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves a different question. Not simply, "What am I trying to accomplish?" But **"Why am I trying to accomplish it?"** Who is supposed to benefit from what I'm building? What purpose is it supposed to serve? And am I still pursuing that purpose? Or has the thing I've been building gradually become an end in itself?

Those aren't always comfortable questions. But they're important ones. Because sometimes the most faithful thing we can do isn't to build something new. Sometimes it's to remember why we started building in the first place.

THE HOUSEHOLD GOD IS BUILDING

And there's something beautiful about the way the New Testament brings all of this together.

In Ephesians 2, Paul reminds us that through Jesus Christ, people who were once separated from God have been brought near. And then he uses the language of a building.

Listen to Ephesians 2:19–22:

"So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are also being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit."

Do you hear what Paul is saying? God is still building something. But it isn't a wall around a city. It's a people redeemed by Jesus Christ.

And Jesus Himself is the cornerstone.

Through His death and resurrection, people who were once far from God can become members of His household.

We don't earn our place by what we accomplish or what we build. **We are brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ.**

And by His grace, God is building us together into something that will last forever. That's why we must never confuse the tools of ministry with the purpose of ministry.

Buildings matter. Programs matter. The work we do matters. But those things exist to help us glorify God, make disciples, love one another, and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So let me leave you with one question this morning:

What are you building, and have you forgotten why?

Maybe that's a question for your family, your career, your priorities, or your involvement in the church. Are you investing your life in things that will matter beyond your lifetime?

Are you building something that serves God's purposes and blesses the people He's placed around you?

Because the wall mattered. The work mattered. But the wall was never the point. **The people were. And the faithful God who was restoring them was.**

So, let's build what matters. Let's love the people God has entrusted to us. And let's remember that our greatest hope isn't in anything we accomplish, but in what Jesus Christ has accomplished for us.

Because in Christ, God is building something that will last forever. Let's pray.